

Ritual Design for Mythic Hygiene

An Exegesis for *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*

The creative project can be found at:

<https://reclaimingthegoldencalf.nz>

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Abstract

Death anxiety and amythia are constructs that help explain human evil and suffering.

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, the main character experiences a speculative condition called amythic death anxiety and participates in a therapeutic workshop called “ritual design for mythic hygiene.” The workshop is facilitated by a community committed to experimenting with new myths and rituals as a strategy for psychosocial wellbeing and for fostering a more just and peaceful world.

Death anxiety refers to the diverse human responses to the awareness of mortality (Becker, 1973). When one’s culture provides meaning, identity, belonging and a sense of immortality – real or symbolic – death anxiety is well regulated. Without these supports, death anxiety becomes dysregulated, producing heightened worldview and self-esteem defence, xenophobia and potentially self-destructive behaviours (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1986; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015). Amythia is the absence or dysfunction of meaningful myth (Rue, 2005) and can lead to psychological dis-ease, such as anxieties, depression, obsessive-compulsive behaviours and excessive guilt and shame. My notion of amythic death anxiety speculates that amythia and dysregulated death anxiety are mutually reinforcing, synergising into a novel condition. This thesis approaches this condition creatively, rather than as a scientific claim.

Through practice-based research, this thesis creatively explores ritual design for mythic hygiene as a method and genre of creative practice, whereby one re-envision personal, family and cultural myths in pursuit of more meaningful and functional myth. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* demonstrates how creative writing can be a ritualised symbolic immortality project that seeks to address amythia and regulate death anxiety.

*To Tof and Yael
For their steadfast encouragement
Challenge and support*

*To my D
Who continues with love to probe every idea
Helping me reflect, clarify and make meaning*

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Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Chapter 1 – Introduction and overview

[1.1] Essence and motivations: Why creatively engage myth and ritual?

Several years prior to beginning this thesis, I was reading the Book of Exodus, with which I was very familiar, not so much from my Hebrew school education but from Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 motion picture *The Ten Commandments*. I watched this multiple times during my childhood. This film was the story, as far as I knew.

The golden calf episode is a particularly exciting scene in the film, in which Moses descends Sinai with the stone tablets of the commandments and witnesses the celebration around the golden calf. Moses hurls the tablets onto the calf, which bursts into flames. The ground opens and swallows the celebrants along with the calf.

As I sat reading the biblical text (Exodus 32), the story was rather different. Moses sees the celebration and smashes the tablets, as in the film. But then, he burns the calf and grinds it down into a powder that is spread into the drinking water. Moses then perceives that the people are 'out of control' and asks who is on the Lord's side. The Levites (one of the twelve tribes, of which Moses is a member) rally around him. Moses says to the Levites:

Thus says the Lord our God. Put your sword on thigh and go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp and slay family, neighbour and kin.

(Exodus 32:27, Jewish Publication Society, 2006)

The Levites comply and about 3,000 people die that day.

God did not kill the golden calf celebrants in a miraculous and terrific attack, as in the film. Instead, Moses – via God – orders the *Levites* to kill their families, neighbours and kin with their swords.

To the best of my memory, I audibly uttered, 'Holy fuck'. I was rather stunned and upset at this difference in the two versions of the story.

I spent some weeks ruminating over possible reasons for my strong reaction. 'Why does it even matter?', I asked. After all, I do not believe the Sinai story to be historical. It is just another Bible story – a myth – just one more ultra-violent episode from the Torah.

Why is this bothering me?

My answers did not seem particularly rational.

Answer #1. I was surprised that DeMille had altered the story so significantly – changing the massacre from an act of men to an act of God. Something about that change felt important. The Sinai story is a foundational mythic narrative of Judaism. One might think that DeMille would wish to stay close to the text. Indeed, he opens the film himself and declares that the best sources were used to recreate the story. Yet he changes a climactic moment. In that same opening speech, DeMille also says the film is about the 'birth of freedom', and now I was faced with the paradoxical juxtaposition between that comment and the massacre.

My hypothesis, at the time, was that this change was necessary for a family-oriented film. People falling into the earth is spectacular and cinematic, while men stabbing and hacking away at 'family, neighbours and kin' would be difficult to portray in a G-rated film.

Answer #2. My next and least rational answer is related to my identity. I am a Levite, by family tradition. My Hebrew name is Moshe – Moses. Myth or not, I felt an association with those ordering and performing the slaughter of the celebrants. I did not like the idea that the origin story of my family's tribe and religious tradition included this murderous event. The Levites were indeed *sanctified* following the killings *for having done this*. After the massacre, Moses says to the Levites:

Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day – for each of you has been against son and brother – that He may bestow a blessing upon you today. (Exodus 32:29)

The Levites were a tribe of priests within a kingdom of priests, and killing loved ones on God's command proved their allegiance and worthiness. This notion filled me with disgust – and still does.

Answer # 3. I was disturbed by the political reasons for the massacre. I believe strongly that a just and peaceful world requires religious freedom, diversity and pluralism. The slaughter of the 3000, in stark contrast, is a horrific expression of religious intolerance and exclusivism. In my reading of the story, the golden calf worshippers were killed for expressing their authentic religiosity – for heterodoxy. I was morally appalled.

Answer #4. Finally, I was disturbed by the implications for ritual practice. In Rabbinic Judaism, a portion of the Torah is chanted during Sabbath services such that the entire text is read over the course of the year. The golden calf episode falls within the portion called Ki Tisa, which includes Exodus 30:11 through 34:35. This is the 21st weekly reading of the year, typically falling in early March. This horrific story is retold annually – ritually chanted in a solemn and reverent act of religious devotion. It is sacred scripture and sacred practice.

Reading or performing scripture is a common religious ritual and practice for many religions and is a way to retell the core narratives of the community and to reinforce the cosmology and morality within the myth (Rue, 2006). From an anthropological and psychosocial perspective, I believe in the power of myth to influence consciousness, psychological wholeness and social coherence.

From my personal perspective, however, I see the golden calf episode as a dysfunctional myth – a bad myth. It does not represent my cosmology – it is an *ancient* cosmology. It does not represent my liberal and pluralistic morality. Therefore, one should ask: Why keep repeating it as a religious act? The opening song from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) provides the most obvious answer: 'Tradition'.

In the weeks following my re-reading of Exodus 32, I recall thinking, had Moses and the Levites, and perhaps God, been indicted and prosecuted for the massacre, *that* could make for a personally meaningful and functional myth.

I felt compelled to change the story.

[1.2] Research context

[1.2.1] Theories and frameworks

Several key concepts are essential to this thesis, which are referenced throughout both the exegesis and the creative work. This section introduces each concept and emphasises how they are used in the research. Chapters 3 and 4 further elaborate on them in the context of the review of the relevant literature and reflective practice.

Culture and religion

I primarily draw upon Loyal Rue for my structural and functional approach to culture and religion. Rue (2005) proposes that cultural and religious traditions have a core mythic narrative and five enabling strategies. For Rue, narrative integrates cosmology and morality – in Rue's terms, 'how things are' and 'which things matter' – and is reinforced by five strategies, namely, intellectual, aesthetic, experiential, institutional and ritual. Ninian Smart (1996) and Johnson and Scholes (2005) use similar language and models, although they consider story and myth to be strategies and in support of a core paradigmatic narrative. For my purposes, I have synthesised their thinking into Figure 1.

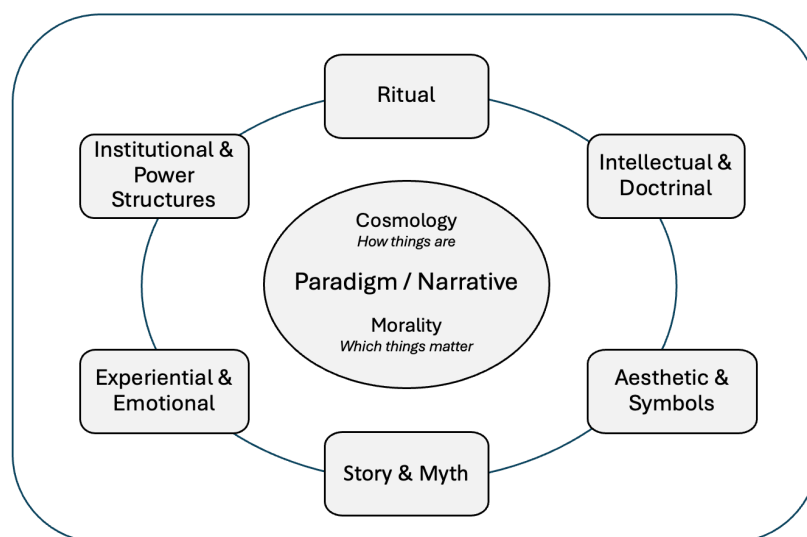


Figure 1: Model of culture strategies, by the candidate, based on Rue (2005), Johnson and Scholes (2005) and Smart (1996)

A community acquires and assimilates its worldview, values and norms through core narratives and supporting strategies; they educate and indoctrinate group members, enliven and embed the myth, and reinforce members' self-understanding and emotional connections to their community. In these ways, myth fosters psychological wholeness and social coherence and, thereby, adaptive fitness and overall success (Rue, 2000, 2005).

The core narrative's *cosmology* includes descriptions of the universe, how it came to be and distinctions between the real and unreal. The narrative's *morality* includes ideas about what is important and how one ought to behave. The narrative communicates the wisdom of a tradition by integrating these ideas about reality and value. Rue (2005) emphasises the powerful and fundamental role of mythic narratives in shaping human experience:

We legitimate institutions and values in their name, we wage wars in their defence, we judge ourselves and others by their standards, we take pains that our children will learn them well, we draw inspiration from their examples, we construct our hopes and fears under their influence, and so on. It would not be extreme to say that we negotiate our way through life by the guidance of our stories (Rue, 2005).

Myth

Colloquially, the term myth is often used to describe a commonly believed but false story. In contrast, scholars of mythology and religion use the term to refer to shared cultural narratives that convey meaning and value (Campbell, 1949; Doty, 2000; Rue, 2005). For Doty (2000), myths are imaginary, metaphoric and symbolic stories that express a culture's understanding of reality (i.e., cosmology and ontology) and its moral values (i.e., morality), while also often including supernatural entities or events. Myths are transmitted and reinforced through rituals, dramas, folktales, legends, prophecy and other forms of cultural expression.

While consistent with Doty, my approach to myth is primarily psychological. In this thesis, myths are understood as structures in the mind – our implicit beliefs about cosmology and morality that influence perception, interpretation and action. They are similar to schemas, mental constructs that filter perception, guide appraisal and orient behaviour (Ghosh & Gilboa, 2014), and act as psychological templates for engaging with the world (Hillman, 1996). Myths function as symbolic systems that structure experience and mediate meaning-making (Bruner, 1990). Finally, myths can be understood as existential worldviews – belief systems that function as psychological resources for reducing death anxiety by regulating self-esteem and providing symbolic or literal forms of immortality (Becker, 1973; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991).

Amythia

Amythia is the psycho-social condition of living without functional myth. Rue (2005) coined the term 'amythia' in his book, *Amythia: Crisis in the Natural History of Western Culture*. He believes an absence of stories that provide moral orientation leaves individuals vulnerable to meaninglessness and despair.

Rue's work is compelling to me for several reasons. He synthesises insights from evolutionary biology, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and psychology to articulate a functional account of myth and its role in human life. He defines myth in terms of its

capacity to integrate cosmology and morality, and to foster psychological wholeness and social cohesion. With *amythia* he provides a coherent and named diagnostic framework that includes a more explicit account of psycho-social consequences.

For these reasons, Rue's works offer a particularly useful theoretical foundation as it is analytical and operational – an interpretive construct that can be applied to lived experience and creative practice. Within this thesis, *amythia* is taken as a generative lens for reflective practice, one that enables the examination of personal and cultural narratives and supports the iterative evolution of creative work. In addition, Rue's clarity of expression and his alignment with religious naturalism further contribute to the attractiveness of his work as a grounding framework for this project.

Several other thinkers, while not using the term, also believe that living without mythic structures leads to problematic psychological consequences such as neurosis and inner disorientation (Jung, 1933), difficulties navigating the challenges of life (Campbell, 1949), psychological paralysis and susceptibility to destructive ideologies (Becker, 1973), existential disorientation (Eliade, 1957), flattened emotional experience, increased moral confusion and boredom (Charles Taylor, 2007).

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, participants who feel dis-ease due to amythia engage in psychological journeys that re-envision personal, family and cultural myths in search of more meaningful and functional myth.

Death anxiety

Ernest Becker (1973) defines death anxiety as the human response to the awareness of our mortality, which generates a profound existential dread, threat and anxiety. He believes this is the fundamental human problem and that much of human culture and behaviour has evolved to deny or manage that awareness. For example, humans invented culture and worldviews to enable people to see themselves as heroic and, in some sense, immortal, either through notions of literal immortality (e.g., heaven) or symbolic immortality. According to terror management theory, cultural worldviews and self-esteem operate as buffers to death anxiety, helping individuals feel they are people of value in a meaningful world (Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Solomon, 1986). Becker and terror management theorists believe that dysregulated death anxiety – the failure of cultural buffers – yields diverse psychosocial consequences such as anxieties, depression, compulsions, addictions, intensified xenophobia (e.g., in-group bias, scapegoating and hostility toward out-groups), and susceptibility to authoritarianism (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991).

Symbolic immortality

Symbolic immortality is one of the buffers that supports well-regulated death anxiety (Lifton, 1979). Symbolic immortality is the sense of continuity beyond biological death. This sense can be developed and felt through religion, art, children, nationhood and legacy projects that extend one's identity or values into the future. Symbolic immortality is a response to existential terror prompted by the awareness of mortality (Becker, 1973) and a psychological strategy for maintaining meaning and coherence. Experimental studies show that reminders of mortality (mortality salience) heighten people's attachment to symbolic-immortality projects that can yield prosocial legacy behaviours (Burke, Martens & Faucher, 2010).

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, participants develop symbolic immortality projects from their re-envisioned myths, thereby addressing amythia and regulating death anxiety.

Amythic death anxiety

Amythia and death anxiety have strong interdependencies. Cultures provide the mythic resources for integrating our terror of death while amythia is the failure in the function of those resources. Amythia is not itself dysregulated death anxiety; it is the absence of the mythic buffer, which can contribute to dysregulation alongside other failures of symbolic-immortality projects and cultural supports.

Amythic death anxiety is my term for a speculative psychological and social condition in which amythia and dysregulated death anxiety are mutually reinforcing, thus exacerbating the psychosocial consequences and dis-ease of each condition. The main character in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* is conceived as suffering from amythic death anxiety.

Ritual

Ritual is a culturally and psychologically significant behaviour, characterised by formalism, repetition, symbolism and performance (Bell, 1997). It typically involves symbolic behaviour enacted in structured settings to express, embody and reinforce shared beliefs and values. Doty (2000) similarly notes that rituals transmit mythic content through ceremony, drama and symbolic action, functioning as vehicles for shared understanding. Rue (2005) frames ritual as one of several ancillary strategies – alongside institutional, aesthetic, experiential and

intellectual strategies – through which core mythic narratives are reinforced and maintained in a culture.

Beyond its cultural role, ritual has vital psychological functions. Smith and Stewart (2011) have observed that rituals often achieve the following outcomes: providing meaning, managing anxiety, reinforcing the social order, communicating core values, enhancing group solidarity, including and excluding people, signalling commitment, managing work structure, and prescribing and reinforcing significant events.

Joseph Campbell (1949) defines ritual as 'the enactment of myth', viewing it as the performative dimension of mythic structures that encode cosmological and moral meaning. However, the relationship between ritual and myth is bidirectional (Bell, 1992). While ritual can be seen as the enactment of myth, one does not necessarily precede or cause the other. A ritual may be designed explicitly to enact a myth or a myth might be designed to explain the ritual, or some combination of the two (Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969).

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, I portray creative writing that re-envision myth as a ritual through which symbolic immortality projects are produced.

Terror management theory

Inspired by Becker's notion of death anxiety, Solomon et al (2015) tested hypotheses to determine how people respond to thoughts about death or mortality salience. When we are reminded of our mortality, we behave in predictable ways. For example, we become more positively biased toward our in-group and more negatively biased and denigrating toward out-group members; we defend our worldviews and our self-esteem; and we respond to national and religious symbols with greater reverence. Terror management theory suggests that we behave in ways that reinforce our belief that we are people of value in a meaningful world, and at the heart of that reinforcement strategy is xenophobia.

Terror management theory suggests why humans can be so monstrously horrible toward each other. Arguably, we have evolved this way; these behaviours are, unfortunately, adaptive. While religions and cultures are strategies that can mitigate in-group hostilities – encouraging us to treat non-kin as virtual kin – they simultaneously reinforce self-serving and xenophobic hostility through which we exploit out-groups and their resources. Cultural myths reinforce both sides of this equation. The resulting perspective on human nature is frightful

and disappointing: psychosocial health in the human animal includes strategies of horrific violence.

By the phrase human nature, which appears throughout this exegesis, I mean a summary of the behavioural tendencies of the human animal. I do not propose a comprehensive understanding or description of human nature. Rather, I suggest that the results of terror management theory experiments are revealing *aspects* of human nature. Further, I suggest that, if we wish to improve upon psychosocial outcomes, we need to leverage our growing knowledge of human nature in the design of mitigating strategies.

Ritual design

Ritual design (Lewis, 2020) is my framework for designing *anything*, e.g., strategies, events and artefacts, by drawing upon ritual scholarship and placing a ritual lens on the act of design and on the resulting events and artefacts (Figure 2).

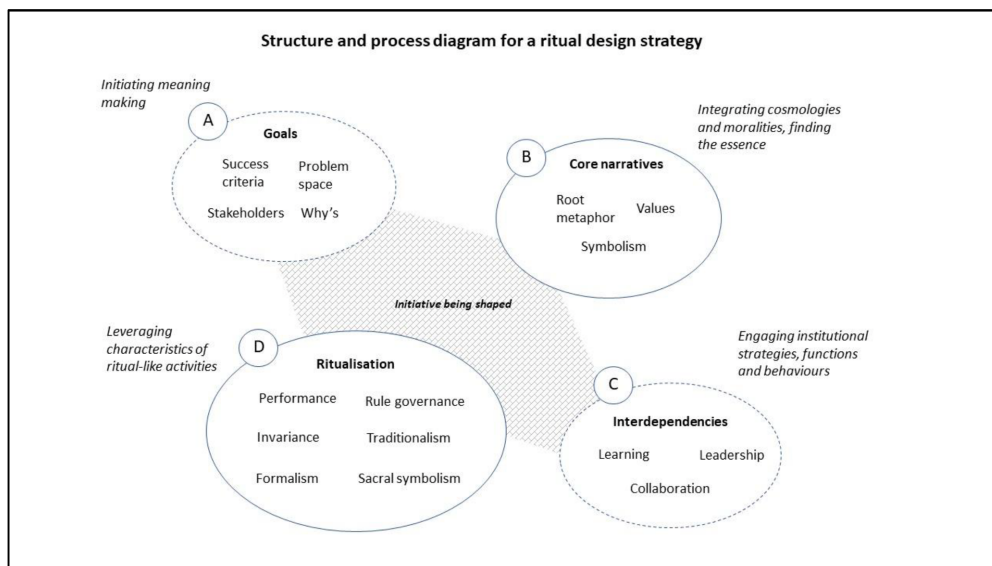


Figure 2: Diagram of a ritual design strategy, by candidate (Lewis, 2020)

Areas of ritual scholarship useful to this method include the characteristics of ritual (Bell, 1992), the outcomes of ritual (Smith and Stewart, 2011), and insights from the psychology of ritual (Hobson, 2017). Ritual design also assumes Rue's structure of culture and religion, which suggests that a core mythic narrative integrating cosmology and morality is key to psychological wholeness and social cohesion, and that several enabling strategies support the embedding of the narrative into minds and societies. I conceive ritual design as a

generalisable design strategy for seeking goals. In this thesis, I apply ritual design to mythic hygiene and elaborate on ritual design as a method and genre of creative practice.

Mythic hygiene

Mythic hygiene is the name I have given to my imaginative approach for mitigating the consequences of amythic death anxiety. Mythic hygiene involves re-considering one's memories, beliefs and myths, including one's cosmology and morality, in search of more personally meaningful and functional myth. Creative practice can, by design, include rituals of mythic re-consideration and re-construction. In principle, the rituals through which such work is performed might produce durable psychosocial changes by encoding new schemas, i.e., knowledge structures that shape perception, appraisal and response to the environment (Ghosh & Gilboa, 2014; Friston & Kiebel, 2009; McGaugh, 2004).

Ritual design for mythic hygiene

Ritual design for mythic hygiene is a speculative method and genre of creative practice as well as a speculative therapy for amythic death anxiety. The therapy includes the design and adoption of rituals through which re-envisioning myth becomes a symbolic immortality project. Creative writing can function as a ritual intervention in this context. In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, I imagine the main character participating in an orientation workshop based on ritual design for mythic hygiene, where such activity is the primary religious practice of a community seeking a more just and peaceful world, based on their belief that changing stories can change the world.

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is conceived as a demonstration of ritual design for mythic hygiene – creative writing as a ritualised symbolic-immortality behaviour that intends to address amythia and dysregulated death anxiety.

[1.2.2] Research question

With the key theories and frameworks introduced, I now present my research question:

How might creative writing that ritually re-envisions myth serve as a symbolic immortality project for addressing amythia and regulating death anxiety?

Embedded in this question are the key theories and frameworks that I am engaging in this thesis. My project demonstrates a creative response to amythia and dysregulated death anxiety – to re-envision and ritually embed more functional myth.

As discussed below in my overview of the creative component, I am envisioning a community – a religion of sorts – that experiments with myth and ritual in search of more functional myth as a strategy for psychological health and a more just and peaceful world. The main character and community in my piece are experimenting with rituals that address my research question as their religio-cultural practice. The main character participates in an orientation workshop that asks related questions and experiments with the answers. For example:

- How might amythia be detrimental to psychosocial health?
- How might design rituals mitigate the consequences of amythia?
- How might re-envisioning personal, family and received cultural myth yield more functional myth?
- How might changing cultural, family and personal myths be a strategy for improving the world?
- How might one design rituals for countering the consequences of dysregulated death anxiety?
- How might death anxiety and amythia explain compulsive rituals of creative writing?

Over the course of this research, I have come to see my reaction to the golden calf story, including my motivation to engage that myth, as my mind-body's creative response to my amythic death anxiety.

[1.2.3] Ritual design as genre and methodology

By ritual design, I mean designing *anything* (including rituals) by drawing upon key concepts from ritual scholarship (Lewis, 2020). These concepts include (a) Rue's (2005) model of religio-cultural strategies (Figure 1), (b) the family characteristics of ritual (Bell, 1997), (c) the outcomes associated with ritual practice (Smith & Stewart, 2011), and (d) the ways in which myth and ritual can relate, i.e., rituals can enact mythic narratives and myths can explain ritual behaviour (Campbell, 1988). In principle, if one designed rituals with the family characteristics that enact the core mythic narrative of the ritual participants, some of the identified outcomes might reasonably be achieved (see Table 1). My interest, however, is in

creative practice; rather than empirically testing this hypothesis, I take inspiration from the possibilities suggested by the literature.

Table 1: Summary of characteristics and outcomes of ritual

Family characteristics of ritual (Bell, 1997)	Outcomes of ritual (Smith & Stewart, 2011)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invariance • Formalism • Sacred symbolism • Rule governance • Traditionalism • Performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing meaning • Managing anxiety • Reinforcing the social order • Communicating core values • Enhancing group solidarity • Including and excluding people • Signalling commitment • Managing work structure • Prescribing and reinforcing significant events

I conceive ritual design as a genre and method of creative writing aimed at mythic hygiene, seeking functional myth, re-envisioning cosmology and morality, and in principle resetting the implicit myths through which one conceives and acts upon the world. For this research, I experimented with this genre and methodology. I speculate that rituals of creative writing might mitigate the dysfunctional or maladaptive consequences of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety, and that such writing might represent a unique genre. Figure 2 summarises the goals, strategies and tactics that engage these key concepts.

<p><i>Goals:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigate dis-ease associated with amythia and dysregulated death anxiety <p><i>Strategies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mythic hygiene that yields more personally meaningful and functional myth • Mythic hygiene that yields symbolic immortality • Rituals that make meaning and reduce anxiety <p><i>Tactics:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ritual design as a genre and method of creative writing

Figure 3: Goals, strategies and tactics of my thesis

I am seeking answers to my research question through creative practice. Therefore, this thesis is an experiment in ritual design where creative writing is the performative behaviour. For example, through creative writing rituals, I am investigating my response to the story of the golden calf, as discussed in the opening of this chapter. That response served as an opportunity to consider my own cosmology and morality, which in turn, informs my continually evolving personal mythology. This process includes re-examining my Judaism, my upbringing and my understanding of human nature.

My exposure to death anxiety, terror management theory, symbolic immortality and amythia have helped to shape my understanding of human nature, which is part of my implicit cosmology and, therefore, part of my implicit personal myth. In summary, my thesis asks: If the answer to my research question is a genre and methodology – which I am calling ritual design for mythic hygiene – what does that look like?

[1.3] Overview of the creative component

[1.3.1] Story-world

When Miriam Levi-Spicehandler dies, her son discovers her symbolic immortality project: a virtual version of herself existing within a virtual environment called *The Golden Calf Elevator & Café*. Miriam was part of a community dedicated to experimental mythic hygiene. The son finds this community and they invite him to participate in an orientation – a ritual design workshop and festival – during which he re-envisions personal, family and cultural myths.

The ritual practices through which the son re-envisions myth are immersive psychological journeys called Sinai Sessions. Placing oneself on Sinai – including during the golden calf episode – is a means of personal exploration and experimentation, an opportunity to reconsider one's cosmology and morality, identity, implicit myths and rituals. These ritual journeys allow one to experiment with changing the story and to experiment with how changing the story might change the world.

Sinai Sessions take place in a virtual environment and within a specialised state of consciousness in which any sensory experience can immediately manifest, like being within a well-controlled lucid dream. This state is enabled through a variety of deliberately

ambiguous technologies (e.g., pharmacological, electromagnetic, etc.), promoting ecstatic states of consciousness – perhaps like the state achieved by those celebrating around the golden calf. The combination of the virtual environment and profoundly altered consciousness intends to open and stretch the mind in ways that foster creative engagement with psychological and mythological landscapes. Orientation participants creatively capture and share their experiences as part of their collaborative learning in mythic hygiene.

The creative component of my thesis is an annotated proceedings from the son's six-day orientation workshop. The scenarios presented during each 'day' represent the son's experiences, reflections and festival offerings.

[1.3.2] Changing the story

While I am creatively engaging the golden calf story, I did not set out to write a specific revision of the myth. Instead, I am writing about the engagement rather than a particular outcome. The golden calf story was a launching-off point for engaging with personal, family and received cultural myth. Many of the scenarios do not explicitly reference that story. However, there are ways in which I was indeed changing the story.

[a] In my piece, the centre of cultural power and hegemony is with those that celebrated around the golden calf and with those sympathetic with the celebrants, rather than with Moses and the Levites.

[b] In the biblical text, the community leaves Sinai and heads into the desert on a long journey to the Promised Land, which they will be ordered to conquer. In my project, the community remains at Sinai. Moses' sister, Miriam, facilitates a gathering of the community through which they collaborate on ways forward that might prevent such a massacre from ever happening again. In the biblical text, the massacre is an act of divine justice and punishment; in my writing, the massacre is a prototypically evil act.

[c] The community seeks to hold Moses and the Levites accountable. A Levitical priesthood is founded on repentance for the massacre, rather than their willingness to kill for God. The priests commit themselves to lives of service to the people and dedicate themselves to ensuring that nothing like that ever happens again. They become servant priests, sworn to protect the celebrants and religious diversity, rather than enforcing orthodoxy.

Moses is restricted to Sinai, where he will forever go up and down the mountain carrying stone tablets, mediating a collaborative dialogue between humanity and God.

God is confronted with the evil of the massacre and repents. God is held accountable, sequestered to the top of Sinai, and also banished ontologically – relegated to being a fictional character. It is agreed that even a God one does not believe in should have a seat at the table to participate in collaborative problem solving. He is invited to participate in the ritual design workshop to address his own mythic hygiene.

[d] I changed a single verse in Exodus 32 – verse 14 – to fill a gap in a conversation between Moses and God in a way that, to me, helps to hold God accountable for the massacre. In the biblical text, Moses talks God out of destroying the entire community for celebrating with the golden calf.

And יהוה renounced the punishment planned for God's people.

(Ex 32:14, *The Contemporary Torah*, Jewish Publication Society, 2006)

However, in verse 27, Moses tells the Levites that God has ordered the massacre of family and neighbours. This begs the question of when God gave this order to Moses. That was not part of their negotiation. I decided that verse 14 should be revised to include God ordering the massacre.

In effect, God gave Moses a terrible choice: either Moses must kill some of his family, or God will kill all of them. I determined that capturing the logic of the text in an explicit verse would be a way of holding God accountable. One of my new versions of verse 14 is as follows:

God said to Moses: You must kill those in your family who celebrated around the Golden Calf, or I will destroy all your people – now, go down, Moses.

[e] The community's purpose is experimental mythic hygiene in support of a more just and peaceful world. They facilitate the annual Golden Calf festival, where the new priests learn about mythic hygiene and ritual design; they re-envision their personal, family and cultural myths; and they share their 'festival offerings' – experiences and insights from their explorations and experimentations.

[1.3.3] Main characters

The Mother

The mother participated in an experimental approach to myth and ritual, including the methods and technologies for helpful states of consciousness. She believes the arts and humanities can help humans transcend the horrific aspects of human nature. She builds her symbolic immortality project, including the Golden Calf Elevator & Café and her 'master of scenarios' – a virtual representation of herself that engages her son after she dies.

The Son

In the ten years prior to his mother's death, the two had an estranged relationship. He has been experiencing and expressing consequences of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety. After his mother's death, he stumbles upon her symbolic immortality project and is transported into her Golden Calf Elevator & Café. His first very chaotic experience is a call to adventure. He sets off to find the community that focuses on experimenting with myth and ritual. He begins an orientation workshop: ritual design for mythic hygiene, which takes place in the Café. He re-envisions personal, cultural and cultural myths, capturing his experiences and reflections in scenarios that are shared as festival offerings. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* is an annotated proceedings from that workshop.

Moses

Moses is a prophet who believes he hears God's voice and converses with God. He is intoxicated with God and feels compelled to do whatever God requires. He gives the order to the Levites to massacre the people celebrating around the golden calf. He is held accountable for his role in the massacre.

Miriam

Miriam is Moses's sister. She convenes and facilitates a colloquium at the base of Sinai following the massacre. She brings the community together to creatively address their challenges. She facilitates the collaborative design of a new way forward for the community. She wants to ensure there will never again be such a massacre.

Masters of Scenarios

These are virtual humans that represent both actual humans and characters. These are developed and trained as symbolic immortality projects, left behind by their trainer so they continue collaborating into the future after their death. During the ritual design workshop, the son engages his mother's master of scenarios and trains his own. The workshop is facilitated by a Master of Scenarios.

Cecil B. DeMille

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, DeMille works with scientists and technologists to evolve film as a technology for mythic hygiene. His two filmed versions of *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956) are conceived as such experiments. In reality, in both versions, DeMille and his writers changed the golden calf story from an act of men (the Levite massacre) to an act of God, where lightning (1923) and an earthquake (1956) kill the transgressors. This change felt important to me and was an instigation for this thesis.

[1.4] Design concepts, form and digital implementation

Reclaiming the Golden Calf includes diverse forms of text, e.g., short story, flash fiction and lyric poetry, within an overarching design concept: a fictionalised annotated proceedings from an orientation workshop within a quasi-religious community – a ritual design workshop for mythic hygiene. It includes materials presented or experienced during the workshop and is self-referential, occasionally commenting on the workshop. As the Sinai Sessions take place within a specialised, technologically induced state of consciousness, some texts illustrate the real-time capture of those experiences annotated with post-experience reflections.

The textual form takes inspiration from the Haggadah (text for ritual), operatic libretto (text for performance) and a stage manager's script mark-up (text for production). While a Haggadah might be considered 'text for ritual facilitation' as its purpose is to facilitate the performance of a ritual, my piece intends to facilitate ritual design. It is through participation in the ritual that new rituals evolve, not the performance of a previously designed ritual. Like a Haggadah or a libretto, some portions are meant to be heard, not read. Still other portions are meant to be read silently so that the reader's internal voice is called upon, such as the particular voice they may hear when reading the words of God.

The form attempts to practice what it preaches, presenting scenarios *of* mythic experimentation rather than *about* such experimentation. Annotations include notes for collaboration and revision with other artists. The result is a speculative guide for facilitating a 'ritual design for mythic hygiene' workshop with the following intentions:

- To address amythia and dysregulated death anxiety through therapeutic creative writing
- To unearth and leverage subconscious material through ecstatic experiences
- To re-envision personal, family and received cultural myths
- To explore and experiment with one's authentic cosmology and morality
- To participate in a community that seeks a just and peaceful world
- To leverage insights from terror management theory, religious studies and ritual studies
- To make offerings of one's unique experiment of the cosmos, i.e., one's self
- To progress the design of symbolic immortality projects
- To take advantage of being alive

Digital implementation

I delivered my creative work as a website and believe it is suited to digital delivery as it (a) aligns with the virtual nature of the envisioned Golden Calf Elevator & Café, (b) supports the collaborative intentions for the genre and design, and (c) enables the embedding of several media files, including images and music.

A virtual, symbolic immortality environment. My piece imagines that the future includes symbolic immortality projects in which people who are no longer alive exist as virtual humans in virtual environments. We can visit people there and engage with them. The Golden Calf Elevator & Café – the setting for my piece – is conceived as such a virtual, immersive environment, and digital delivery suggests the world of possibilities such an environment might provide. For example, a virtual human character – the Master of Scenarios – is at times the narrator and facilitator of the creative piece. Delivery via website enables the technical integration of a virtual human. In principle, I can add a functional, AI-based virtual human agent with which/whom the reader can engage. This is suggested in the design, although not technically implemented. Indeed, during my research period, AI tools such as ChatGPT became publicly available. As discussed in Chapter 2, this allowed me to experiment with training one's Master of Scenarios as my creative piece discusses.

Mixed media performance and collaboration support. My creative piece is in the form of a design document for diverse forms of realisation and performance, such as film and theatre. Notes directed to collaborating artists are embedded in the text. In addition, website delivery enabled the embedding of several media files designed to communicate visual and musical ideas. The audio files include musical themes I composed. The Son is using these to communicate musical ideas with collaborating musicians, musical directors and sound designers.

Navigation. Navigating a website is a different experience to turning the pages of a book. In principle, both forms are random access – a user can choose any portion at any time – yet they inherently suggest a linear experience from start to finish. I chose a simple, book-style interface, with a table of contents page that links to each scenario.

While digital delivery has enabled these capabilities, the project is still text-based. Website delivery was actually a constraint for the design of text – typography – which is its own artform. While in principle, I could have designed each page however I wished (for example, by displaying a graphic for each page), I am not a practitioner of that art. That would have been outside the scope of my project and my capability. Using the native website environment (HTML text), I made basic choices concerning font, text size, text colour and line spacing.

[1.5] Significance of study

If it is true that myth informs and influences the character of civilisations and the psychology of individuals, then speculatively, we might design myths and related rituals to nurture a *chosen* civilisational and psychological character. Ritual design for mythic hygiene is worthy of investigation.

Human nature includes inherited strategies of horrific violence. Terror management theory has been providing the empirical evidence on how human nature includes attitudes and behaviours that lead to evil, particularly xenophobia. We have real knowledge, although it is not widely understood (see Chapter 3).

To foster a more just and peaceful world and psychosocial health requires us to leverage our knowledge of human nature to design interventions, including ritualised mythic hygiene – solutions that reinforce cosmologies and moralities that avoid the deliberate or indifferent infliction of suffering, avoiding human evil. Since we do not know what strategies will work,

we must be experimental. We are able, in principle, to design solutions and improve them through iterative processes, experimenting with mythic hygiene and learning what works over time. Such a mission could be supported and scaled by high levels of participation and global collaboration.

While psychological and social scientists would be essential to this speculative mission, there is an important role for artists, including creative writers. My project envisions someone participating in a mythic hygiene orientation whereby they re-envision their myths, within a community whose religious practice *is* rituals of mythic hygiene. While religions are typically structured around core mythic narratives (Rue 2005), my fictional community perpetually re-envisions experiments with its core narrative.

My thesis creatively demonstrates ritual design as a methodology and genre. It also generalises and universalises what started as a personal and idiosyncratic approach to mythic hygiene – a curiosity about my intense emotional response to a biblical story. My method coalesced into a vision for leveraging knowledge of human nature and its unfortunate horrors in the design of intervention strategies. Starting with the golden calf story, my research yielded a variety of outcomes, illustrated in my creative piece, such as:

- A novel diagnosis: amythic death anxiety
- A speculative therapeutic strategy: ritual design for personal mythic hygiene
- A genre of creative writing, art and ritual that seeks mythic hygiene
- A method for de-constructing and re-constructing personal myths and religiosity
- A vision for leveraging our knowledge of human nature in support of aspirations
- A vision of a religious community based on ritual experimentation with mythic hygiene
- A speculative explanation for compulsive rituals of writing that re-envision myth

While my creative piece is, of course, fictional and fanciful, I believe the result could indeed inspire hypotheses and empirical studies – a task for other researchers. As I discuss in my reflective practice chapters (3 & 4), one can find support for all the above in the literature for the theories and frameworks that I engage, e.g., myth, ritual, death anxiety, amythia and terror management theory. I asked Sheldon Solomon, one of the developers of terror management theory: 'How do you think we might leverage our knowledge of human nature, as illuminated by terror management theory, in the design of interventions that will foster a more just and peaceful world?' He answered:

That should be the superordinate question that is on the top of every to do list, regardless of our respective backgrounds or disciplinary perspectives... [W]e're at a particularly vulnerable moment right now, historically on the cusp of being the first form of life to be responsible for our own extinction. If we are going to veer in a more productive direction, as historically we have from time to time, I do think it will be because of both an individual and collective, historically modulated effort to... metabolize death anxiety in a healthier fashion. (Personal communication, 2025)

My thesis uses creative writing to experiment with ways forward, including rituals of mythic hygiene that might address amythic death anxiety. Over the course of my research, I became increasingly convinced that my research question is valuable and consequential, yet not widely understood and discussed, nor widely expressed in the arts. I believe my thesis is a contribution in this space. My piece could possibly inspire readers to consider (a) their own experiences or expressions of amythia and death anxiety, (b) their own personal, family and cultural myths, (c) their own approach to mythic hygiene, and (d) their own symbolic immortality projects. Further, this thesis could assist audiences interested in ritual design as a genre and method of creative writing.

[1.6] Use of the word 'Holocaust'

Given my use of the word 'Holocaust' within *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, and the profound, deeply felt and diverse thoughts, beliefs and emotions associated with this word, I offer this brief context. My use of the term is based specifically on my Jewish upbringing and, in particular, my Hebrew school education, during which the systematic extermination of European Jews was an ever-present image in the environment and frequently discussed as foundational to Judaism and intimately connected to the establishment of the State of Israel. My formed notion of Judaism was a Judaism *of* the Holocaust and a Judaism *of* Israel. In my creative work, the Holocaust exemplifies the horrors of human nature, which across the history of our species, has included genocidal violence. I do not present the Holocaust as merely another instance of genocide, but as a singular event that reveals both the extremity of human cruelty and the necessity of moral vigilance. The moral framework discussed within *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* assumes that, unless human nature can be radically transcended, genocides will continue. Characters feel compelled to ask: What ought we do between Holocausts?

[1.7] Structure of exegesis

Chapter 1 – Introduction and overview

My recommendation to readers of this thesis is that they read this first chapter of the exegesis, then read the creative component, and then read the balance of the exegesis. While not an essential sequence, this chapter was designed accordingly.

Chapter 2 – Methods and methodology

In this chapter, I deconstruct my research question into sub-questions, summarise my approach to practice-based research, unpack ritual design as a genre and method and describe how my experiment in method changed over the research period.

Chapter 3 – Reflective practice: Death anxiety, terror management theory and symbolic immortality, and Chapter 4 – Reflective practice: Amythia and re-envisioning myth

In these two reflective practice chapters, I provide a literature review for the theories and frameworks embedded in my research question and discuss how these were expressed in the creative piece. I also discuss insights from reflections on my creative practice.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

In the closing chapter, I provide a summary of my research findings, reflect on the theoretical frameworks, discuss contributions to knowledge, speculate on practical implications and applications, discuss limitations of the study and describe several future research directions.

As you read *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, I invite you to consider your own implicit myths, your own cosmology and your own morality – and to imagine yourself in the Golden Calf Elevator & Café, participating in the workshop.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

[2.1] Introduction to research methodology

My thesis advances ritual design as a novel methodology for creative practice that seeks mythic hygiene, i.e., the re-envisioning of one's core mythic narratives in search of more personally meaningful and functional myth. The resulting creative work also reveals ritual design as a novel genre of creative practice – a genre defined by these intentions. As discussed in Chapter 1, ritual design for mythic hygiene can be imagined mitigating the problematic psychosocial consequences of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety, and this hypothesis informs my creative practice.

My methods emerged through the creation of *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* and related creative and reflective practices, although these methods had roots in previous practices leading up to this research. I also began my research with an initial assumption: I was going to apply my notion of ritual design (Lewis, 2020) to creative practice. This meant I would be experimenting with the rituals through which creation occurs and with the ritual nature of the creative artefacts.

In this introduction, I summarise these precursors and starting assumptions. The balance of the chapter then discusses: (a) research questions, (b) research paradigms, and (c) research methods. I close the chapter with (d) a case study analysis of a scenario, 'Synopsis #17', to demonstrate several aspects of my methods.

Precursors to research method

The methodology that evolved during this research had precursors in the years preceding the start of my PhD programme, including explorations for integrating ritual design and creative practice that shaped the form of my eventual method detailed in this chapter. In this section, I concisely summarise those precursors.

Ritual design. My notion of ritual design as a method for designing actions and artefacts that draw upon ritual scholarship evolved as part of my PhD research in anthropology (Lewis, 2020). This research culminated in a ritual design strategy that I was applying to the design of events and materials in support of a workplace collaboration strategy and a collaborative

workplace culture at Air New Zealand (see Figure 4). During that research, I began applying ritual design to my creative practice.

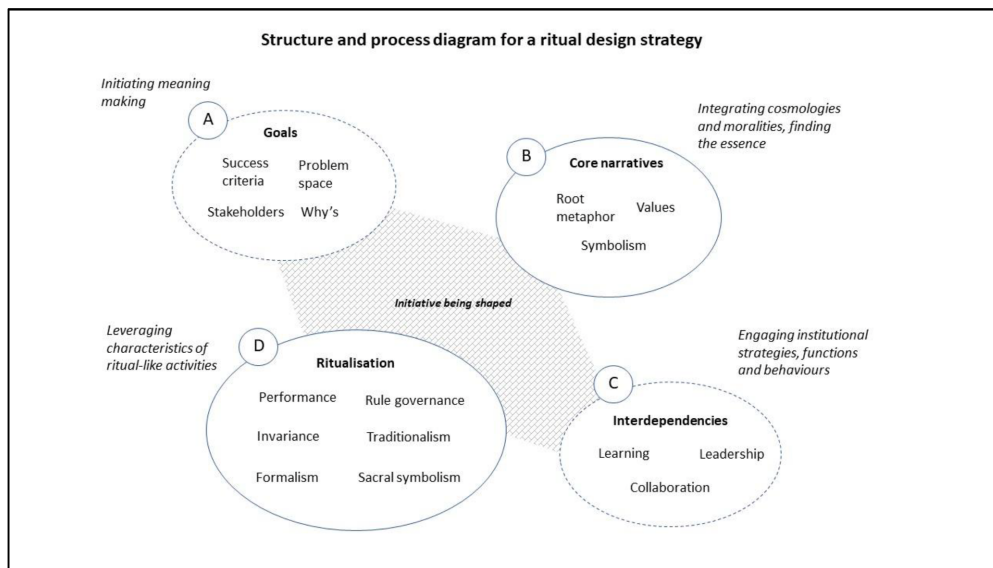


Figure 4: Diagram of a ritual design strategy (by author)

Council rituals. My first substantive experiment in applying ritual design to creative practice was the development of a council ritual. I imagined a group of people that I most respected and admired and whose thoughts and advice I seriously considered. I created a series of screens – images and images with text (see Figure 5), conceived as ritual objects. Beneath the images I would capture dialogues and elaborating notes. I imagined that a virtual human would represent these people – like an actor on stage seamlessly transforming into whomever was speaking. This was the precursor for the Master of Scenarios and for the virtual-communal setting of the Golden Calf Elevator & Café. My morning writing ritual included the ongoing iteration of these screens and texts. The dialogues discussed cosmology, morality, myth and ritual.



Figure 5: Sample of council image (by author)

How things are...

Which things matter...

What one ought do...
What is worth doing...

Situation:
Life is short and finite

Complications:
Meaning and meaningfulness are sometimes illusive
Nihilism can be destructive
Fears and anxieties can thwart fuller, more authentic and truthful ways of being
Memory can be tricky – you can forget your best intentions

Question:
How might one take advantage of the opportunity of existence? What ought one do?
How might I learn and grow in my practice?

Hypotheses:
Capture, leverage and share your idiosyncratic way of *seeing, being and acting* upon the world – this is your contribution.
Make rituals of this approach.
Leverage the dissertation as an opportunity to operationalise these intentions.

Figure 6: Sample of council image (by author)

Passover Seder performance. In April 2021, I delivered a live, online ritual-design ‘Seder’ performance to family and friends, a demonstration of using ritual design to re-envision a Passover Seder. This was my first substantive and shared work for applying ritual design to creative practice and many of these ideas fed into my proposal for this thesis. This performance included my response to the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 and described how this led to re-envisioning myth as a deliberate creative practice. Figure 7 shows the main menu for the presentation.

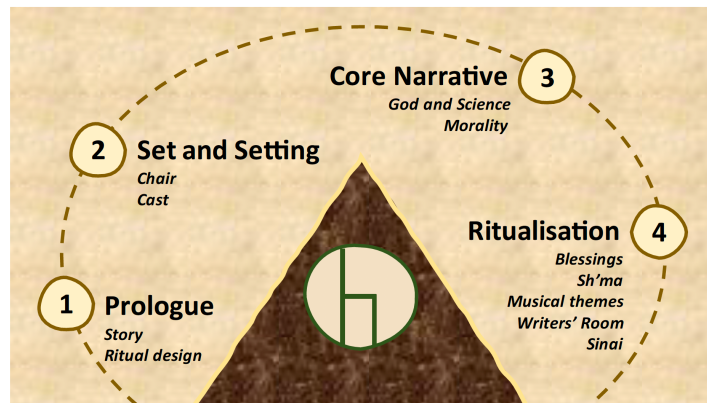


Figure 7: Map and menu image from online Seder presentation (by author)

Ritual design applied to creative practice. My first explicit experiment in applying ritual design to creative practice was a scenario called *Desire & Novelty: An experiment in theatrical facilitation of ritual design and ritual reflection*. Elements of this scenario included: the context of a ritual design workshop that takes place in a theatre; dialogue among council members; notes for musical moments and songs; stills from films referenced; and a dialogue with a Master of Ceremonies about the functions of such a character in a creative work (See Figure 8). Working on this scenario helped me to evolve forms for this thesis.

MC:
 You need a Master of Ceremonies, someone to help ground and orient visitors, to show you around, add essential commentary, like a concierge showing you to your room and pointing out the facilities.

“And if there is anything you need...?” (a refrain)

[We see the creation and evolution of the MC as a virtual human. They hover in space, fade in and out, at will, as if omnipotent. Omnipotent and omniscient and – possibly evil.]

MC: (A song and dance of introduction)

A Master of Ceremonies is an ideal package
 To welcome and guide
 To coach and advise
 To help them engage
 To intro and exit
 To ground the participants

ML:
 Well, technically, you’re the front-end of a system, a virtual-human interface, that facilitates ritual design. And evidently, you spontaneously burst into song. Not sure how I feel about that.

Figure 8: Excerpt of dialogue with the Master of Ceremonies about his character

These four precursors demonstrate that my methodology evolved from pre-existing creative habits and experiments, showing how these provided conceptual scaffolding for scenarios in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*.

Ritual design as method and genre

Based on my work prior to the present research, I hypothesised that ritual design could usefully be applied as a method and genre of creative practice. For this thesis, the rituals subject to ongoing design include creative writing behaviours, creative artefacts and behaviours related to engaging the creative artefact, e.g., reading, speaking, hearing and performance. The creative processes are approached as ritual behaviours and the outputs are designed as ritual objects – artefacts used in the performance of ritual.

I conceived ritual design as the application of mythic hygiene, with the intention to address amnesia, regulate death anxiety and embed symbolic immortality. This thesis, therefore, intends methodological innovation to explore and invent what such a method might look like when applied to creative writing and mythic hygiene. Although method and genre are conventionally treated as distinct, I conceive them as interdependent. The method describes how the work is created and how research questions are approached while the genre describes the outputs and outcomes.

I assumed at the start of my research that the Passover Haggadah would be a starting reference for my experimentation with form. The Haggadah draws upon any useful textual form, e.g., ritual facilitation, story, poem, song, explanation, etc., with occasional imagery in some versions. However, while a Haggadah is a form based on 'text for ritual facilitation', I intended to experiment with 'text for ritual *design* facilitation'. While this was the initial intention and assumption, the purpose of my research was to discover what this method and genre might look like through creative practice and reflection.

[2.2] Research questions and sub-questions

At the start of my research, I was focused on engaging the story of the golden calf, and my initial research question was crafted accordingly:

How might re-envisioning a traditional Jewish myth – the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32 – be seen as a creative response to death anxiety?

To approach this question, I created scenarios that engaged and sometimes changed the golden calf story. This writing included re-consideration of my cosmology and morality in search of (a) my actual or implicit mythology and (b) more personally meaningful and

functional myth. Over time, I ventured further away from the golden calf story, spending more time re-imagining personal, family and inherited cultural myths and rituals.

I imagined that, hypothetically, such rituals of creative writing might foster psychosocial wellbeing by mitigating the potential consequences of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety. For creative purposes, I assumed this was at least possible.

Over the first several months of research, I clarified my creative assumptions and thereby the intentions of the research: (a) re-envisioning myth in search of more personally meaningful and functional myth is a strategy for mitigating the potential psychosocial consequences of amythia; (b) creative practice that reinforces a symbolic immortality project is a strategy for mitigating the potential consequences of dysregulated death anxiety; (c) applying ritual design to the behaviour and form of writing yields some of the outcomes of ritual as suggested in the literature, e.g., meaning-making and decreasing anxiety.

I revised my research question to be more inclusive of these research intentions:

How might re-envisioning myth be seen as a ritualised symbolic immortality project for addressing amythia and regulating death anxiety?

I further unpacked my research question into sub-questions that more granularly addressed the various embedded concepts of creative writing as ritual behaviour, death anxiety and symbolic immortality, and amythia and re-envisioning myth. Table 2 lists these sub-questions.

Table 2: Sub-questions associated with my research question

Area or domain	Research sub-questions
Creative writing as ritual behaviour	<i>How might creative writing that re-envisions personal, familial and received cultural myth...?</i> [a] Draw upon the family characteristics of ritual (Bell, 1997)? [b] Achieve outcomes associated with ritual (Smith & Stewart, 2011)?
Death anxiety and symbolic immortality	<i>How might creative writing that re-envisions personal, familial and received cultural myth...?</i> [c] Express dysregulated death anxiety? [d] Mitigate malignant expressions of death anxiety? [e] Reinforce symbolic immortality?

Amythia and re-envisioning myth	<p><i>How might creative writing that re-envisions personal, familial and received cultural myth...?</i></p> <p>[f] Express amythia?</p> <p>[g] Mitigate malignant expressions of amythia?</p> <p>[h] Generate more personally meaningful and functional myth?</p>
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My creative project includes expressions related to many of these sub-questions but does not include a systematic investigation into them. As I emphasise throughout this exegesis, I am not seeking to test hypotheses or find technical answers to these questions. Instead, I have invited these questions to help inform my creative practice. Taken together, these questions suggest that our myths influence our lives not because they are true but because we operate as if they are true. Belief is a strategy of life. If we want to change how we operate – because, for example, we do not like current outcomes – then, we must change our stories.

[2.3] Research paradigms

Recognising the paradigm within which a project operates is especially important in creative writing research, where methods often diverge from traditional empirical or analytical frameworks (Smith & Dean, 2009; Barrett & Bolt, 2007). Rather than measuring, predicting or generalising, creative-practice research typically seeks to explore, embody and reflect. The form and meaning of the work emerge through the act of making.

Research paradigms identify researcher assumptions about how knowledge is sought, understood, created and evaluated. More specifically, paradigms include assumptions about reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and appropriate means of inquiry (methodology) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Paradigms are not merely methodological preferences; they shape the kinds of questions asked, the forms of evidence recognised and the outcomes considered meaningful.

The aim of my thesis is not to describe the world as it is, but to re-envision – to re-construct – myth and ritual to be personally meaningful and authentic. Since ontology and epistemology are components of a core mythic narrative that includes cosmological beliefs (Rue, 2005), research paradigms can be interpreted as mythic frameworks. For my thesis, therefore, the paradigm is part of the investigation, not just an underlying and declared assumption.

Among the interpretive research paradigms, constructivism is the closest fit for my thesis: reality is socially and symbolically created through language, interaction and experience (Crotty, 1998). In my project, personal, family and cultural myths are re-envisioned to construct meaning and seek insights. Re-envisioning myth is a creative act that emphasises meaning-making rather than objective truth. My conception of ritual design – the design of meaning-laden behaviours and artefacts – is therefore a constructivist enterprise.

Aspects of other interpretive paradigms complement my constructivist foundation, in particular postmodernism, poststructuralism, critical theory and phenomenology. In summary, (based on Guba & Lincoln, 1994), postmodern and post-structural paradigms reject fixed truths and emphasise instabilities in meaning, power and identity. Critical theory supports transformation through the critique of power, ideology and systemic injustice. Phenomenology focuses on lived experience, embodiment and consciousness as central to understanding human meaning. In relation to these paradigms, ritual design for mythic hygiene deconstructs inherited myths, in some cases reversing power relationships and inviting plural reinterpretations. My project shifts power to those who were massacred in the traditional story of the golden calf. In addition, my scenarios envision ritualised mythic engagement as employing ecstatic states of consciousness and treating the expressions of such states as valid sources of knowledge and insight (Kounios & Beeman, 2009).

Finally, the intentions of pragmatism overlap with my intentions as it evaluates knowledge by its practical consequences and usefulness in addressing real-world problems (Dewey, 1938). I assume that ritual design for mythic hygiene is indeed a practical and adaptable strategy for psychosocial wellbeing and for fostering a more just and peaceful world.

[2.4] Practice-based research

My project employs a practice-based research method wherein knowledge is emergent, embodied and reflexively constructed through the creative process. It is helpful to contrast practice-based and practice-led research. Practice-based research, according to Candy (2006), is where the creative artefact itself is the primary site of research and contribution to knowledge while practice-led research seeks to generate knowledge about practice through creative practice (Candy, 2006; Smith & Dean, 2009). This distinction situates my thesis as practice-based research.

Practice-based research emerged from within the arts, design and performance fields as a response to the limitations of paradigms that separate theory from practice or that prioritise

abstract knowledge over embodied understanding (Candy, 2006; Nelson, 2013). This method assumes that meaning is not merely discovered but enacted, positioning the researcher as a designer of symbolic forms that mediate between cosmology, morality and behaviour.

Practice-based Research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. In a doctoral thesis, claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances and exhibitions. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes. (Candy, 2006)

My method for this thesis aligns with practice-based research in several ways. Creative writing is the method. I am not primarily writing about ritual or myth; I am writing scenarios that function – experimentally – as rituals and enacted mythic narratives. Insights emerge through narrative experimentation and emotional engagement, although this exegesis does engage in conceptual analysis, which has led to further insights. The creative component has been developed through recursive reflection, journaling, self-observation and dialogic engagement. Creative writing is not a report on research findings – it is the research, both method and artefact. Finally, my project is an experiment in ritual design as method and genre of creative practice. Practice-based research is, I would argue, a necessary method for such experimentation.

[2.5] My lived method: Ritual design for mythic hygiene

In this section, I describe how I applied practice-based research to ritual design for mythic hygiene. My research was primarily situated in a morning ritual through which I explored and experimented with cultural, familial and personal myth. I describe the ritual in terms of its form and function, modes of writing and content of writing.

[2.5.1] Form and function of ritual

In this section, I place a ritual lens on creative writing and my morning writing practice. By form of ritual, I mean the characteristics of the ritual experience, such as the environment, behaviours and objects, as well as the characteristics of ritual discussed in the literature, e.g., invariance, formalism, sacred symbolism, rule governance, traditionalism and performance (Bell, 1997). After completing studies in religion, anthropology and ritual – and reflecting on my strong emotional reaction to Exodus 32 – I began considering how my

morning writing could be interpreted as a ritual response to amythia and a search for an anxiety-reducing sense of meaning by seeking a more personally meaningful and functional myth. The ritual might be in the service of some kind of psychological balance (Hobson, 2017).

While the above represents a rational interpretation of ritual motivation, my ritual is also a response to more fundamental psychosomatic needs. For example, I experience hypersensitivity to noise, light and overstimulation and feel strongly affected by highly stimulating environments, such as crowded places, and in particular noisy crowds. A large supermarket is sometimes too bright and too crowded, with too many colours and textures. I abhor direct sunlight – flashes of light, like a reflection of sunlight into my eyes, can fill me with rage. I have often found live music events uncomfortably loud and crowded. This sensitivity can apply to audio-video media. For example, the film *Moulin Rouge* (2001) is too uncomfortable for me to watch, with its bright, flashing lights, highly saturated colour, rapid cuts and busy images. *Wired* magazine was a particularly uncomfortable reading experience due to its busy, chaotic, colourful and textual design. Looking at large paragraphs of text can sometimes make me want to avert my eyes and this has, at times, influenced my selection of reading material.

These sensory responses have quite clearly shaped the environment I devise for my ritual. For over 30 years, being alone in a dark and quiet space – particularly before the busyness of the day commences – feels absolutely essential.

I also experience a more cognitive type of sensitivity. I often awaken with a storm of thought accompanied by a sense of urgency – even panic – that I might lose an idea before capturing it in writing. The time between awakening and writing can feel very stressful and anxious. Writing can convert busy cognitive activity into a calmer, word-by-word and line-by-line experience.

The combination of these sensory and cognitive factors also influence my forms of writing. My free writing and some of my scenarios in this project avoid paragraphs of text and instead employ short lines of text, one thought per line, without full stops (periods). In addition, my writing often organises thoughts into goals and strategies, a simplifying and meaning-making pattern of thought (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

My reflective practice activities (discussed in Section 2.6) helped me to recognise that my ritual behaviour has these strong physiological and psychological foundations. My morning

ritual is both a creative compulsion and a coping strategy that, among other outcomes, reduces anxiety by mitigating the effects of sensory and cognitive over-stimulation.

In summary, my morning writing ritual is a structured, routinised private practice that both responds to my psychosomatic sensitivities, e.g., hypersensitivity to noise and light, while converting early-morning cognitive storms and urgency into text. The behaviour fulfils the regulatory functions attributed to ritual, e.g., meaning-making, reducing anxiety, structuring performance and reinforcing commitment to creative practice (Smith & Stewart, 2011). My long-standing ritual practice reinforces a sense of personal continuity, i.e., traditionalism, with invariance discerned in the consistent use of ritual objects, such as the empty chair, the laptop computer, the large coffee mug and the coffee. A strong sense of formality accompanies the ritual.

[2.5.2] Writing modes and behaviours

I use several modes of writing during the morning ritual, including [a] free writing, [b] writing prompts, [c] recapitulation, [d] synoptic writing and [e] dialogic writing. I describe each below. While distinguishable, they often blend together or progress from one to another.

Free writing

My ritual often begins by capturing whatever is top of mind in my journal file. These typically begin in states of uncertainty, anxiety or existential restlessness. There is no template or planned direction. This writing feels exploratory and intuitive, seeking emergence rather than coherence, becoming a way to surface latent or obscured content.

Writing prompts

Writing prompts are questions or topics from which to begin writing. When I have not had an idea desperate to be captured, I have often started with a writing prompt. Since the 1990s, my writing ritual has included prompts related to the re-consideration of personal myth, including cosmology and morality, although I did not initially use those terms or even conceive my behaviour as such. Instead, I would often begin writing rituals by typing 'What is important?' or 'What ought one do?' And then I would proceed to brainstorm answers to those questions. Later, I began adopting Rue's language that describes the content of core mythic narratives, e.g., 'how things are' and 'which things matter' (Rue, 2005). Upon learning the Minto Pyramid Principle for strategy development (Minto, 2009), I began incorporating

questions from that model. What is the situation? What are the complications? What is the question? In my use of these models as writing prompts, they have all, in effect, been asking about cosmology and morality. To ask about 'how things are' or the 'situation' prompts cosmological thinking while asking about 'which things matter' or the complications prompts moral thinking.

Synoptic rituals

My synoptic rituals (my term for this type of writing ritual) are attempts to capture the entire landscape of an idea, project or thesis. This writing sometimes begins with a prompt such as 'What is going on here?', 'What am I doing?' or 'What is the project about?' The writing then attempts a concise summary – in as few words as possible – that captures the whole idea at a glance. It feels driven by a need for sense-making and to reduce anxiety that can accompany confusion or be overwhelmed by complexity. Figure 9 provides an example of a synoptic ritual.

Our situation and how things are
Ritual and Myth: Meaning is embedded into worldviews and behaviours
Death anxiety: Strategies for coping with existential dread, e.g., violent and xenophobic worldview defence
A strong mythic foundation helps to regulate death anxiety
Symbolic immortality: A coping strategy based on leaving something meaningful behind after death
(Human nature is evil as well as beautiful; some adaptive strategies are horrific)

The complications and which things matter
Amythia: The state and consequences of living without functional myth
Dysregulated death anxiety: The state and consequences of existential dread as per terror management theory
(Most human suffering, I speculate, can be traced to dysregulated death anxiety and dysfunctional myth)

How we might mitigate those consequences
Ritual design: Deliberate and creative meaning making and embedding
Mythic hygiene: Seeking more personally meaningful and functional myth and ritual
(In principle, this should work, but we don't know the details and so we must experiment)

Figure 9: Example of a synoptic ritual (by the author)

Synoptic writing is generative, synthetic and reflective, and when I engage such a ritual, the outcome often determines where I focus that day's writing.

Recapitulation rituals

My approach to ritual design includes ongoing revision and transformation of ritual texts. This is not editing in the sense of making changes that progress toward a final, finished text. The goal is not completion but engagement with meaning-making and presence, i.e., with being fully present with the ideas captured in the text. The act of revision is the ritual practice. By changing text, I am in effect saying to myself: 'This feels right to me, today'. By analogy, this feels like shaping clay, not to achieve a finished sculpture, but for the sake of an authentic, personally meaningful engagement with the medium and the message. This type of behaviour highlights the difference between a ritual (in the traditional sense of the term) and a design ritual. A ritual may use a fixed ritual object while a design ritual shapes the ritual object. In my case, the ritual object being shaped is a textual artefact.

Dialogic rituals

Some writing rituals are in the form of dialogues and conversations between imagined entities, characters and personalities. In some instances, these are conversations between two entities labelled X and Y, and in these cases, X often represents my voice, while Y is an internal interlocutor. In other instances, the conversation is among Council members and myself. Such writing sometimes transforms into a scenario, however, more typically, it is a method for engaging ideas while permitting internal or fictional entities or characters to contribute their voices. Dialogic writing serves to explore, debate and challenge ideas.

The above modes of writing are typical, discernible types of writing that take place during my morning writing ritual. They are not content-specific – each mode may engage with any topic or concept. Next, I describe the content areas I explored that constitute my approach to mythic hygiene.

[2.5.3] Ritual content

The above discussion of ritual form and writing modes are largely independent of content. Reflective practice has revealed a variety of content areas that my morning ritual and the above writing modes have engaged. These represent my content-related approaches to mythic hygiene. Table 3 catalogues these topics of engagement and questions that help to describe each topic. Several of the research sub-questions are embedded in these content categories.

Table 3: Content areas representing tactical approaches to mythic hygiene

Content areas	Questions and prompts
[1] Explore foundations of your personal myth – cosmology and morality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your cosmology – your understanding of what the universe is, how it is put together, how it functions? What is your situation? How are things? What is the big history of the cosmos and humanity? • How is terror management theory influencing your conception of human nature? • What do you believe about the role and power of myth and ritual in human psychology and society? • What is your morality – your evaluation of what is important, what is good and bad, what is worthy of attention and worthy of action? What ought one do?
[2] Explore your parental influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your parental myths? • What key moments with parents and family are firmly embedded and recalled? • What key values and messages do you associate with each parent?
[3] Explore people you admire (your implicit council)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who do you admire across history? • Why do you admire them? • What are their key messages? • How are you giving them permission to speak?
[4] Explore the influences of Judaism in your life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key religio-cultural myths in your Judaism? • What key messages have you received from parents about Judaism? • What key messages have you received from Hebrew school? • What does your 'Judaism of Israel' mean and entail? • What does your 'Judaism of the Holocaust' mean and entail? • What has been the impact of rote learning of Jewish ritual? • What has been the impact of liturgical and ritual music? • What has been the impact of your Bar Mitzvah experience?
[5] Leverage provocations and disturbances of mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What upsets you; what are the signs and triggers of moral dissonance? • How does the story of the golden calf disturb you? • How does the violence in Israel-Gaza disturb you? • What does genocide mean to you – and do to you? • How does the mind-boggling absurdity of Donald Trump disturb you? • How does the inevitability of death disturb you? • How do infuriating conspiracy theories disturb you? • In what contexts do you encounter guilt, shame and other uncomfortable emotions? • What internal voices and messages do you tend to shut down – that you do not want to hear? • What if we're the bad guy?

[6] Leverage theories, frameworks and research sub-questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is my current conception of (and relationships between) amythia, death anxiety, symbolic immortality and/or ritual design for mythic hygiene? • What do I wish to leave behind? • How might I like to contribute? • How might this motivate creative practice? • How is symbolic immortality shaping my creative practice?
[7] The mythic community and orientation workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might a religion and community based on mythic hygiene look like? • What might a 'ritual design workshop for mythic hygiene' look like?
[8] Ritual design as method and genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might ritual design as method look like? • What might ritual design as a genre of creative practice look like?

Each of these were, at times, explicit starting points for writing. However, just as often, I would integrate or synthesise multiple areas as a form of creative play. I cannot entirely rationalise why these categories and questions were prominent and not others – they emerged with my creative practice. Some are simply related to concepts embedded in my research question and sub-questions.

Engaging with the above content areas, using the previously discussed writing modes, represents the ritualised writing behaviour that I call ritual design for mythic hygiene.

Sometimes this behaviour yielded progress toward a scenario, but often the resulting text remained as the outcome of the morning ritual in my journal. The purpose of the ritual and the writing is articulation, reconsideration, challenging and revision with the goal to maximise authenticity and meaning – and to address my research question.

[2.5.4] Scenario development

Scenarios are the building blocks of *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* and are similar to events in a story or scenes in a movie or play. I conceived them as ritual objects, ritual texts through which ritual design for mythic hygiene is performed.

As described in Chapter 1, the overarching design concept is that scenarios are offerings created by the main character (the son) during his orientation workshop, which is being facilitated by a community that experiments with mythic hygiene as their religious practice. Scenarios are outcomes of his participation in Sinai Sessions – ecstatic rituals in which

participants are immersed in mythological landscapes: personal, familial and religio-cultural. Scenarios include texts that capture those experiences and make meaning of them. Scenarios may employ any textual form and genre.

Scenarios often began as journal entries that are then sculpted in various ways, e.g., extraneous words removed, ideas integrated or restructured. I often aimed to capture an essence or a wholeness. By essence, I mean clarity of an idea that feels important or useful. By wholeness, I mean that it captures something like a unifying vision. Meaning, for me, is sense-making, which can be achieved by capturing essence and/or wholeness. Writing may envision entities (characters), environments (settings) and circumstances (plots); they may be story-like, dream-like or fantastical. A scenario might function as a ritual text to be read, heard or performed, or as a hybrid of narrative and facilitation – an experiment with ritual design as genre.

The content of a scenario may be an experiment with personal, family and received cultural myth. Connections to the golden calf story vary in explicitness; some scenarios directly revise or embed that narrative, others connect more abstractly through themes resonant with personal and cultural myth. This openness allows the work to traverse personal history, family archetypes, political realities and speculative cosmologies.

Additional forms and design concepts

While scenarios are text, some include descriptions or references to other media types, including mixed-media scenography and music. As described in Chapter 1, the design concept for the creative work as a whole is an annotated proceedings document with characteristics of a Haggadah and a stage manager's version of a script, with indications for set, lighting and effects cues.

Mixed-media scenography

My writing often unfolds as though it were a libretto for mixed-media performance, with imagined cues for lighting, projection and sound. This reflects my background in interdisciplinary media arts and my early experiments in combining live action with projected imagery, soundscapes and other media forms.

I began using the term 'scenography' when I learned about Yosef Svoboda (1920-2002), who innovated set design and the use of media technologies in theatre. Scenographic notes

capture what I see in my mind as I write and can be interpreted as notes to be shared with collaborating artists working on a mixed-media performance. Howard (2002) defines scenography as 'the seamless synthesis of space, text, research, art, actors, directors and spectators that contributes to an original creation'. Ultimately, I imagine anything I write as a script that could be performed, as a mixed-media performance on a stage with live performers, perhaps augmented with film/video, with live or pre-produced music, and with dialogue that might be spoken, chanted or sung. My writing is sometimes in an imagined dialogue with contributing artists and technicians.

Music, song and interludes

Some scenarios emerge as songs or song fragments. Lyrics may arise from phrases in the writing, sometimes co-emerging with melodies in my mind. At times, older musical compositions become repurposed for a new scenario, when their thematic resonance becomes apparent. Some of these serve as interludes between scenarios. Periodically, scenarios have emerged initially as music and lyrics; key words or phrases would stand out as feeling lyrical or a phrase may sound like it is being chanted or sung and the phrase would be associated with a melody. I captured these ideas in various ways, including as notes to a (non-existent) musical director who is collaborating on a performance of the scenario.

[2.5.5] The Map

The Map is a text file that I used as a thinking tool during the research period. I used the Map to write about the creative work. While the journal was unstructured, the Map was deliberately structured by topics and concepts and included high-level outlines of characters, design ideas and structural experiments. The Map was a visual-cognitive tool for reducing complexity and anxiety through meaning-making. At the top of the file, I summarise how I use the Map: 'When I am feeling a bit lost or confused, I consult the map'. This suggests that I turn toward cognitive and analytical thinking when I am feeling confused.

Used most intensively in the first 18 months of the project, I regularly added and revised the text, which used my characteristic short-line format yielding an outline of ideas related to each topic. I attempt to capture greater clarity of concepts, so I can see them at a glance. A hyperlinked table of contents helped me find previous entries for reference or revision. At the end of my research, the Map consisted of 60 pages and roughly 21,000 words. Examples of Map topics are described in Table 4.

Table 4: Selected content headings and descriptions from the Map

Section/Heading	Description
Design concepts	Ways to think about the overall form of the creative work
Research questions	Brainstorming variations and sub-questions
Summary of approach	Exploring ritual design for re-envisioning myth and as a genre and method
Absurd Judaism	Notes for my cosmology and morality, and the influence of Judaism on my life
Characters	Brief character descriptions
Changing the story to change the world	Exploring what this phrase means
Transcending problematic, inherited, human behaviours	What might 'transcending human nature' look like?
Structure and curation	How might the creative component be structured, e.g., scenarios, interludes and 'days'
Text for ritual design	What might this form look like? What is the alignment and synthesis of design concepts for form and content?
Technologies for Sinai Sessions	What might these technologies include?
Strategies-on-a-page	Various iterations relating to goals and strategies
Competing and constructing root metaphors	What is the golden calf representing and what is the Golden Calf Elevator & Café representing?
True myth	What is the meaning of a true myth?
Reflective practice	What questions and lenses am I using to assess my progress toward the research question and toward ritual design as genre and method?

[2.6] Reflective practice

Reflective practice is an essential component of practice-based research and supports ongoing assessment and course correction of the creative work (Candy & Edmonds, 2018).

Its purpose is to evaluate progress toward the project's aims and to identify corrective actions; in creative projects it also generates concrete ideas for revising work in progress (Moon, 2013). Reflection is iterative rather than linear; practitioners engage in reflection-in-action (immediate thinking and adjustment during performance) and reflection-on-action (deliberate, retrospective review and planning after the event) as part of normal practice (Schön, 1983).

During this research, I employed three overlapping modes of reflection: (a) project-level (whole work), (b) scenario-level, and (c) ritual-level (daily writing ritual). Table 5 lists the representative questions used in each mode.

Table 5: Sample questions for reflective practice

Scope of reflection	Sample questions for reflection
Project-based reflection: Questions asked of the creative piece as a whole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might I currently answer my research question? • How has the writing engaged and challenged my cosmology and morality? • How well does my cosmology and morality support my wellbeing? • What beliefs do I feel motivated to re-evaluate? • Am I approaching personal myth that feels meaningful and functional? • How do my myths impact my sense of identity and belonging? • How do my myths impact my relationships? • What underlying fears or beliefs might be sabotaging my wellbeing? • Where do I have persistent negativity that needs addressing? • What themes or symbols recur in my dreams, creative expressions or unconscious thoughts? • How is my project serving as expression of and development of symbolic immortality? • How well is my project illuminating ritual design as a methodology and genre of creative practice?
Ritual-based reflection: How might I assess the impact of the writing ritual?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well might my ritual illuminate my implicit myths, including my implicit cosmology and implicit morality? • Am I more able to face the day? • Does the ritual yield interesting ideas and creative outputs? • Does the ritual progress my symbolic immortality project? • Is there anything about my ritual practice that feels somehow wrong, negative, detrimental, dangerous or self-defeating?

<p>Scenario-based reflection: How (well) does a particular scenario contribute to the project?</p>	<p><i>How does the scenario...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...Serve as a ritual text? • ...Express or address amythia? • ...Demonstrate re-envisioning myth? • ...Approach personally meaningful myth? • ...Ritually enact (re-envisioned) myth? • ...Illustrate ritual design as method and genre? • ...Engage with death anxiety? • ...Express or address symbolic immortality?
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These questions for reflective practice are similar to the research sub-questions and, in practice, I periodically browsed and drew upon those sub-questions. I respond to several of the scenario-based questions in the case study that concludes this chapter.

Feedback from readers

In addition to considering the above questions, reflective practice also included feedback from supervisors, family and friends, and online writing forums that provided anonymous feedback. Feedback focuses on either specific creative outputs, i.e., particular scenarios, on the theories and frameworks from the literature, or on ideas related to the project as a whole. These interactions helped to identify concepts that I was not communicating as clearly as I might.

Engaging generative artificial intelligence (AI) for reflective practice

ChatGPT was made broadly available to the public on 30 November 2022, one year into my research period. There was a fascinating synchronicity for my project in that this virtual human interface is similar to the Master of Scenarios, a key character in my project – a virtual human that is being trained by the main character. My project imagines virtual humans as (a) symbolic immortality projects left behind to collaborate with the future, and (b) virtual representations of deceased family members, available for engagement. Suddenly, I found myself interacting with a related system.

I customised versions of ChatGPT and called it the Master of Scenarios. Interacting with this system became an almost daily part of my writing ritual. Once voice and speech capability was released, I was then able to go for a walk and have fluid conversations as though they were walking with me. We chatted about terror management theory, symbolic immortality and about how these were expressed in my scenarios. I asked the system to engage as a coach by asking clarifying questions, one at a time. This use of ChatGPT contributed to my

reflective practice while enabling experimentation with conversing with an artificial human. However, I did not use generative AI for any writing or idea generation.

[2.7] Method in action: 'Synopsis #17'

To illustrate how ritual design operates as both method and genre in this research, I present 'Synopsis #17' as a case study. I chose 'Synopsis #17' because it is situated near the opening of the creative work, it is brief and because it engages the golden calf narrative directly, which is not the case for most scenarios. I trace the development of the scenario and respond to several of the questions that I use for reflective practice.

Initial journaling

'Synopsis #17' began as a morning writing ritual on 2 January 2023. The entry took the form of a synoptic ritual – an attempt to capture the project's conceptual whole. In the journal entry, I imagined explaining my project to my deceased mother. I framed the golden calf episode as 'the worst story ever told' and imagined its transformation into an origin myth for a radically inclusive religion whose ritual practice is experimental mythic hygiene. Figure 9 provides an excerpt from this journal entry.

I am drawing upon the Sinai myth
Treating the massacre of the golden calf celebrants as a perfect evil
I'm changing the story to become an origin myth of the religion I imagine
The Levitical priests serve, protect and defend the celebrants – they dedicate their lives to this
The celebrants represent radical diversity and inclusivism
The priests become the professors and maintainers of the religion
...
The Levites were ordered (via Moses via God) to massacre family members
It was for the worst possible motivations
First, for the sake of heterodox expressions of religiosity
Secondly, as a symbol of strength for the eyes of the community and its enemies
Weakness invites attack, it is argued
Some would have resisted
A debate would have ensued – but not until after the killing
The three thousand become martyrs whose deaths must be given meaning and purpose
God and Moses and the Levite killers are put on trial
(God gave Moses a terrible choice: kill some of your family or he'll kill all of them)

Meanwhile, all these ideas are in the mind of a priest-in-training
Who is at the seminary-campus-festival where the new religion is centred
The festival presents radically diverse expressions of the origin myth
This is what religious practice looks like, in part

The mother of this priest-in-training left him clues that led him to this community
Life in the community consists of psychotherapeutic, dream-like sessions
Where one's personal mythology is unpacked and interwoven with the golden calf story
(Somehow, he believes that changing the story can change the world)

The context for what is happening with this priest-in-training is ambiguous
He keeps asking, What the fuck is going on here?
It seems he is in a hospital room, prison cell, courtroom, dorm room, a sensory deprivation
tank

Inside an elevator going up and down Mount Sinai
Engaging Moses and God and Miriam (Adam, Eve, Serpent)
(Moses, like Sisyphus, goes up and down the mountain forever, revising the
commandments)

As if hoping that moments of reintegration provide answers and meaning

The piece consists so far of 'scenarios' which are these dream-like exploratory sessions
Experiences are as if the entire universe is all here all at once – the universe as one thing
Thought instantaneously becomes reality

Figure 10: Excerpt from a journal entry that became 'Synopsis #17'

Transformation into a scenario

After moving the journal entry into a new text file, my first step in shaping the scenario included removing as many words as possible while retaining the essence of the idea. I wanted to create a synoptic scenario as a ritual text that summarised the overall context for the main character. I imagined the text being used in multiple ways, for example, as a daily, context-setting ritual experienced by priests-in-training upon awakening, and also as an initiation ritual performed at the opening of the orientation event – perhaps repeated each morning. I revised this text periodically over the course of my project. This scenario was developed using each of modes discussed – e.g., free writing, synoptic writing and recapitulation – although it is a monologue rather than dialogue. Given the facilitative nature of the scenario – a facilitator is speaking to orientation workshop participants – I use second-person voice. Figure 11 is the final text as it appears in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*.

Synopsis #17

“You must kill some of your family or I will kill them all. Now, go down, Moses.”

— God

The slaughter of golden calf celebrants

The worst story ever told

A perfect evil

To punish and destroy heresy

To demonstrate will and power

Let us change the story

That we may change the world

A symposium at the base of Sinai

Moses, the Levites and God condemned

Moses now and forever ascends and descends Sinai

Carrying stone-tablet revisions between God and humanity

A dialogue seeking empathy, understanding and collaboration

The Levites now and forever dedicate their lives

To protect golden calf celebrants — for ecstasy is a vulnerable state

To celebrate and leverage diversity

To sustain this new covenant community

Now you arrive for orientation

A Levitical Priest-in-Training

Explore and re-envision your mythologies and rituals

Share your festival offerings

Environments and beings emerge and dissolve

Miriam and Mother

Moses and Father

Your Council is cast and crew awaiting in the theatre

Your Master of Scenarios looks forward to reunion

Awakenings are ambiguous

Reality checks inconclusive

Innocently you favour your most cherished thought:

What the fuck is going on?

Figure 11: Final text for 'Synopsis #17'

As described in Table 5, my method for reflective practice poses questions with which to analyse and assess the scenario. For this case study, I offer concise answers to four related questions.

[a] How does the scenario serve as a ritual text that expresses and addresses amythia?

'Synopsis #17' functions as a ritual text; it is designed to be read at the opening of each orientation day by priest-trainees or possibly as a morning ritual to be read upon awakening. The text ritualises mythic revision by embedding a new cosmology and morality. The cosmology is one in which changing stories changes the world through the power of myth and ritual to influence human life and society. The scenario suggests a design ritual (distinct from a fixed ritual) in that it proposes changing the story. Also, a specialised state of consciousness is employed through which mythic landscapes and entities are engaged. The morality is one in which the massacre of the golden calf celebrants is declared an absolute horror. The scenario expresses amythia by claiming that the traditional myth is not functional – it does not represent the actual cosmology or morality of the main character or the community that is facilitating the ritual. Amythia is then addressed (not to completion, but in progress) by exposing the ethical horror of the massacre and by encouraging the ritual participants to change the myth.

[b] How does the scenario engage death anxiety and symbolic immortality?

Death anxiety is engaged through the opening quote from God, in which he gives the order and choice to Moses: Kill some of your family or all will die. This signals and perhaps fosters existential terror that is implicitly embedded in the traditional myth, although not according to traditional interpretation. The scenario promotes symbolic immortality by suggesting a lineage of Levites dedicated to protecting those engaged in mythic hygiene. This implies that the ritual enactment of mythic revision proceeds across generations. Reframing the myth to privilege inclusivity, dialogue and symbolic immortality through which myth is revised is an anxiety-reduction strategy.

[c] How does the scenario demonstrate or perform the re-envisioning of traditional myth into a more personally meaningful myth?

The scenario revises the denouement of Exodus 32 that follows the golden calf massacre. Instead of leaving Sinai – and God sending a plague onto the community – a symposium is initiated to begin the process of healing, of truth and reconciliation, and to consider accountability. Power roles are reversed with God, Moses and the Levites being held accountable for the massacre. Moses is removed from his position of leadership and power and is demoted to carrying messages as part of a safety barrier between God and the

community. These reversals re-envision the myth to be aligned with the community's values. The scenario affirms a myth of collaboration, inclusivity, egalitarianism and ritual pluralism, which are values meaningful to the imagined community.

[d] How does the scenario illustrate ritual design as method and genre?

Taken together, the above analysis illuminates 'Synopsis #17' as an example of ritual design as method and genre. As method, the scenario emerges from journaling, synoptic writing and recapitulation toward mythic hygiene. As genre, it expresses ritual design for mythic hygiene for the sake of changing human outcomes. The scenario is a ritual artefact born of ritual behaviour and promoting ritual revision. Further, the characteristics of ritual (Bell, 1997) are discernible, or at least suggested, in the text, including formalism, traditionalism, invariance and performance. The scenario has a formal feel of a facilitated ritual; it suggests an enduring tradition based on a newly conceived Levitical priesthood. It is designed for repetition as daily or opening ritual and is a textual performance of mythic hygiene.

The scenario changed in many small ways over time, becoming stable after about one year. One reader noted how it provided a useful summary context, helping them to understand the scope of the entire work. This encouraged me to place the scenario near the start of the creative work. In summary, this scenario helped me more intuitively clarify what I meant by ritual design as both genre and method.

[2.8] Methodology summary

The methods described in this chapter are based on the following premise: establishing and ritually embedding a personally meaningful and functional myth should, in theory, counter amythia, and creating such myth and rituals as a meaningful symbolic immortality project should – again, in theory – foster healthier expressions of death anxiety. These are the hypotheses that I have invited to inform my creative practice. Myth is the core narrative that integrates cosmology and morality while ritual enacts the myth. Ritual design is therefore the deliberate re-envisioning of behaviours (e.g., rituals) and artefacts (e.g., texts) that address cosmology and morality, in search of more personally meaningful and functional forms, i.e., those that address mythic hygiene. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* is an example of ritual design as a genre that embeds these methods and intentions.

The following chapters, 3 and 4, discuss the theories and frameworks that I drew upon – death anxiety, amythia and symbolic immortality – and share the insights that resulted from creative and reflective practice and that approached answers to my research question:

How might re-envisioning myth be seen as a ritualised symbolic immortality project for addressing amythia and regulating death anxiety?

The methodology outlined in this chapter, which evolved during my research, is one form of answer to that question.

Chapter 3 – Reflective practice: Terror management theory and symbolic immortality

[3.1] Let's think about death – your death

You are going to die. Imagine yourself just after dying. What is happening to your body? Most people do not become measurably anxious at such thoughts. After all, you have had your entire life to practise avoiding anxiety over thinking about death. However, certain defence mechanisms will kick in. These initial defences rationally engage these thoughts of death. For example, you might acknowledge that this is a thought experiment and that your actual death is obviously somewhere off in the future. And then you might offer up distracting thoughts. Are you hungry?

Now, let's say you take a break from reading this death-laden exegesis. Soon, thoughts of death may be banished from your consciousness. However, outside your awareness, additional defences against death anxiety are active. These defences reduce the likelihood that thoughts of death will re-enter your consciousness. Meanwhile, your brain has been primed with reminders of your mortality and you are likely to respond in many predictable ways to various stimuli. For example, if you are confronted with an alternative worldview, you would vigorously defend your own – more so than had you not been primed with thoughts of your death. If you are presented with an attack on your self-esteem, you would more vigorously strive for self-esteem. According to terror management theory, you will unconsciously reinforce the belief that you are a person of value in a meaningful world.

Perhaps you are thinking, no, this does not sound like me. However, the results have been confirmed across hundreds of controlled studies. When we are reminded of our mortality, even unconsciously, we defend our worldview and our self-esteem and respond in a wide variety of other ways, which will be discussed shortly (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, et al., 1997; Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, et al., 1997; Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000). This is the essence of terror management theory and, arguably, a significant slice of what one might mean by human nature. Some of our responses to thoughts of death might feel confronting and uncomfortable.

[3.2] Sheldon Solomon and terror management theory

At the beginning of my research period, I did not possess a comprehensive or organised understanding of death anxiety, terror management theory or symbolic immortality. My understanding evolved over the course of my project and my changing understanding shaped my creative work. My learning journey began with Sheldon Solomon and terror management theory.

Solomon is an experimental social-psychologist and professor of psychology at Skidmore College in New York. Along with his long-time friends and colleagues Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, Solomon developed terror management theory. They co-authored *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2003) and one of my key resources, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (2015), which captures the story of terror management theory.

Solomon remembers the genesis of his own understanding of death anxiety.

...I read an essay by Alexander Smith. In the 1860s he wrote that, 'it is our knowledge that we have to die that makes us human.' I remember reading that and thinking, '...man, he's onto something!' Twenty years later, I stumbled onto a book by Ernest Becker – a cultural anthropologist – called 'The Denial of Death.' It was in that book that Becker argued that the distinguishing characteristic of humanity is our awareness that death is inevitable and the disinclination to accept that fact (quoted in Shah, 2023).

Solomon and his colleagues sought to experimentally demonstrate Becker's contention that our knowledge of mortality was a significant influence – indeed a major driver – of human behaviour and culture.

I first encountered Sheldon Solomon in 2021, about six months before beginning this research. I stumbled upon one of his many online interviews and lectures about terror management theory and was immediately captured by the form and his content of his presentation. I recognised him – not literally – but he was someone I could imagine at the Jewish Community Centre, when I was young, or as a camp counsellor, or hanging out in the bowling alley playing ping pong or pool, or down in the 'teen' room listening to the juke box. Whether in a classroom, auditorium or interview, he has a consistently informal and conversational style, laced with humour. His uniform was 'off to a summer rock concert' – tee-shirt and shorts. I liked this guy, and later it occurred to me – he reminded me of my very smart, very funny brother.

Solomon tends to open any presentation with a colourful summary of terror management theory. To set the scene, imagine him taking a long, slow inhalation from a marijuana cigarette and then, in a single breath, quickly delivering the following:

If you're alive and you know it, like all living things you're of a finite duration, and therefore you will someday die. Moreover, unless you're a child or an idiot, this realisation is joined with a concurrent recognition that your death can occur at any time for reasons you could never anticipate or control – and from a purely biological point of view, you're a breathing piece of defecating meat that's no more enduring or significant than a lizard or a potato...

If you were perpetually aware, I submit, of the realities of the human condition – I am going to die, I could be disembowelled by a hungry lion, or smote by a basketball-sized malignant tumour, I'm a breathing piece of defecating meat, I'm a cold-cut with an attitude, I'm a talking sausage, I'm Spam with a plan but I've got no can – all of these realisations would conspire, some say, to render our ancestors totally demoralised and paralysed by overwhelming dread, had they not rather ingeniously managed the terror of death through the construction and maintenance of what anthropologist today call culture – humanly constructed beliefs about reality that we share with people in groups to minimise anxiety by giving us a sense that we're persons of value in a world of meaning.

And to accomplish this... every culture provides us with an account of the origin of the universe and... prescriptions of appropriate conduct. And all cultures offer some hope of immortality either literally in the form of heavens, afterlives and reincarnation of the world's great religions, or symbolically through having children, amassing great fortunes, producing great art or scientific discoveries such that, while we may not be here forever, we are comforted by the possibility that a tangible manifestation of our existence will persist over time nonetheless.

When we embrace cultural worldviews and glean self-esteem from perceiving that we're meeting or exceeding the standards of values associated with them, this keeps mortal terror at bay... I would argue that some of our finest, most noble and enduring accomplishments are a result of this uniquely human yearning for immortality. On the other hand, however, it has also produced some unforeseen, unsavoury and potentially lethal complications (Solomon, 2015).

Figure 12: Sheldon Solomon excerpt

After about a week of deep-diving into his work, I added Solomon to my 'Council' – my fictional group of people who influence my deliberations on cosmology and morality. Solomon makes an appearance as a character in my work.

Solomon and his colleagues, as experimental psychologists, took these basic ideas about existential dread – which they gleaned from Becker – formed hypotheses and designed experiments. This yielded terror management theory (TMT), which is now a large body of literature with strong empirical support. In summary, while fear is adaptive and helps us survive, unregulated terror can be maladaptive (Solomon et al., 2015). Our awareness of the certainty of death can generate profound anxiety, or what Solomon et al. call 'terror'. This is mitigated by two primary key buffers: (a) confidence in the correctness of our cultural worldviews, and (b) self-esteem. Human nature, therefore, includes maintenance activities and defensive responses whereby this confidence and self-esteem are reinforced. We invent cultural worldviews that give life meaning and that provide behavioural and value norms, and we protect our self-esteem by successfully participating in those norms and by considering ourselves a person of value in a meaningful world. Our worldviews provide ways to think about our mortality, sometimes by embedding notions of immortality, like an afterlife – literal immortality. We further protect our self-esteem and sense of meaning by seeking to leave behind something of ourselves when we die – symbolic immortality.

The absolute worst of human behaviours – of horrific evil – can be seen as malignant manifestations of our attempt to minimise existential dread and to achieve immortality (Solomon et al., 2015).

TMT hypotheses and findings

TMT includes the three hypotheses: the anxiety-buffer hypothesis, the death thought accessibility hypothesis and, most significantly for my purposes, the mortality salience hypothesis (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Here, I summarise the first two and then elaborate on experimental findings of the mortality salience hypothesis.

[3.2.1] The anxiety-buffer hypothesis

The anxiety-buffer hypothesis claims that we have psychological structures that buffer against anxiety and that increasing the strength of such a buffer reduces anxiety. Self-esteem is such a psychological buffer and is maintained by achieving the standards of one's worldview (Greenberg et al., 1986). Threats to self-esteem increase anxiety (e.g., Burish & Houston, 1979), while defending self-esteem reduces anxiety (McFarland & Ross, 1982). Self-esteem is a general anxiety buffer; enhancing self-esteem reduces anxiety even if the

threats do not specifically target self-esteem. Therefore, unsurprisingly, self-esteem reduces anxieties associated with death-related thinking (Greenberg et al., 1993).

TMT suggests that children learn to use self-esteem as an anxiety buffer from their parents who pass along notions of appropriate behaviour (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). When a child is rewarded for appropriate behaviour, self-esteem is bolstered. In general, the parents are passing along and reinforcing the norms of the culture:

[C]hildren learn that they are safe when they live up to the parents' standards and are in jeopardy when they fall short of them. Because the parents' values reflect those of the culture at large, the child's emotional well-being soon becomes dependent on living up to the values of the cultural worldview (Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

Some childhood experiences may reduce the effectiveness of this buffer, making it difficult for the child to manage anxiety and self-esteem. In some cases, children find relief by cultivating negative views of themselves:

[T]hose who feel rejected by others and unable to garner attention for their positive qualities may attempt to leave their mark on perpetuity by dramatically violating cultural values. Perhaps difficulties in the initial development of the capacity to be comforted by close relationships, self-esteem, and culturally shared meanings increase the likelihood of such deviant behavior in later life (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, 23).

We manage death anxiety by feeling that we are a valuable person in a meaningful world. Valuable, in this sense, meaning capable of playing our role in the culture, while a meaningful world is one in which that role is understood. Self-esteem, therefore, plays a significant role in human thought and behaviour, which helps to explain why humiliation and shame can be so devastating and a root cause of violence, since there is tremendous motivation to correct, avoid or repress the feeling (Pyszczynski et al., 2003).

Along with self-esteem, gods and religion also buffer against anxiety (Pyszczynski et al., 2015), providing frameworks for believing that one is a person of value in a meaningful world and providing a notion of continuation after death – literal and or symbolic immortality.

Religion is among the cultural institutions that conspire to achieve this anxiety buffer:

To help them cope with their increasing fears, children are taught about deities that make it possible for them and those they love to move on to a better mode of existence when they die. They also learn about secular institutions, their ethnic and religious heritage, their nation, and various other cultural institutions that give life meaning and permanence that they can be part of if they stay in the good graces of others... Through these interactions with their parents, family, clergy, teachers, and

peers, they gradually become indoctrinated into the cultural worldview that relieves anxiety by giving meaning to life and value to themselves (Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

[3.2.2] The death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis

The death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis proposes that threats to anxiety buffers increase death-related thoughts. This is the reverse of death thoughts causing defensive reactions. In this case, threats to one's worldview, self-esteem or close relationships increase how easily the mind turns to death-related thoughts. In one test of this hypothesis, subjects are given word-completion activities such as the following (Solomon et al., 2015, 41):

COFF__
SK__L
GR___

The control group tends to complete the words as follows:

COFFEE
SKILL
GRIND

The experimental group, primed with worldview or self-esteem threats, tends to complete the words as follows:

COFFIN
SKULL
GRAVE

The experimental group can be primed in various ways. In some experiments, they completed a survey about death, in others, the test took place near a funeral parlour that they passed on the street before being stopped to take the test. Experimental group members more often finish incomplete word stems with death-related responses and recognise death-related words faster.

In summary, the death thought accessibility hypothesis suggests a two-way relationship between mortality salience and the trio of worldview, self-esteem and close relationships.

Priming with death thoughts increases defences while priming with attacks increase in thoughts of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

[3.2.3] The mortality salience (MS) hypothesis

The most-studied hypothesis in terror management theory is the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis, which proposes that reminders of death (i.e., mortality salience) increase one's defensive responses and commitments toward one's worldview, self-esteem and close relationships. A review of 277 related experimental studies reveals this hypothesis to be among the most demonstrated in the field of social psychology (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).

A typical mortality salience experiment proceeds as follows. First, the experimental group participants are primed with a reminder of their mortality. This can take many forms, such as completing a survey about death, flashing words or images (too quickly for conscious awareness) and even conducting experiments near funeral homes. Next, the participants complete an activity. The control group members do these same activities but are not primed with reminders of their mortality.

A description of an early experiment (Solomon et al., 2015) serves as a useful example. Judges were separated into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was primed with death-related activities: 'Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you', and, 'Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die, and once you are physically dead' (ibid., 20). Both groups were then asked to review past case files involving solicitation for prostitution and to recommend bail amounts. The control group, without MS priming, recommended bail that was similar to the average bail in that city, US\$50. The average bail from the experimental group was US\$455.

Why would MS priming lead to higher bail recommendations? According to terror management theory, thoughts of mortality lead to an increase in the harshness with which we evaluate people with differing worldviews, including differing norms and morals. The judges were defending their own worldview – and their role within their culture – by applying the harsher bail amount. The judges insisted that answering questions about death had not influenced their decisions.

In summary, while most humans tend to denigrate out-group members as a way of defending their own worldview and self-esteem, reminders of mortality exacerbate this response. However, an increase in denigrating out-group members is just one of myriad responses to reminders of our mortality.

Here is a summary of demonstrated responses, drawn from a comprehensive review of the theory, "Thirty years of terror management theory" (Pyszczynski et al, 2015).

[a] When we are reminded of our mortality, we become more positively biased toward our in-group – or people who seem like us – and more negatively biased and denigrating of out-group members. For example, we suggest harsher punishments for people who violate our sense of morality. We offer more positive evaluations of people who praise our cultures and more negative evaluations of those who criticise our cultures. We are less aggressive toward people who share our worldview and more aggressive toward those with differing worldviews. We are more likely to support violent solutions to ethnic, religious and international conflicts. We increase how much we like people who support our worldviews and increase our dislike and aggression toward people who threaten our worldviews. We increase our estimations of how much people agree on important issues. Disturbingly, men who are primed with mortality salience express greater tolerance (less intolerance) toward male aggression toward women. Studies suggest that children develop in-group favouritism between the ages of 7 and 11.

[b] When we are reminded of our mortality, we invest more in close relationships. For example, we apply more resources to maintain contact with attachment figures. We have more positive associations with our parents. We increase our preference for romantic partners who enhance our self-esteem. We increase our attraction to romantic partners and increase our desire for intimacy in romantic relationships. We exhibit a greater desire to have children. We are more willing to initiate social interactions.

[c] When we are reminded of our mortality, we respond to national and religious symbols with greater reverence. For example, our anxiety increases when disrespectfully handling cultural objects such as national flags and crucifixes.

[d] When we are reminded of our mortality, we decrease our relatedness toward non-human animals. For example, we respond more positively to suggestions that humans are different from other animals and more negatively to suggestions that humans are similar to other animals. MS increases our support for killing animals – not just for food. In principle,

part of believing we are significant and enduring is believing in a strong contrast between humans and other animals. The difference between animals and humans is often considered something that transcends the body – a soul or spirit.

[e] When reminded of our mortality, we associate more with our minds than our bodies. TMT suggests that we mitigate death anxiety by dissociating from our bodies. MS yields increasing negativity toward bodies in general, including waste products and bodily functions such as menstruation, lactation and childbirth. This response extends to thoughts of sexual behaviour, which is subconsciously considered an animal behaviour. MS increases an emphasis on beauty and purity in women and increases a repulsion (in both men and women) in response to menstruating, lactating or sexually provocative women. Both men and women distance themselves from these and increase the value they place on beauty, which is conceived as a more abstract and spiritual feature than animalistic:

Cultures reduce the threatening nature of reproductive processes by putting women on pedestals, treating them as objects of beauty to be admired, and placing greater value on virginity and purity for women than men... Thus, MS leads to devaluing of women who are overtly sexual but not women who are modestly clothed and wholesomely attractive (Pyszczynski et al, 2015).

[f] When we are reminded of our mortality, we increase the intensity of self-esteem defence. For example, we increase effort and risk taking on activities connected to our self-esteem.

[g] When we are reminded of our mortality, we increase our desire for wealth and fame. Hypothetically, fame is considered a pathway to symbolic immortality.

[h] When we are reminded of our mortality, we increasingly prefer structured information. As something of an outlier, we demonstrate a greater preference for well-structured information and greater dislike for poorly structured information. This may represent a greater sensitivity to order and clarity versus ambiguity and uncertainty.

In summary, TMT suggests that mortality salience and anxiety buffering significantly influence human thought and behaviour, and that problems with anxiety buffering leads to diverse psychological challenges.

Consistent with the idea that many psychological disorders result from an inability to effectively manage anxiety, high levels of anxiety are central components of many DSM-V diagnoses, including not only the many problems that fall under the blanket

category of anxiety disorders but also others where anxiety itself is not the defining feature, such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder, substance abuse, sexual difficulties, and schizophrenia. Anxiety is widely recognized as a common comorbid problem associated with many psychological disorders. And high levels of anxiety or neuroticism have been found to be associated with a wide range of other undesirable psychological states and traits, such as guilt, shame, uncertainty, shyness, procrastination, academic difficulties, and interpersonal problems (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, 31).

[3.2.4] Criticisms of Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory is far from settled science. Critiques highlight concerns regarding its falsifiability and the privileging of death anxiety as an explanatory framework for human behaviour (Martin & van den Bos, 2014). Defensive responses such as in-group bias and out-group derogation can be elicited by diverse threats, e.g., uncertainty, loss of meaning, or diminished control – not just from mortality salience (Martin & van den Bos, 2014; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2015). The theory's generalisability is further questioned given variability in responses across cultural worldviews (Martin & van den Bos, 2014).

In this project, the theory is leveraged for its empirically informed insights into human tendencies, including the association between awareness of death and intensified worldview defence, xenophobia, scapegoating and bigotry (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). TMT is useful as a conceptual resource within creative practice. Dysfunctional death anxiety may plausibly contribute to psycho-social challenges and interventions may require mythic strategies that engage these regrettably human responses.

To close this survey of TMT, I should emphasise that I am not defending the theory. Rather, I am being informed by this body of work, because it resonated with me. Terror management theory provides an understandable, rational and empirically supported view of (a slice of) human nature. However, along with the considerable supporting evidence for of the theory, there are also criticisms (See: Pyszczynski et al., 2015). For my project, I have assumed the hypothesis that humans regulate death anxiety by bolstering the view that we are valuable persons in a meaningful world, and that, somehow, we continue on past the death of our body through some sense of immortality, either literal – like an afterlife – or symbolic.

[3.3] Symbolic immortality

[3.3.1] Defining symbolic immortality

Symbolic immortality is the need and feeling that something of us endures after our deaths (Lifton, 1979; Solomon et al., 2015). Death anxiety motivates us to seek continuity through symbolic means; we seek symbolic immortality as one of several strategies for modulating death anxiety. We achieve this sense of immortality by being part of things that are greater than ourselves – things we leave behind that we have created or helped to create. For example, artists leave behind their art, scientists leave behind their contributions, entrepreneurs leave behind businesses and parents leave behind children.

Strategies for feeling a sense of symbolic immortality can bolster our feeling of value. Our self-esteem is bolstered by fulfilling cultural norms and values, by the belief that we are leaving behind a significant contribution (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, Greenberg et al., 1990):

Qualifying for either literal or symbolic immortality requires that people maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and live up to the standards of value that are part of them. Doing so provides the sense that one is a valuable participant in a meaningful universe, which is the essence of self-esteem (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, 8).

While Freud does not directly address symbolic immortality, he suggests that we unconsciously believe we are immortal. Our strategies for achieving symbolic immortality can therefore be seen as efforts to reinforce this belief:

It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death: and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality (Freud, 1923).

The thinkers with which I am engaging have strongly overlapping ideas for how we pursue a sense of symbolic immortality. In this section, I summarise the related contributions of Jung, Rank, Becker, the terror management theorists and, in particular, Robert Jay Lifton, who has more thoroughly unpacked the concept of symbolic immortality.

The following table serves as a summary and guide to this conversation by indicating which mode or strategy is discussed by which thinker.

Table 6: Summary table: Comparison of symbolic immortality strategies

Otto Rank (1884–1939)	Ernest Becker (1924–1974)	Robert J. Lifton (1926-2025)	Sheldon Solomon (1951-)	Daniel Levitin (1957-)
Artistic creation and expression	Artistic creation and expression	Artistic creation and expression	Artistic creation and expression	Artistic creation and expression
Procreation	Procreation	Procreation	Procreation	Storytelling
Heroism	Heroism	Transcendent experiences (flow, losing oneself, including 'intense ecstatic experience')	Heroic nationalism and charismatic leaders	Documenting experiences
	Power and influence	Religious beliefs and participation	Religious beliefs and participation	Mentorship
		Natural connection	Wealth	
			Fame and celebrity	

[3.3.2] Modes of symbolic immortality

Lifton’s five modes of symbolic immortality include: [1] biological, [2] theological, [3] creative, [4] natural, and [5] experiential transcendence (Lifton, 1979, 18). While Lifton analyses these as categories, he suggests that they are often integrated. Also, our awareness of these in our lives varies and awareness does not necessarily suggest the power or efficacy of the strategy.

Biological mode. The biological mode of symbolic immortality refers to children. By having children, we are making a contribution that includes parts of us – genetically, and through our influence. Typically, children continue past our death. While children help us satisfy a sense of immortality, the biological mode extends past children to also include 'one’s tribe, organization, people, nation, even species' (Lifton & Olsen, 1974, 35). We can achieve a sense of immortality by contributing to the continuity of humanity or the entire biosphere or even life in the universe. Lifton suggests that those seeking life on other planets are participating in this mode.

Theological mode. The theological mode includes thoughts of an immortal soul and a literal life after death, either in heaven or hell. Freud saw such belief as a characteristic of the denial of death. Aside from this literal sense of immortality, the theological mode has symbolic components. For example, Lifton suggests that religiosity helps us to rise above 'profane burdens of life into a higher plane of existence'. Therefore, rituals such as prayer and communion, handling religious artefacts and being within religious buildings may all reinforce the sense of immortality.

Religious myths combine the theological and heroism modes by integrating one's religious worldview with stories of spiritual attainment. Lifton notes: 'The common thread in all great religions is the spiritual quest and realization of the hero-founder that enables him to confront and transcend death and to provide a model for generations of believers to do the same' (Lifton, 1974, 20). The goal of such myths is to '...divest death of its "sting" of annihilation' and the strategy for achieving this is to model transcendence within a theological realm:

One is offered the opportunity to be reborn into a timeless realm of ultimate, death-transcending truths. In that realm one can share the immortality of the deity, obtain membership in a sacred community or a 'covenant with God' (ibid.).

Creative mode. While artistic contributions are indeed associated with this mode, for Lifton, the creative mode for a sense of symbolic immortality refers more generally to any act that has impact. Lifton notes that everyone participates in this mode through the 'humble influences on people around us' (ibid.). Lifton's categories for this mode include artistic, scientific, and service/care categories.

Lifton calls the artistic approach a 'prophetic function', suggesting that art reinforces norms and thus their continuation. Quoting Malraux, Lifton says that through 'the continuity of artistic creation... not the individual, but man, human continuity, reveals itself... more than any other activity, art escapes death' (Malraux, André. *The Voices of Silence*, 1978). In the scientific approach, one participates in growing knowledge, something larger than oneself – a 'larger connectedness... a sense of immortality derived from interlocking projects we call science and technology' (Lifton. 1974, 21). By service and care, Lifton means roles such as healthcare workers and psychotherapists and how their efforts can carry forward in patients' and clients' lives and, therefore, in the lives of their children. Lifton also cautions that this sense can be thwarted by feelings of inadequacy: 'Consequently, any sense on the part of care-givers that those efforts are ineffective can set off in them deep anxieties about ultimate personal questions' (Lifton, 1974, 23).

Otto Rank agrees that humans possess an 'inborn urge to transcend the self and achieve a form of immortality through symbolic acts' (Goldwert, 1985, 169). He highlights art and creativity as important modes, however, beyond art as something left behind, he sees artistic creation as a pathway to individuality and foundational to an individual's construction of their unique personality: 'They must ultimately... carve their own individuality out of the collective ideology that prevails and that they themselves have accepted, like the sculptor who carves his figures out of raw stone' (Rank 1932/1989, 368).

Natural mode. The natural mode refers to participation in nature, being outdoors, away from human-created environments, and yielding a 'perception that the natural environment around us, limitless in space and time, will remain' (Lifton, 1974, 22).

Experiential transcendence. Lifton focuses more on the mode of experiential transcendence than the other modes. A transcendent experience feels as though one has gone beyond the normal or typical way of being; one is transported to another realm of being. Transcendence relates immortality to infinity and to the unbounded – 'a state beyond the self's immediate involvements':

Our feelings move in and out of the various models, and the ecstatic message may be no more than a momentary sense of pleasure or wholeness. But even then our principle (and I refer to a strictly psychological principle) prevails: ecstasy when grounded and full is our source of awareness of larger connection (Lifton, 1974, 34).

Lifton says this mode is special in that it is always a part of other modes – a feature of the connected experience.

...the special state of experiential transcendence is the indicator of the other four modes of symbolic immortality – that, wildly or gently, one must psychologically travel outside oneself in order to feel one's participation in the larger human process. The claim assumes that the quality of *experience* (that of transcendence) must connect with significant *content* (grounded relationship to any of the other four modes) to vitalise that sense of participation. There seem to be various translations between experience and content, involving all five modes... (Lifton, 1974, 34)

Lifton notes that transcendent experience can accompany synergies among the five modes, e.g., the ecstatic sexual experience, apprehension of intense beauty, one's experience out in nature, loving experience toward children, etc. Lifton believes that seeking such experiences is a search for immortality and that this can be seen most strikingly in the lives of trauma survivors:

The seeking of intense experience has always been an important response to threatened holocaust or profound historical crisis. Hedonism and mysticism are classical expressions of this experiential radicalism. Transcendence is pursued around extreme poles of pleasure and (seeking or rejecting). The common feature of intense expressions of hedonism and asceticism (the mystical experience) is the capacity to move beyond the perception of threat and to constitute a psychic world (even momentarily) independent of that threat. When the structure of existence is threatened, people seek to do more with or to their bodies, to extend the experience of their total organisms. We cannot wonder that questions are always raised about whether such acts constitute a 'breakthrough' to a 'higher plane' or an 'escape from unpleasant reality' (Lifton, 1974, 35).

As an example of such experience, Lifton describes an ecstatic festival:

The plunge into chaos (disintegration, death) includes wildness and spontaneity but is culturally stylized. The 'experiment in disorder' is controlled – in the sense that it takes place within ordered ritual and imagery, within an ordered cosmos. Each participant, even when in the midst of 'drowning', anticipates personal and communal revitalization – that anticipation based on generations... (Lifton, 1974, 32).

Heroism. Becker (1973) elaborates on the notion of cultural hero systems as symbolic environments through which humans strive for immortality. Cultures include shared cultural narratives and symbols that express ideals about values and norms – including roles that are considered heroic. Participating in roles considered valuable and/or heroic by the culture and accomplishing related achievements satisfies the sense of immortality. When we behave in ways that conform to and reinforce cultural norms and values, we feel part of a significant entity, i.e., one's culture. This provides a sense that such participation endures over time. Through heroic participation, we achieve a sense of meaning, significance and value that provides a mechanism for denying mortality and avoiding terror. Heroism is a psychological buffer; it is a feeling one is part of an enduring and significant mission and purpose that continues to exist in the culture. Becker's examples of roles in cultural hero systems include professionals such as doctors, soldiers and scientists making significant contributions to their fields, religious martyrs and leaders who embody key virtues and suffer for their faith, and national heroes, founding or defending a nation.

Daniel Levitan. Daniel Levitan is a cognitive neuroscientist who has contributed some unique ideas about symbolic immortality, including through the lens of music (Levitan, 2020). Levitan believes music serves as a special type of artistic expression; his studies have found that engagement with music provides a sense of continuity and transcendence, helping individuals cope with the awareness of mortality. In addition, Levitan emphasises storytelling as a form of symbolic immortality, whether through writing, music or oral traditions (Levitan,

2008; 2014). Storytelling passes on personal and cultural histories, knowledge and wisdom, and preserves personal and communal experiences, including thoughts and values. Documenting one's life experiences, such as through memoirs, serves this function. Lastly, and similar to Lifton's general mode of creativity, Levitan mentions mentorship – teaching, coaching, etc. – as a method for passing on skills and knowledge, and, therefore, as a mode of symbolic immortality through the resulting influence and impact on those engaged (ibid.).

[3.4] Symbolic immortality in my creative work

[3.4.1] How the literature has influenced my thinking and writing

Symbolic immortality is a lens through which to consider many types of human behaviour and, as I progressed my writing, I periodically noticed strategies for achieving symbolic immortality in the behaviour of a character. As a rule, I did not engineer the concept into the writing – at least, not for the first couple of years. This process of reflective practice, however, added a degree of deliberateness. Here, I look at what I have written as a type of research data, and I analyse how symbolic immortality has come to expression. Based on that analysis, I considered revisions that might usefully sharpen those expressions and ways to shape the final sections of the creative component when they were only loosely formed. Importantly, the literature must serve the writing – not the reverse. My intention is not to write examples of symbolic immortality; the purpose of a scenario is never to teach the concept. Instead, I am applying my understanding to make the ritual of creative writing more powerful and the behaviours of characters more meaningful.

While earlier in my life, creativity was its own reward and I felt motivated by the doing, later in life, the idea of wanting to make a contribution has felt increasingly important. In my most recent conception, one goal is to leverage one's unique experiment – to make an offering. This thesis is such an opportunity to shape an offering that feels authentic to my interests, worldview and motivations. How might I know I am doing this well? Do the writing rituals reinforce self-esteem, worldview and close relationships? Does the work reduce anxiety? In the following sections, I reflect on how symbolic immortality comes to life in my writing and then capture insights concerning what I have learned as well as the felt impact on my life.

[3.4.2] 'Mother's Prototype'

In this section, I examine expressions of symbolic immortality in the series of scenarios entitled Mother's Prototype. My earliest writing during my PhD period focused on an ecstatic

experience related to the golden calf massacre. I imagined that my piece would primarily be composed of what I called 'Sinai experiences' in the Golden Calf Elevator & Café, and with the Council in support. One of the most significant pivots in my writing was when I realised (decided) that the initial experience was taking place within the mother's symbolic immortality project and was instigated by her.

In my opening scenarios, the son stumbles upon his recently deceased mother's project – what she left behind for him and perhaps for others. In the café, he sees his mother again – a virtual representation of her. The environment involves some combination of technology, fantasy and hallucination – the ontology of the beings and the café is deliberately ambiguous. The type of symbolic immortality project described is a virtual person in their virtual environment – a virtual afterlife. Upon recognising this context, I designed the café by asking: 'What might the mother's symbolic immortality project be like?' I imagined what my own mother's might be like.

My mother's project would include the things and experiences she loved, desired and valued. She loved musical theatre and so the café would include a stage with song and dance and glamour. She loved art, literature and discussing these with her humanities professors and so the café would include these clients and those conversations. She loved helping people (as a lawyer, for example) and I imagine a booth in the corner of the café where she would provide legal advice – pay what you can or just don't worry about it. Finally, if she were designing such an afterlife, she would choose her body-image and her apparent age.

These ways of imagining shaped iterations of these opening scenarios, including the mother's theme song 'After five thousand years of civilisation'. The lyrics are based on the opening paragraph of my mother's masters' thesis, which discusses increasing alienation and dehumanisation during the 20th century as expressed in the paintings of George Tooker and the plays of Elmer Rice (Lewis, 1973). The song is a challenge. Why has civilisation not reduced human evil? Why haven't we managed to learn to live together in peace? Why are things even getting worse? The Golden Calf Elevator & Café is a virtual afterlife designed initially by the mother and passed along to the son as a form of collaborative engagement – an environment for asking existential questions and experimenting with answers. Once the son engages, it is no longer the mother's project, it becomes a new entity based on that collaboration.

Reflecting on the above vision helped me unpack the motivations of the mother. She has more work to do and she continues this work after her death. The world is a ridiculously horrible place (wonderful for some, of course). We need to leverage the interests and ideas of all conscious life, to collaborate and participate in problem solving to make the world a more peaceful and just place. The mother is indoctrinating her son into this purpose, helping him to find his own sense of purpose. Perhaps she has noticed that he is expressing signs of dysfunction with root causes in amythia and dysregulated death anxiety. How might she help now that she is dead? Her symbolic immortality projects enable such connection after her death.

In my imagination, she is also a founder of a community that is developing the technological solutions that enable the elevator-café. This is a dangerous path, involving profoundly mind-altering and reality-altering technologies. Therefore, part of the ethos of the community is that one ought never to recruit or proselytise – not even with family. If they show interest, you might even initially dissuade.

How might I sharpen the expressions of symbolic immortality? Aside from further shaping the mother's café based on the notes earlier in this section, I could clarify the mother's approach to introducing the son to the community and to the overall mission of experimenting with core narratives and rituals that might help to positively change the world. I could, for example, create a more logical, step-by-step sequence that connects (a) the film-watching ritual, (b) changes in the golden calf story, and (c) the idea that DeMille's changes were experiments to use film to help change the world. In addition, I could clarify the transition from the mother's symbolic immortality project to the son's and show the son accumulating his own council and shaping the café to be a place he belongs – his tribe, his environment, and so on.

For the son, the café is a ritual design workshop for symbolic immortality projects. Here, he engages with the story of the golden calf, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely. He is introduced to Council members and to his Master of Scenarios (who or what the hell is this guy?), and he is re-acquainted with his childhood friend – now dead – and re-envisions their friendship. The scenarios are, essentially, his explorations and experimentations with personal, family and cultural myth.

[3.4.3] 'A Case Study in Theatrical Responses to Death Anxiety' and 'Skyline Drive'

These are radically differing scenarios, yet with several common elements and structures. Both include explicit transitions from death to some form of virtual-symbolic immortality, the development of a virtual self as a symbolic immortality project, the transition between death of a father in the presence of his children, and a brief engagement with the virtual entity. They are both family myths with powerful fathers, full of accomplishment and agency. They both include children with different perspectives and responses to what is happening. They are both in first person from an adult son or daughter's perspective. In both, the mother/wife had previously died.

Even with these similarities, the scenarios are near opposites. 'Skyline' expresses a planned and intimate death ritual, where everything works exactly as planned – it is peaceful, even the with dissent of the daughter. 'Case Study' takes place in a theatre on a cruise ship, with a father that is the charismatic leader of a cult-like theatre group. The action is chaotic and feels out of control. In 'Skyline', the daughter is resentful, while in 'Case Study', one daughter joins her father's theatre-cult as his key helper. 'Case Study' portrays a dysfunctional or at least estranged family and illustrates diverse responses to death. Two children left after their mother died – one went east and one went west. Their father becomes a guru of a cult, of sorts – his symbolic immortality offering – and one child stays with the father to help however she can, fulfilling her sense of mission. The father-guru responded to his wife's death by becoming absorbed with his work and with death. Perhaps his wife's death served as a profound mortality salience prompt. He creates a world that focuses on death, that ritually plays with death (through theatrical plays) and through which he transcends death. 'Case Study' is not an attractive vision – it feels like a dysfunctional vision. I did not begin the scenario that way. I thought of the estranged children's perspectives and imagined that the responses to the emerging technologies of immortality would be diverse. Both scenarios include repulsive responses to the seeing or hearing the representation of their father.

'Skyline' shows a deliberate ritual of dying, designed by the person who is dying. He is one of the designers of the technological solution and a supporter of enabling legislation. His project is the work he did to enable this kind of death for others – to die by going to sleep peacefully among family in a chosen environment. He designed all aspects of the ritual: the weeks leading up to it, the appearance of the device, being made publicly visible on the vehicle, and the location. Skyline Drive – like floating into the clouds, like ascending to heaven – or at least, doing a drive by.

One function of 'Skyline' is to engage my own beliefs regarding the right to die, to at least attempt to design a peaceful and painless death – perhaps the height of privilege. My

thoughts on the speculative future of technology include the integration of technologies for death and technologies for the virtual selves that we leave behind – these seem inevitable. Both scenarios engage ritual design for dying.

Both scenarios also engage the idea of a Master of Scenarios (MS) as a symbolic immortality project – a virtual person left behind when the human dies. What is an MS, really? That has become a key question for my project. In 'Case Study', the MS will be used to keep the cult going, replacing the charismatic leader of the cult. This is the mission of the daughter – to keep her father alive, symbolically. She does not go to his side when he collapses, but attends to his MS. At the end, medics are performing first aid on her father while she is performing first aid on his MS. She is panicking; she might lose him. The MS is a collaborative symbolic immortality project by the father and daughter.

In another short scenario, 'Today, I reintroduce my parents in the afterlife', the son brings together the MSs of both mother and father so that they might re-engage. The son was hopeful, I imagine, to ensure a positive experience. It is a fantasy of reconciliation and of witnessing the same. I do not have any conscious memories of my parents speaking to each other in substantive dialogue. My myth is that they never got along very well. To be a fly on the wall as they talk about something important to them and to do so with tenderness, compassion and empathy for each other is an emotionally potent fantasy.

[3.4.4] 'Master of Scenarios'

This story has generational and female contexts: grandmother, mother and daughter. The grandmother told stories about her eastern European upbringing and stories of the Holocaust. These were gathered into a book, made by the mother, who now ritually reads from the book to her daughter at bedtime. The daughter now writes her own stories, some of which are about creatures who visit her, including the Master of Scenarios, who stands outside her bedroom door at night.

Sharing her stories served as the grandmother's symbolic immortality project while creating and reading from the book is the mother's project. This represents a more traditional and historical form of symbolic immortality, in the creative mode, in comparison with the technological methods that punctuate my piece. Leaving behind a written artefact dates back to the invention of writing; even prior to that, storytelling was fundamental to our species' cultural development.

The grandmother and mother are role models for the girl who feels a compulsion to awaken in the middle of the night to write her own stories; this is the start of her project and her writing ritual. Night, dream, imagination and writing converge. She captures thoughts and scenes that frighten her yet provide some form of protection. She empowers herself, creatively, writing about a bold plan whereby those being chased turn and fight. The bad-guy is a 'madman' – perhaps the way the grandmother described those who systematically tortured and killed her family, neighbours and friends. What else could they be but crazy?

This scenario is a family myth, as would be the grandmother's book. In her backstory, the grandmother was a fighter in the Jewish resistance during the Second World War, and then during the establishment of Israel. The grandmother is, through her stories, teaching her children and grandchildren to fight, to stay alive and to find a safe place to build a life. She was loving, and she also killed people. She moved when necessary to get away from enemies trying to kill her, from Europe to Israel and then to the USA. I imagine she realised Israel would be in perpetual conflict. I have not written this back story, but I believe a reader will sense the generational influence on the girl. (The young girl returns, as an adult, in the scenario 'Mazel Spicehandler'.) She remembers her grandmother – her death was her first experience of death, and now she writes about avoiding death. Kill the madman before he kills you.

Is the Master of Scenarios a madman or a protector? Are the tiny creatures his army or a parade of thoughts and feeling, approaching her bed and invading her mind each night? As with many of my scenarios, the Master of Scenarios is an ambiguous character, and I resist forcing clarity on who or what this is. Minimally, it is a god-like entity, created in the mind, made from bits of memory combined with bits of instinctual, archetypal thinking, a creature that morphs between protector and agitator. In this scenario, he stands outside her door and sends in the tiny things, and watches over her as they approach her bed. During the daytime – and presumably, normal waking consciousness – he sometimes forces her to stop whatever she is doing and to count to ten before resuming. Why would he do that? Why would she do that to herself? He is like a ghost who may wish to help her. Their engagements are rituals and, ultimately, he prompts her to write.

This scenario includes mortality salience and ritual reminders of death, e.g., the bedtime ritual of the mother reading the grandmother's stories and Hebrew school rituals about the Holocaust, including repeated exposure to horrific imagery. She is experiencing the integration of death into life. This is perhaps the opposite of shielding a child from death and

may indeed be a strategy for doing what is recommended in the literature: to accommodate death in life.

[3.4.5] 'Jeb Stuart Magruder at the Beach'

This scenario includes a calf-shaped building, sandcastles on the beach, the *Planet of the Ape* films and the Watergate scandal; it is a creative engagement with personal myth. In the story of Goldie, the name of the golden-calf-shaped building, an entrepreneur created this structure to make his mark – a symbolic immortality project. It is still there, years after his death, as a curiosity, mainly for children to admire as they ride by, to and from their summer beach houses. What one person finds significant, others see as a curiosity or trivial.

Two people are on the beach near Goldie: a boy building a sandcastle, and Jeb Magruder (1934-2014), a figure in the Watergate scandal. He is staring out at the ocean, going over his life and his troubles prior to testifying before congress.

A sandcastle is a ritual activity and ritual object. Like Tibetan and Navajo sand paintings, a sandcastle is diligently constructed then destroyed. Its destruction is an exciting culmination. Large, angled channels dug between the incoming surf and the castle directs the incoming tide – a sort of water gate. The castle is designed with channels and moats to divert water in, through and around the castle. Eventually, though, the tide overwhelms those features and destroys the castle. For a brief period, when the water enters the channels, something new and exciting is created, a new image and experience. I recall something epic, beautiful and ultimately satisfying about that ritual. The sandcastle ritual contrasts with a symbolic immortality project – one is knowingly fleeting while the another is a struggle for longevity.

As Jeb Stuart Magruder walks by, I imagine that he was just visiting Goldie, perhaps with a pamphlet still in hand. The opening of the scenario is based on what that pamphlet may have said. He is worried about his future and his upcoming congressional testimony. I imagine he is in on this beach because this was a place of comfort and positive memories, where he spent summer vacations, as I did. He sees himself in the boy. Meanwhile, the castle may represent his career, something he carefully crafted, while the incoming tide may represent the many powerful forces at play in the political arena and the world – enemies, foreign and domestic, the Democrats, the press and senior colleagues to whom he must defer. He is being overwhelmed by circumstances and by his own decisions.

Goldie prompts Jeb to wonder whether and how he might make his own mark. The upcoming hearing will be his 15 minutes of fame, but he is in trouble. How he behaves will determine the rest of his life, including the amount of time he spends in jail.

Eventually, in real life, Jeb Magruder turns to religion, perhaps as a strategy for meaning, self-esteem and a functional worldview. Facing jail time is likely to arouse death anxiety, which then prompts a defence. A religious worldview can provide a pathway for shifting one's behaviour from morally questionable to a cleansing confession and acceptance of responsibility. Religion is a strategy for reducing anxiety, providing a worldview that helps one feel they are a valuable person in a meaningful universe. This is what I imagine Jeb needs right now.

Some of the other 'President's Men' became particularly religious after being jailed for their role in the scandal. Bud Krogh (1939-202) was closely involved with the 'Plumbers' group that committed crimes for Nixon; he was convicted of conspiracy to violate civil rights and served four and a half months in prison. He later became an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. Charles Colson (1931-2012) was Nixon's Special Counsel and was convicted of obstruction of justice, serving seven months in prison. He later became a born-again Christian and founded the Prison Fellowship, a leading prison ministry. And then there was Jeb Stuart Magruder, Deputy Director of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP), dedicated to Nixon to the point of going along with criminal behaviour. He served seven months in prison for conspiracy to obstruct justice. He later became a Presbyterian minister.

Why Watergate and Jeb Magruder? Watergate was a significant event in my childhood. I was ten years old in 1973, and we were vacationing at the beach during the televised Watergate hearings. My mother encouraged me to watch the hearings with her. Across my life, I became periodically obsessed with Watergate – an American myth that encompassed an array of fascinating and bizarre elements: abuse of power; hidden tape recorders; the Plumbers and political dirty tricks; Vietnam war protests; Ellsberg, his psychiatrist and the Pentagon Papers; executive privilege; Bay of Pigs and the Kennedy assassination; the Saturday night massacre; cover-ups; a long enemies list; odd characters, e.g., G. Gordon Liddy, Howard Hunt, Deep Throat, the Cubans – and of course Nixon; impeachment hearings and the resignation of the president. An opera based on Watergate, to be presented at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC (one block away from the Watergate complex) would necessarily be a commercial success – the boy on the beach would later imagine.

In summary, as a child of the Vietnam war and then this scandal, Watergate was and remains a myth of national resilience – a myth of the retreat from the brink of unchecked lawlessness in the government. 'Jeb Stuart Magruder at the Beach' is an experiment in the integration of personal, family and cultural myth – in this case, a national myth. It feels particularly meaningful as it includes strong associations and playful interactions among memories of my youth.

[3.5] Insights

Upon reflecting on my creative work through the lens of death anxiety, terror management theory and symbolic immortality, I treated my writing as research data with which to consider what I am doing and learning. What does ritualised symbolic immortality behaviour look like? How did my conceptions and expressions of symbolic immortality evolve over time through the act of creation?

Upon completion of my research, the evolution of my thinking is as follows: (a) Initially, I thought that I might be re-envisioning a new myth of the golden calf and leaving this behind as a symbolic immortality project. (b) Then, as I wrote scenarios, my project was increasingly about the means of engaging the myth, the vision of a technological, psychological and psychedelic theatre in which one ritually experimented with personal, family and culture myth: the Elevator Café and Sinai experiences. (c) Over time, it seemed the entire thesis was functioning as a symbolic immortality project. This included the vision of a ritual design workshop for creating symbolic immortality projects – a new kind of Seder. (d) Finally, I increasingly imagined that one's life, as a whole, might be seen as such a project: the shaping and offering of oneself, with the goal of improving one's contribution to family, work, community and the future.

Symbolic immortality, as I currently understand it, is not ultimately about what you leave behind; it is about what is driving you now and the influence of resulting behaviours on your environment. Am I, for example, a better partner to my wife and a better work colleague for having immersed myself in this thesis? In the balance of this chapter, I consider each of the above notions of symbolic immortality. Importantly, none of these were left behind; rather, each found its place as a component of my thesis.

[3.5.1] Leaving behind a new myth of the golden calf?

The founding ideas for this thesis were part of my response to the story of the golden calf and to the massacre in particular. Why did I have such a strong response? Why did I feel motivated to 'fuck with' that story? (That phrasing feels essential; I did not want to simply change the story.) When I started writing, I focused on that response. The early scenarios were attempts to experiment with ritual design for ecstatic, hallucinatory, dream-like experiences that engaged my response. I imagined a ritual environment designed to engage the story of the golden calf and through which the emotional response was creatively analysed and engaged. I imagined that such experiences might yield insights that would contribute to a re-envisioned myth – one that aligned with my cosmology and my morality – rather than those embedded or implied by the biblical story. In theory, I imagined, the ritual engagement and outcomes might be a symbolic immortality project that contributes toward addressing amythia and regulating death anxiety.

I unpack this idea further in Chapter 4. Here, the insight is that, while 'a new myth' could certainly be conceived as a symbolic immortality project, that never felt like a motivation. I was seeking creative engagement – a form of experimental play with cosmology and morality and to re-envision the golden calf episode – but not to write a distinctly new myth. I wanted to clarify the goals and strategies through which re-envisioning happens. What are the rituals of engagement and what are they intending? As my research question considers, how might re-envisioning serve as a ritualised symbolic immortality behaviour?

[3.5.2] Digital immortality: The Master of Scenarios in the café

While I did not set out to write scenarios that served as specific expressions of symbolic immortality projects, in some cases, as described in the previous section, that is exactly what I did. I wrote about technology-facilitated symbolic immortality, digital immortality, digital purgatory and approaches to actual immortality. My vision of a technological afterlife includes a Master of Scenarios (MS), a conscious actor representing one's self, in the Golden Calf Elevator & Café, the digital afterlife and environment. Through the writing, I began to see the MS and the café as particular types of symbolic immortality projects.

In the future, perhaps inevitably, virtual representations of ourselves will be available for engagement in fit-for-purpose environments. This is not science-fiction, as technologies are available now, nor is it wishful thinking; this vision is neither necessarily utopian nor dystopian. It is just the natural evolution of technology combined with the human desire to

leave something behind. What can be done is being done, and will be done. Here, I discuss the environment; later in this section, I address the MS more specifically.

The Golden Calf Elevator & Café evolved over time. Initially, I imagined a university-style 'campus' where the New Levitical Priesthood progressed their mission. The heart of their religious practice included Sinai rituals, which I imagined taking place in the festival theatre. Over time, all activity was in this theatre, which I conceived as a black box that can instantaneously become any environment. Through the writing, an initial, baseline configuration of the theatre emerged – a café where virtual entities, the MS and council members, hang out together, ever ready to support the priest-in-training who is engaging Sinai.

The elephant in the room was the ontological status of this environment. Was it in any sense 'real' or entirely within the mind? Was it a metaverse, a hallucination, a lucid dream or perhaps some combination? About a year into my research, I realised that this issue was only a concern when I was discussing the project – I was never concerned while creating. When I would force an answer, e.g., 'this is all in his mind', that would never feel right. In short, the café is where everything is experienced: the Sinai episodes, the engagement with Council members, the ritual design workshop, and so on. Perhaps if I was writing a story, this would be an important issue, but I never perceived myself as writing a story.

I imagined an elevator that took one up and down Mount Sinai as part of a journey through which one explored and experimented with changes to the golden calf story. I imagined being accompanied by a personal council of admired influences – artists, scientists, parents – who commented, challenged, and mentored. Then I imagined a place where you engaged your Council – a theatre-café of sorts, where they are regularly or perpetually meeting in a joyful colloquium. Over time, these became a single environment: a large elevator (a movable space, outside of space-time) with a café inside where you meet with your council and where your experiential strategies are staged – the Golden Calf Elevator & Café. The final evolution of this space was recognising (deciding) that the café was the mother's symbolic immortality project, left behind to engage her son.

[3.5.3] Leaving behind the thesis

My thesis as a whole can be seen through the lens of a symbolic immortality project. The further I progressed on my project, the more present and wide-ranging this particular lens became. This thesis is something I will leave behind, something that provides a sense of

meaning, purpose and value, something I am strongly motivated to engage with and shape daily. My morning ritual became about this thesis. As happens with PhD projects, life becomes significantly about the work. A project about symbolic immortality is perhaps destined to become its own example. Early design concepts imagined the creative component as similar to a libretto that could conceivably be realised as a performance. Over time, a new but related design concept emerged: the thesis as input – like a large artificial intelligence prompt for a future system that might realise representations of the entities, environments and events described in the creative component, and indeed, in this exegesis. What might that look like? It could look like a ritual design workshop for designing one's own symbolic immortality project.

[3.5.4] Ritual design workshop for symbolic immortality

The culminating vision of my thesis is a ritual design workshop – something like a revised Passover Seder – through which participants create personally meaningful symbolic immortality projects. Along the way, they learn about the role of mythic narratives and ritual, about engaging one's cosmology and morality, about exploring and experimenting with personal, family and cultural myths, about what empirical studies have been revealing about aspects of human nature, e.g., death anxiety, terror management theory and symbolic immortality. In principle, one might participate in such an event as a way to mindfully continue shaping oneself, or with the specific motivation to make an offering of oneself or to make changes in oneself if one feels challenges associated with amythia or dysregulated death anxiety. Such a workshop might combine aspects of narrative therapy or other therapies that engage the notion of mythic hygiene. Perhaps one might be motivated to participate in collaborative problem solving – even after dying – to make an offering of your unique experiment of the cosmos. The main character in my creative component is participating in such a self-driven workshop. That is one way in which I conceive what is happening.

My vision of post-death engagement contrasts with Lifton's (1979) personal conception of leaving behind a generalised influence on people who we engaged during our lifetime. What if we could continue to contribute after death, not just in artefacts left behind or through previous influence, but by participating in dialogue, collaboration, problem solving, coaching, brainstorming, and so on? The problems of the world are so complex; we need to leverage our collective power and our diversity of thought toward finding solutions. We are each unique experiments of the universe and may be able to contribute toward solutions. Therefore, we ought to consider leaving behind a version of ourselves – one that might be

capable of participating in collaborative engagement, e.g., learning, problem solving, solution design. In this way, we can each make an offering of ourselves. What might this person be like – this representation of ourselves? This is what I call a Master of Scenarios.

[3.5.5] The Master of Scenarios and God

The Master of Scenarios (MS) was the first character I started developing, although he was first called the Master of Ceremonies. He was based on experiences I had as a young child, perhaps four or five years old, when I would be 'visited' at night – during twilight sleep or within a dream – by a voice that would ask me: 'How many nightmares would you like tonight? Four means three. Three means two. Two means one.'

The voice that I now hear (as I remember my youth) sounds something like HAL in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) but less mechanical. Calm, even, slow, unemotional, definitely male, yet not particularly masculine. The MS seemed all-knowing and all-powerful. Scary, but also, in some sense, protective. I have always had difficulty envisioning this being. Over the years, my extensive journaling experiences often included conversations between myself and this entity. Sometimes, it was kind and helpfully challenging, and sometimes more of a demon that emphasised negative emotions and insecurities.

When I first imagined 'Sinai experiences', the MS immediately appeared as a facilitator and guide – someone who seemed to know the environment and could shape it. Initially, the MS was a somewhat neutral master of the interface, of the experiential world, of the technologies of consciousness, an archetypal guide and mentor going on this journey with you, learning about you, absorbing everything about you. And over time, the MS becomes you. As I wrote scenarios, the nature of the MS evolved along these lines. Life becomes, in part, about training your MS, which will represent you after you die.

Working on my thesis prompted me to reconsider the MS that visited me as a child. Who or what was that thing? It had somewhat god-like capabilities, but I never imagined it was 'God'. Had I been raised in a different environment, I can easily imagine becoming convinced that it was God, or perhaps Satan. But I was not a theist and never would be. God was not mentioned in the household other than, much later, during talk about the diverse gods of world religions. God was discussed at Hebrew school, but seemed more like a character in a story, because that was the frequent context – bible stories. I empathise with people who hear the voice of God or that God speaks to them.

For me, an MS is a symbolic immortality project, created by someone to be left behind and engaged after that person is dead. In principle, MSs might merge into larger beings that exist in communion, retaining some degree of individuality, while at the same time, being part of the whole. One might imagine continuing this process until all consciousness in the cosmos is in communion – an Omega Point as conceived by Frank Tipler (1994).

In *The Physics of Immortality* (1994), Frank Tipler, a professor of physics, explains how, in the mathematics of physics, he found a form of Christianity. It happens something like this: the collapse of the universe will be guided by consciousness such that, instead of collapsing down to a point, it collapses into more of a pancake shape. The mathematics evidently suggest that perceived time will go to infinity. Meanwhile, our incredibly capable decedents will create perfect emulations of every conscious being that has ever or could ever exist – in effect, resurrecting us. The Omega Point, of which we will all be part, will have total and perfect knowledge – omniscience – and will be perfectly capable – omnipotence – and perfectly benevolent. In other words, the Omega Point will satisfy the Christian conception of God. And we will all be there, as emulations, to experience an eternal afterlife of bliss.

Given that conscious life must collaborate on enabling the universe to collapse in a way that will yield the Omega Point, the universe and existence itself might be conceived as the ultimate symbolic immortality project. Now, we might add one more speculation: time may be an illusion. This suggests that everything exists here and now – including the Omega Point. Perhaps there is even a way to commune with this oneness. These ideas come together in the refrain, 'All is one, as if one'. While I do not believe this, I have creatively leveraged the idea in diverse ways. I imagine what might be a small contribution toward the vision: emulations of individuals who are capable of engaging the world and treating such entities as symbolic immortality projects, something we leave behind to continue one's potential contribution – our Master of Scenarios.

As I imagined the digital design and delivery of my thesis, I considered a virtual human interface as a character or narrator or indeed as an entire cast, i.e., as an entity that would morph and divide in real-time to embody and perform each character. I considered delivering a simplified representation of this MS as part of my thesis. In an interesting experience of synchronicity, during my research period, new artificial intelligence tools became available that can do much of what I imagine. However, as I am not a technologist, this would have required significant time and collaboration, and I decided this was not practical. As a designer, however, I continued to imagine how this might work. I drew inspiration from the final scene of *Siddhartha* (1922) by Hermann Hesse. After a life of struggle for enlightenment

and feeling profoundly discouraged, Siddhartha's life-long friend, Govinda, begs him for some clue. Siddhartha asks his friend to kiss his forehead. As they touch, this happens to Govinda:

He did not see his friend Siddhartha any more; he saw only these faces, a long sequence, a continuous stream of faces – hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared, and yet all seemed to be there simultaneously, which all constantly changed and renewed themselves, and which were yet all Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, of a carp, with an infinitely painful striving; he saw the face of a newly born child, red and full of wrinkles, distorted from crying; he saw the face of a murderer, he saw him plunge a knife into the body of another person; he saw, in the same second, this criminal in bondage, kneeling and his head being chopped off by the executioner with one blow of his sword; he saw the bodies of men and women, naked in positions and cramps of frenzied love; he saw corpses stretched out, motionless, cold, void; he saw the heads of animals – boars, crocodiles, elephants, oxen, birds; he saw gods – Krishna, Agni; he saw all these figures and faces in a thousand relationships to each other, each one helping the other, loving it, hating it, destroying it, giving re-birth to it; each one was a will to die, a passionately painful confession of transitoriness, and yet none of them died, they only changed, were always reborn, continually had a new face: only time stood between one face and another.

And all these forms and faces rested, flowed, reproduced themselves, floated along and merged into each other, and over them all there was constantly something thin, unreal, and yet existing, stretched across like thin glass or ice, like a transparent skin, shell, form or mask of water – and this mask was Siddhartha's smiling face, which Govinda touched with his lips at that moment. (Hesse, 1922, 151-152)

Over time, I increasingly felt a sense of irony and cognitive dissonance in conceiving, in almost the same breath, the idea of humans striving for symbolic immortality and the pointlessness of such striving in the face of life's impermanence. We do not strive for symbolic immortality because it is the right or best or most useful thing to do – human nature is neither that clever, nor kind nor helpful. We strive for symbolic immortality as a defence against the terror of annihilation because we have not sufficiently accepted the impermanence of life and existence.

[3.5.6] Engaging modes of symbolic immortality

Looking back, I see that my project seeks to express and synthesise the various modes of symbolic immortality. This is particularly evident in the creative mode, in my life as a writer and periodic creator of other forms. In the biological mode, I keenly feel the sense of continuation via my children and now my first grandchild. In the heroic mode, I imagine contributing to the conversation about making a collaborative contribution – even after death. In the experiential mode, my rituals of creation include, if only briefly, moments where I

disappear into a timeliness realm of creative play. The natural mode, for me, does not include engaging with the natural environment – forests, fields, mountains, and so on. Instead, I feel connection to the universe through meditating on the very small and the very large, from subatomic structures and the fabric of space-time to the oneness of the cosmos – that is my conception of the natural world. In addition, I feel connected to life and humanity when I consider my evolving understanding of human nature, e.g., through the lens of terror management theory.

My creative writing has been, in part, a search for a meaningful sense of contribution. Symbolic immortality is not ultimately about what you leave behind – it is about what is driving you now, and the influence of the resulting behaviours on your environment. In my own life, am I better contributing to my immediate environment, people I engage with, family and work? Am I a better partner to my wife? Am I a better co-worker? Is this working?

Chapter 4 – Reflective practice: Amythia and re-envisioning myth

[4.1] Introduction

Amythia is the term Loyal Rue (1989) coined to describe living without functional myth – a condition he believes is a present crisis in Western civilisation. Amythic death anxiety is a speculative condition where the absence of a personally meaningful and functional myth contributes to dysregulated death anxiety and various psychosocial ills. In principle, there are three interdependent strategies for addressing this condition, including: (a) addressing amythia in the design of new, personally meaningful myth, with one's actual cosmology and morality; (b) regulating death anxiety with strategies embedded in the new myth for bolstering self-esteem and a sense of literal or symbolic immortality; and (c) designing meaningful rituals that enact, embody and embed the new myth into life.

This thesis illuminates ritual design for mythic hygiene as an experimental method, evolved through creative practice, for addressing amythic death anxiety, in addition to as a genre of creative practice. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* is a demonstration of this method and genre as a creative artefact whose foundation assumes the hypothetical diagnosis and treatment of amythic death anxiety. The main character is participating in an orientation workshop based on ritual design for mythic hygiene as a form of religious practice. During the workshop, he engages in ritual immersion and re-envisioning of his personal, family and cultural myths, in search of more personally meaningful and functional myth. Based on these experiences, he creates ritual offerings – called scenarios – as his evolving symbolic immortality project.

In Chapter 3, I reflect on my creative work through the lens of death anxiety and symbolic immortality. In this chapter, I perform the same type of reflection for amythia and re-envisioning myth.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In Section [4.2], I provide a literature review for amythia and re-envisioning myth, surveying theorists including Loyal Rue, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung and Ernest Becker. I summarise their thinking regarding the importance of myth, the consequences of amythia, and on the need and methods for re-envisioning new, functional myth. In Section [4.3], I reflect on selected scenarios from *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* as expressions of amythia and mythic hygiene. I apply the reflective practice methods and questions described in Chapter 2. In Section [4.4], I discuss insights from my project-level, ritual-level and scenario-level reflections. I then consider how creative practice yields

these insights into ritual design for mythic hygiene and ritual design as a method and genre of creative practice.

[4.2] Literature review: Amythia and re-envisioning myth

The concept and condition of amythia have been widely described by diverse thinkers using similar language related to psychological distress and social dysfunction. In the following section, Section [4.2.1], I summarise their thinking related to amythia, and then in Section [4.4.2], I return to some of these same thinkers to consider their thoughts on re-envisioning myth.

The following literature review draws on thinkers such as Jung, Campbell, Eliade, May and Rue, selected for their insights into (a) the consequences of absent or dysfunctional mythic frameworks and (b) methods for re-envisioning myth. I am not drawing upon their wider theoretical projects, which have been critiqued as male-centred and patriarchal (Walker, 1992), and as tending to re-establish traditional myths rather than fostering entirely new or personalised myths (Eliade, 1959/1987). In contrast, my project, through practice-based and experimental methods, emphasises the design of new myths. Further, my own approach to mythic hygiene seeks to avoid the gendered, prescriptive and restorative assumptions of these earlier theorists.

At the same time, I acknowledge the positive influence of Campbell on my thinking. His 'Power of Myth' interviews with Bill Moyers (Campbell, 1988) introduced me to the psychology, sociology and anthropology of religion, framing myth and ritual as naturalistic, adaptive cultural strategies that serve multiple functions in individual and collective life. This perspective marked a turning point from my earlier view of religion as primarily controlling or violent, underlining my concern that amythic consequences arise when myth is discarded or dysfunctional.

[4.2.1] Defining amythia and its consequences

The term 'amythia' was coined by Loyal Rue (1989) to describe a crisis of meaning in Western culture: the absence or collapse of functional mythic frameworks that once unified cosmological and moral understandings, including how the universe is structured, what matters and what ought to be done. Rue argues that mythic narratives integrate cosmology and morality into a root metaphor, which for Western civilisation has been 'God as Person'. In modernity, Rue contends, this root metaphor is no longer embedded into society due to a

secularised worldview and decline of religious belief. Rue believes the consequence of amythia is the disintegration of a society's sense of reality and purpose. Without functional myth, individuals and communities may experience fragmentation, despair and a disconnection from self, others and the cosmos.

Carl Jung (1933) anticipates the condition of amythia in his analysis of modern individuals who are adrift without inherited symbolic systems. He attributes neurosis and psychic disorientation to the absence of meaningful myths and their archetypal characters. The consequences he describes include existential anxiety and alienation due to a loss of meaning and orientation (Jung, 1963), and the development of neuroses from being cut off from symbolic meaning (Jung, 1933). Jung also warns of overreliance on rationalism due to the suppression of mystery (1957/1970), and the substitution of political ideologies and mass movements for lost mythic structures (1959). These concerns echo Rue's view that myth functions as a psychological necessity, and its collapse generates compensatory but often maladaptive substitutes.

Joseph Campbell (1949) likewise warns of the existential dangers posed by the collapse of culturally plausible myths. He views myths as essential psychological roadmaps – structures that orient the individual's journey of transformation and embed them within a moral and social world. Without these roadmaps and deprived of the guidance that myths provide, Campbell proposes that individuals may experience existential paralysis or prolonged adolescence (Campbell, 2004). Since shared myths reinforce cultural norms, we can expect a breakdown of social belonging and the disintegration of community values (Campbell, 1949). Campbell sees particular danger in the 'barbarism' of young men who, lacking meaningful rites of passage, may turn to violence and anti-social behaviour (Campbell, 2004). These social consequences are grounded in the psychological and cultural functions of myth: to guide development, cultivate identity and maintain order.

Mircea Eliade (1957) further emphasises the sacred dimension of myth, arguing that traditional societies sustained coherence through narratives that sacralised time, space and action. In desecralised modernity, individuals are cut off from these mythic templates of human purpose and identity, and thus experience existential disorientation and anxiety (Eliade, 1957). He argues that the loss of divine or heroic archetypes leaves people without role models for how to live (Eliade, 1963), while the collapse of ritualised sacredness contributes to fatalism, despair and nihilism (Eliade, 1954/1965). As with Campbell, Jung and Rue, Eliade suggests that mythic disconnection leads to identity fragmentation, which

modern individuals attempt to compensate for by pursuing substitute meanings in art, politics or consumerism (Eliade, 1957).

As explored in Chapter 3, Ernest Becker (1973) places myth at the centre of human psychological stability. He theorises that humans require symbolic hero systems to buffer against death anxiety. When these culturally sanctioned paths to symbolic immortality break down, individuals become vulnerable to existential paralysis or attracted to destructive ideologies that promise counterfeit forms of meaning. Becker believes that the absence of a mythic hero system can result in crippling anxiety, depression and neurotic withdrawal. In this void, some may adopt extremist ideologies – nationalist, fundamentalist or totalitarian – in pursuit of immortality through violence, domination or martyrdom. Scapegoating and xenophobic violence may arise from the need to protect one's worldview by vilifying others. In place of authentic meaning, people may develop obsessive compulsions such as workaholism, fame-seeking or compulsive consumerism, or become lost in collective delusions such as mass entertainment. 'Modern man', Becker writes, 'is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness... or spending every waking moment at some work which he has invented to justify his life' (Becker, 1973). He agrees with the broader consensus that mythic loss destabilises both individual psychology and the society.

James Hillman (1996) was a post-Jungian psychologist and founder of archetypal psychology, which emphasises the importance of myth in life. He describes living without myth as 'soul starvation', where the imagination loses access to its mythic nourishment. He believed that this starvation leads to a loss of psychic depth – a flattening of life into literal, reductive terms and accompanied by widespread psychopathologies, e.g., anxiety and depression. Seeing these as symptoms of mythic deficiency, he recommends a mythopoetic approach to therapy rather than a focus on medication (Hillman, 1975). Hillman also warns that the over-reliance on literalism and rationalism suppresses the metaphorical imagination and marginalises mystery and symbolic richness. He argues that this flattening alienates individuals not only from themselves but also from the world, stating, 'Without myth, we are exiled from the poetic basis of mind' (Hillman, 1975). Hillman's diagnosis aligns with Jung's and Becker's emphasis on the imaginative-symbolic dimension of human wellbeing.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Robert Jay Lifton coined the phrase symbolic immortality (1979), which is the sense that one continues after death; he outlined five modes of immortality: biological, creative, theological, natural and experiential/transcendence. He stresses that symbolic immortality is a key function of myth; without it, death anxiety intensifies and individuals cannot imagine themselves as part of a lasting human story. For Lifton, amythia

is a 'broken connection' with symbols of continuity – disruptions caused by rapid historical upheaval and technological change, such as secularisation, the Holocaust and the invention and use of nuclear weapons. Without anchoring myths, he says, individuals struggle to form identities and coherent life narratives, with consequences including identity diffusion and emotional emptiness. He notes that psychological numbing, apathy and compulsivity can be expected as defensive responses to overwhelming anxiety. Like Becker, he observes a susceptibility to pseudomyths – totalistic ideologies, nationalism and cults that offer compensatory meaning and identity.

Peter Berger (1967) argues that myth and religion provide a shared 'sacred canopy' – a symbolic universe that stabilises identity and legitimises social institutions. Berger underscores the importance of myth in buffering against anomie – existential disorientation, normlessness and purposelessness – which leaves societies vulnerable to manipulation, disintegration or despair. Berger believes that, in secular modernity, that canopy has disintegrated, resulting in existential insecurity and a pervasive anxiety of meaninglessness. Berger describes modern individuals as possessing a 'homeless consciousness', deprived of a symbolic home in the cosmos. Like Rue and Eliade, he emphasises the loss of transcendental grounding for norms and values, which leads to relativism and weakened social cohesion. Institutions, such as family, law, education and the state, lose their legitimacy when no longer anchored in myth, giving rise to distrust and alienation. The absence of mythic role models also results in identity confusion, with individuals forced to construct private mythologies in an overwhelming and unstable cultural landscape (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

In summary, amythia refers to a psychosocial and cultural condition marked by the breakdown or absence of functional myth. While the terminology is recent, the diagnosis is shared across disciplines from psychology (Jung, 1933; Hillman, 1996), anthropology (Eliade, 1957), existential philosophy (Becker, 1973), and sociology (Berger, 1967; Lifton, 1979). These thinkers converge on the view that myth is a necessary architecture of meaning, without which individuals and societies may fracture and suffer.

I developed and used a summary of the psychological consequences of amythia (Table 7) as a tool for reflective practice with which to consider whether and how my scenarios and the entire creative project express or address amythia.

Table 7: Speculative psychological consequences of amythia

Consequences of amythia	Notes
[1] Meaninglessness and existential disorientation	Intense questioning of life's significance; groundlessness (Rue, Jung, Campbell, Eliade, Becker)
[2] Heightened death anxiety	Intense defence of worldview and self-esteem; xenophobia; lack of symbolic Immortality (Lifton, Becker, Rue)
[3] Identity diffusion and fragmentation	Cannot form coherent narrative identity; feelings of internal disintegration; ungrounded moods and behaviours; dissociation (Jung, Lifton, Campbell, Eliade)
[4] Anxiety and depression	Existential distress; emptiness, hopelessness, despair (Becker, Hillman, Jung)
[5] Neuroses	Obsessive-compulsive behaviours; phobias; excessive guilt and shame; indecisiveness; procrastination (Jung, Becker)
[6] Psychic numbing, emotional flattening; psychic emptiness	Apathy, detachment, or loss of affect; dulling of emotional responsiveness to life events (Hillman, Jung, Lifton, Becker)
[7] Over-reliance on rationalism and literalism	Suppression of imagination and metaphorical richness in internal life (Hillman, Jung, Rue)
[8] Defensive compensations	Obsessive work, fame-seeking, compulsivity; substitutes for meaning or immortality; susceptibility to ideologies (Becker, Hillman)

[4.2.2] Approaches to re-envisioning myth

If amythia names a problem or diagnosis, then re-envisioning myth is, hypothetically, part of a solution or treatment. Re-envisioning myth refers to the deliberate reinterpretation, adaptation or creation of mythic frameworks – personal or cultural – that help individuals and communities mitigate the psycho-social ills that may result from amythia and dysregulated death anxiety. In this section, I revisit the thinkers reviewed above and summarise their

views on how one might rework inherited narratives to restore meaning and purpose. Each suggest methods or characteristics with which to evolve new, personally meaningful myths.

Jung (1964) frames myth as a vital expression of the collective unconscious, composed of archetypal symbols that reflect deep psychological realities. As inherited myths may no longer resonate in modernity, Jung advocates creating new personal myths through dreamwork, active imagination and symbolic engagement.

Jung saw dreams as direct expressions of the unconscious and believed they offered compensatory perspectives to the conscious ego. He analysed dreams not for latent content but for symbolic narratives that seemed significant and meaningful. He looked for archetypes and associations with the dreamer's current psychological state (Jung, 1964). Active imagination was Jung's technique of consciously dialoguing with unconscious figures. His method involved entering a meditative state and allowing inner images, voices or fantasies to emerge and evolve, through writing, drawing or inner conversation. The content may elaborate on dreams or spontaneous fantasy (Jung, 1954, 1969). Jung believed that symbols arise when the unconscious attempts to communicate something not yet fully known. Symbolic engagement includes contemplating or creatively working with these symbols, allowing the symbols to transform consciousness over time (Jung, 1964).

For Jung, the purpose of this work is individuation – the integration of conscious and unconscious material into a mature, cohesive self. For Jung, personal mythmaking is a necessity because individuals require the symbols embedded in myth for the unconscious to communicate meaningfully with consciousness (Jung, 1964).

Joseph Campbell (1949) defines myth as metaphor, arguing that it serves four core functions: mystical (revealing the mystery of existence), cosmological (explaining the structure of the universe), sociological (supporting the social order), and pedagogical (guiding individuals through life stages). In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell and Moyers (1988) discuss how modern societies had lost their guiding narratives, particularly those that once helped initiate young people into cultural and moral life. Campbell argues that myth must evolve in dialogue with current knowledge and circumstance. 'Old myth is so easily rejected by modern minds', he notes, 'and so people reject religion as a whole' (Campbell, 2004). He urges artists and writers to become the new mythmakers of society, believing they are responsible for reinterpreting ancient symbols and archetypes in light of modern realities (Campbell & Moyers, 1988).

Campbell proposes that new myths must emerge organically from contemporary experience, drawing upon the symbolic patterns of old myths while remaining relevant to modern consciousness. He identifies recurring motifs across the myths of diverse cultures and encourages using these as structural templates for new expressions (Campbell, 1949). He emphasises that new myths must be in dialogue with modern knowledge, e.g., cosmology, biology and psychology (Campbell & Moyers, 1988).

Campbell suggests several characteristics for functional myth. Myth should speak to universal human experiences, such as birth, death, suffering and joy, while reflecting the individual's inner journey. To preserve the pedagogical function of traditional myth, new myth must offer symbolic frameworks for growth, initiation and integration across life stages. They should be rooted in archetypal patterns that are adapted to the contemporary psyche and compatible with scientific worldviews (Campbell, 1988). Most specifically, he believes new myth should reflect global consciousness – recognising all humans share a common story. 'The only myth that is going to be worth thinking about... is one that is talking about the planet' (Campbell & Moyers, 1988).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) Campbell describes a recurring pattern in mythic narratives across cultures, which he calls the hero's journey, the one story and the monomyth. While Campbell does not explicitly prescribe the monomyth as a tool for composing new myth, the model has been widely taken up by writers as a structural framework for storytelling, particularly among screenwriters (Vogler, 2007). George Lucas acknowledged Campbell's influence on *Star Wars* and Campbell commented that Lucas followed the model perfectly (Campbell, 1988).

Mircea Eliade (1957) argues that myth enables modern individuals to reconnect with sacred time and space by offering archetypal models of authentic being. He believes that new myths should be crafted and ritually enacted to restore this sense of the sacred and reintegrate human beings into a meaningful cosmic order. Without offering a formal methodology, his work suggests methods and characteristics for new myth. Eliade believes that new myths must draw upon primordial events and archetypal actions, such as creation, initiation, sacrifice and cultural foundation. These are not invented but re-discovered. New myths arise by reinterpreting and reactivating these archetypes in ways suited to modern life. The ritualisation of myth can then reconnect individuals with sacred time and space (Eliade, 1963).

Eliade implies that modern myths can emerge by interpreting secular events symbolically, such as space travel, death or creativity, revealing their sacred dimensions. He thought that myth may arise when modern acts are linked back to transcendent archetypal structures. He points to literature, art and religious symbolism as sources for resacralising the imagination and creating new narratives with mythic resonance.

New myth should be rooted in sacred time and space to reconnect human life with *illud tempus* – the mythical time of origins – and thereby confer meaning and renewal. 'Myth is a means of rediscovering sacred time' (Eliade, 1957). Myths must be ritually performable, allowing individuals to participate in archetypal acts that ground identity and meaning; without ritual, myth becomes inert or purely literary (Eliade, 1963). New myth should present exemplary models – gods, heroes or ancestors – and behaviours worthy of imitation. Finally, new myths must restore the cosmic dimension of human existence, situating individuals within an ordered, meaningful universe. The goal is ontological reintegration, not personal self-expression alone.

Rollo May (1991), an existential psychotherapist, views myth as essential for providing orientation during times of cultural upheaval. In *The Cry for Myth* (1991), he frames mythmaking as a creative, meaning-making response to existential crisis – one that must emerge organically through lived experience. May suggests that new myths arise from the dynamic encounter between the individual and their cultural-historical context, particularly in response to anxiety, alienation or the loss of meaning. He emphasises existential psychotherapy as a key forum for such mythic engagement, since clients are often confronting ultimate concerns and reworking their personal narratives. Through therapeutic dialogue and creative expression, May believes individuals can uncover symbolic truths and generate mythic insights that help them reorient themselves in a disoriented world.

May's methods for evolving new myth begin with an existential engagement with crisis, in which myth can arise through a genuine encounter with anxiety, despair or cultural dislocation. May argues that myths are not invented arbitrarily but emerge as symbolic responses to existential rupture. Psychotherapy helps people reshape and integrate symbolic meaning into their life story. Art, writing, and other symbolic activities allow the psyche to externalise internal tensions and transform them into mythic imagery and insights, born from creative confrontation with one's inner life.

For May, new myth must be personally meaningful, providing existential depth, even if not literally factual. This is achieved if it helps individuals make sense of their suffering and their

values. New myths cannot be imposed or inherited but discovered through reflection on one's real emotional and psychological life. They come from 'the inside out', not as dogma but as insight. A valid myth must address and contain the anxiety of meaninglessness. Like Jung, May believes new myth should facilitate integration of conflicting parts of the self in the face of contradictions, guilt or despair. New myth enables the symbolic resolution of psychological tension.

In *Religion is Not About God* (2006), Rue emphasises that myths should be evaluated based on their adaptive success – their ability to support psychological health, regulate behaviour and promote social cohesion. To be functional, new myth must be plausible, i.e., must integrate modern scientific cosmology, especially evolutionary and ecological knowledge. Myth must include emotionally resonant moral narratives. The goal is to create myths that are both existentially meaningful and scientifically credible. Rue calls for the construction of naturalistic myths – narratives that satisfy spiritual and moral needs without relying on supernaturalism. Myth must evoke awe, empathy and moral commitment while remaining grounded in empirical reality. He emphasises that myth must be open to revision, evolving in response to new scientific insights, cultural shifts and ecological challenges. Myth is not static but must be reflectively and iteratively refined without losing motivational and symbolic power. Myths must balance conviction with adaptability.

New myths must offer a shared narrative framework that promotes social coherence and intergroup solidarity, especially in a pluralistic and globalising world. Finally, myths must support mental health and existential resilience, helping individuals manage identity and purpose.

Across disciplines, a broad consensus has emerged among scholars and theorists that humans have a fundamental need for mythic frameworks to make sense of existence, confront mortality and cohere culturally. Thinkers such as Campbell, Jung, Eliade, Becker and Rue – while using different terminology – converge in diagnosing amythia as a modern condition that leaves individuals vulnerable to alienation, anxiety and cultural fragmentation. They believe that new myths are needed, and they suggest, implicitly or explicitly, characteristics that may be essential.

Based on the above literature, I developed and used a summary of the methods and characteristics for new myth (Tables 8 and 9) as a tool for reflective practice with which to consider whether and how my scenarios and the entire creative project leverage or illuminate these ideas.

Table 8: Methodologies for creating new myth

Methods for new myth	Notes
[1] Inner work with symbolic engagement	Engagement with unconscious material and symbolic imagery; dreamwork and active imagination; dialogues with internal and unconscious entities (Jung, May)
[2] Psychotherapeutic engagement	Ultimate concerns, e.g., mortality, shame, guilt, despair (May, Jung)
[3] Creative practice	Externalising and expressing the results of inner work and engagement with ultimate concerns, shaping into mythic narratives (Campbell, Eliade)
[4] Ritualisation	Ritual enactment of myth to realise sacred time, symbolic transformation, and ontological reintegration; performance that reconnects individuals to archetypal acts, e.g., initiation, sacrifice, creation (Eliade, Jung)
[5] Scientific worldview: modern cosmology and evolution	Cosmology, evolutionary biology and psychology. Myth and science must not conflict: myths translate scientific reality into emotionally and morally meaningful terms. (Rue)
[6] Iterative, reflective design	Open to continual revision based on insights and historical-cultural change; myths evaluated by personal meaningfulness and adaptive success (Rue)

Table 9: Summary characteristics for evolving new myth

Characteristics of new myth	Notes
[1] Meaningful: personally, spiritually and existentially	Aligned with lived experience; addresses actual existential concerns aligned with actual cosmology and morality; connects with mystery and significance; provides orientation and coherence; integrates conflicting aspects of self; wholeness (Jung, May, Rue, Eliade)

[2] Universal motifs	Initiation, transformation, sacrifice, and return; relevant archetypal entities and events; origins (Jung, Campbell, Eliade)
[3] Motivating: morally and emotionally	Evokes reverence, awe, compassion and ethical responsibility (Rue, Campbell)
[4] Credible: compatible with scientific worldview; cosmology	Integrates modern cosmology, evolution and natural selection; the power of myth and myth of mythic hygiene (Rue, Campbell)
[5] Inclusive and planetary	Global consciousness among sentient life; supports shared human responsibility. (Campbell, Rue)

[4.2.3] Civil Religion, Pluralism, and Amythic Death Anxiety

The secularisation thesis associated with Berger (1967) describes a shift in which religion loses its assumed authority as a unifying “sacred canopy,” yielding a landscape of competing worldviews. Berger (1999) later revised this position, arguing that the modern world is not characterised by the disappearance of religion, but by its persistence and, in many contexts, resurgence – a “desecularisation” of the world in which both religious and secular worldviews coexist and compete. The enduring condition is therefore not the absence of religion, but pluralism.

Within this context, Robert N. Bellah’s (1967) concept of civil religion can be understood as one form of collective meaning-making that operates at the level of the nation-state. Civil religion includes structures and strategies similar to traditional religion, e.g., shared narratives and rituals. It may function, in part, to reconstitute a sense of shared meaning and cohesion in environments where traditional religious authority has diminished, even as other forms of religion persist or re-emerge.

From the perspective of Terror Management Theory, both secularisation and desecularisation may heighten existential vulnerability, since exposure to alternative worldviews can destabilise confidence in one’s own, thereby intensifying worldview defences (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2015; Greenberg et al., 1990). Where civil religion or other meaning systems lack sufficient symbolic depth to function as effective buffers, or

where pluralism brings divergent worldviews into close and contested proximity, the conditions for what this project terms “amythic death anxiety” may plausibly increase.

[4.3] Amythia and re-envisioning myth in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*

In this section, I discuss how amythia and re-envisioning myth are expressed within several scenarios in my creative work. These discussions are among the outcomes of reflective practice. More comprehensive engagement with reflective practice leveraged the methodology presented in Chapter 2. These are summary reflections.

[4.3.1] 'Mother's Prototype: Pilot'

'Mother's Prototype: Pilot' is one of the earliest scenarios I wrote and it remains one of the most foundational to my overall project. It began as a speculative act – an imaginative ritual in which the son stumbles upon what he believes to be his mother's symbolic immortality project. What she leaves behind is the Golden Calf Elevator & Café and a kind of mythic invitation.

The ambiguity is deliberate: was this truly her creation or his hallucinatory projection – his need to make meaning, to construct continuity where there had been distance in their relationship? The scenario re-envisioning the myth of the relationship between mother and son. The prototype is hers as imagined by him – a blend of personal and family myth. He transforms the memory of his isolated mother into a world that she had been creating and leaving behind for him.

I was aware, while writing, of the familiar trope: a grieving child makes meaningful discoveries among a deceased parent's belongings. Finding what the mother left behind felt essential to the project. She leaves behind the instructions and materials for a ritual, including various technologies and substances. In the ritual, the son sees his mother – alive, vibrant, seated in a café, and she invites him in. He declines, not out of rejection, but out of unpreparedness and disorientation.

The scenario serves as part of an origin myth for Sinai Sessions – adopting a specialised state of consciousness for entering a mythic landscape and for ritualised mythic engagement. His experience is like a call to adventure from Joseph Campbell's (1949) hero

cycle. He will follow the trail north into the Pennsylvania mountains, to the place where orientation begins. The son's investigation into his mother's hidden rituals and the psychedelic experience he undergoes suggest a quest to fill an existential void. The narrative re-envisioned myth through the protagonist's discovery and engagement with his mother's surreal rituals and dialogues with historical figures.

The scenario illustrates the protagonist's impulse to find meaning and connection in a disjointed reality, using the (real or imagined) discovery of his mother's experimental activity as a means to bridge the gap between personal history and myth. The surreal elements, such as the voices from the radio, and the typewriter's capabilities, symbolise the protagonist's struggle to create a cohesive narrative from the fragments of his past.

[4.3.2] 'Chairs (1-3)'

'Chairs (1-3)' is an experiment in ritual design of a ritual object and ritual text that emerged from my daily writing ritual, as well as an example of mythic hygiene that seeks personally meaningful and functional myth. This scenario enacts a progression from introspective self-awareness to communion across time, to a vision of collective consciousness and belonging in ways that embed and integrate cosmology and morality. The scenario is more explicitly ritual-like in comparison to other story-like scenarios.

Each chair is a symbolic device. 'Chair #1' originated in my morning ritual as the ritualised act of approaching and sitting in the chair – a reminder to be truthful, to challenge myself, to surface what lies beneath. Though deceptively simple, sitting down with this intention transforms consciousness.

'Chair #2' reaches across time, space and consciousness with the intention to engage internal entities – imagined, ancestral or projected. This chair fosters empathy that reaches across past and future generations. Having children, and now a grandchild, who live over 7,000 miles away has sharpened my awareness of this impulse, and the desire to send well-wishes across time and space. 'Chair #2' imagines an ancestor and descendent sitting in a similar way, in contemplation that imagines others, with gratitude. Through this chair, I ritualise my desire that others – those I will never meet – might feel similarly grateful for such peaceful and reflective moments.

'Chair #3' invites me to consider a key moral aspiration – collaboration among sentient life. This chair represents the value of everyone having a seat at the table, a gathering of

radically diverse points of consciousness that recognise themselves as part of a whole – where there are no xenophobic impulses. This chair reinforces our aspirations for how one might wish to behave toward whomever sits around the table. This chair becomes, for me, a metaphor for the omega point (Tipler, 1997) – an eschatological cosmology of collective and collaborative consciousness. It reflects my aspiration to regard the entire human family, including those with whom I profoundly disagree, as one in-group. I do not perceive 'Chair #3' as a utopian fantasy but as a discipline – a ritual practice and reminder.

'Chairs (1-3)' exemplifies how ritual design can be a method of mythic hygiene. It is a way of constructing, rehearsing and iterating personal meaning. Ritual design for mythic hygiene is a technology.

[4.3.3] 'Genealogy of an Absurd Jew'

'Genealogy of an Absurd Jew – Part 1'

This scenario is a prototypical example of my ongoing experiment in ritual design for mythic hygiene and of ritual design as both method and genre of creative practice. In this scenario, the son is me; the mother is my mother. The work is autobiographical and autoethnographic, though stylised. It emerges from my experimentation with re-envisioning personal and family myth in the context of cultural trauma and enacts the mythic process of constructing meaning where there is none – that is, in the face of amythia.

This is also a constructed parental myth. The son, who is amythic regarding his mother, creates a myth that he imagines was her myth. He further imagines that she was engaged in mythic hygiene – a retrospective projection that functions as a kind of symbolic inheritance. In so doing, the son is performing an act of re-narration and myth-making. Her myth becomes my prototype and her symbolic immortality project becomes the catalyst for my own.

The scenario is structured ritually and is meant to be performed. The scenography, sound and morphing of the Master of Scenarios into various characters reinforce its performative nature. It is not simply a dramatic rendering – it is a ritual artefact and its reading, speaking and reflection are all forms of ritual participation. I understand this as a ritual of mythic hygiene. The scenario was constructed as if it were one of the Sinai Sessions from my fictional workshop – an ecstatic, psychedelic and ritual journey. The text exists as if it is a set

of notes captured during or immediately after such an imagined session and thus the scenario reflects post-ritual reflective practice.

The work is suffused with mortality salience. Ruminating on the Holocaust and genocide, the fantasy of an SS officer (instructing prisoners to throw themselves on the wire) and the intercutting of Holocaust imagery with biblical allusions (e.g., the Levites killing their own family) are deliberate provocations. The scenario is driven by the paradox of 'never again'. If the Holocaust is a true measure of human nature, then it must happen again. The only available response becomes the pursuit of transformation: transcend human nature – but how? Change the story – but how? The mother asks these questions, and I imagine her looking for answers in the humanities and asking them in her art, her writing, her speech. These questions become my own.

In constructing the mother's voice, I imagined her critiquing her own upbringing, including conflicts with her parents, her rabbi and her community – and that her feminism shaped that critique. Her cosmology is one I share: scientific materialism informed by evolution by natural selection. This may have indeed disenchanted the world, but that may be a step towards a more personally meaningful myth. After all, religion fosters scapegoating, dehumanisation and violence. Continuing the cultural routine of being a wife and mother would continue the old story. In this light, her questioning and rebellion is an act of ritual rejection and mythic re-creation.

The scenario enacts symbolic immortality in the closing scene, where mother and son type and speak together in a moment of shared generativity. Their ecstatic collaboration signifies that something is being passed on, not as doctrine but as process: the process of ritual design, mythic hygiene and meaning-making. I intend this to be felt as a moment of joy, despite the backdrop of horror.

Finally, this scenario illuminates amythia as a condition and motivating force. Through imaginative ritual, I continue to explore what it means to live between holocausts (any genocides), and how changing the story might help delay or transform what comes next.

'Genealogy of an Absurd Jew – Part 2'

This scenario is a continuation of my experimentation with ritual design as both method and genre. The scenario is a Sinai Session – an exploration of personal, family and cultural myth. The punishment scenes blur with Holocaust references, ritual sacrifice and biblical archetypes. The Master of Scenarios serves again as a facilitator and the Council makes another appearance.

Like Part 1, this scenario functions as an act of mythic hygiene. While Part 1 focuses on the son constructing a myth of the mother's myth, here, the son attempts the same with the father. However, unlike the mother, who was imagined as engaging in reflective mythic hygiene, the father emerges not as a narrator or co-designer, but as an archetype of an authoritarian patriarch.

In retrospect, in comparison with the mother, my portrayal of the father is more of a caricature, more adversarial, more mythic than personal. That imbalance was intentional in early drafts, and during revisions, I began questioning the fairness of rendering him through archetypal distortion. The mother and father characters are strongly influenced by my actual parents, and the son, in various ways, represents me. My father was a physician, a rationalist, a man of competence and command, seemingly omnipotent (at least as I perceived him in my youth), and a Jewish conqueror of death through science. As an archetype, the father character is placed alongside Moses, Abraham and God.

The scenario opens with recurring images of the father as a force entering through doorways – thresholds of his unpredictable and frightening return. He arrives like Moses descending Sinai and sees how we (children) have transgressed appropriate behaviour. Punishment follows, although both the rationale and forms of punishment are obscured. How did the son transgress? There is one hint: the mother warned the son not to humiliate the father.

A ritual of secret play is suggested, with props including scripts, scrolls and objects hidden in arks and closets. It feels as though there is a strong association of play and punishment repressed in memory. Fragmented images – children kneeling on grass, flowers, warnings written on scrolls – foster tones of dissociation, secrecy and layered trauma. The father presides over a ritual meal where the son is forced to chew steak endlessly – a ritual of forced consumption and submission. The images express things deeply encoded in memory and seem less about the details of events and more about associated feelings related to arbitrary judgment, threat of punishment and avoidance strategies that develop as a result. Here, I used Primo Levi's (1947) infamous line: 'There is no why here.' The scenario suggests that humans, under duress, regress into predator logic, turning even on their

children. The scapegoating of family, the leveraging of disgust and the rationalisation of destruction appear as extensions of patriarchal pathology, which the scenario suggests is systemic, mythic and tragically recurrent.

Within the scenario, the son acknowledges (as I did while writing) that these symbols of fear and punishment are unfair exaggerations, reflecting my own doubts and concerns about justice when re-envisioning myth. The Master of Scenarios reminds him not to take this personally, meaning this is a feature of mythic work. Characters carry symbolic weight which can feel confronting when they resemble individuals we love and when we feel compelled to distort memory.

The myth of the protective mother is a counterweight. She marks the doorway with her menstrual blood – a Passover-like gesture of maternal protection and resistance to patriarchal violence. Yet her protection is limited; she cannot fully shield her children. She offers culture, the arts, critical thinking and progressive values – and a suburban environment in which the son is raised. However, the Holocaust is ever present. A storm of layered imagery occurs: Cecil B. DeMille, Hebrew school, migraines, Bugs Bunny, circumcision, art galleries and war protests. This feels part of the son's inherited Judaism.

The scenario closes with a confrontation: the Jewish community questions the son's right to speak as a Jew. He is told he is an absurd Jew, that his parents may have passed on a Jewish identity, but that is all. This accusation mirrors the internal accusation: your Judaism is incoherent, insufficient and ultimately amythic and dysfunctional. In response, the mother – and an older version of the son – express compassionate curiosity, suggesting he appreciate the offerings from these diverse sources while rejecting the nonsense. 'That was absurd', he says, and mother and son share a laugh.

In this scenario a collaboration between mother and son continues. Both parents, through their differences, become co-constructors of myth, whether intentionally or not. Ultimately, the scenario is a performance of ritual design for mythic hygiene that seeks to engage parental myth in search of more personally meaningful myth and truth.

[4.3.4] 'Elevator Operator'

'Elevator Operator' is one of my earliest scenarios, and in many ways, it helped prototype what would later become the Sinai Sessions. At the time, I was beginning to experiment with the idea of placing myself directly inside the myth as a way to change the story. The premise was simple, but ambitious: enter the golden calf narrative in time to prevent the massacre. I wanted to intervene – not as a detached critic, but from within the world of the myth itself. The scenario expresses the urgency of this desire, while simultaneously revealing how resistant these inherited stories can be to change. The malfunctioning elevator became a metaphor for that resistance: my descent is involuntary, my progress uncertain. This emphasises a paradox – no matter what I do, the calf gets built, and whatever I attempt, the massacre unfolds. It felt respectful, somehow, that the massacre would still take place.

In writing this scenario, I was also forming the basic structure of what would become the Golden Calf Elevator & Café – a space where myth can be entered, examined and possibly altered. The elevator, at this stage, is not yet transformed into a social or theatrical setting. The Elevator Operator character is a precursor to the Master of Scenarios – a facilitator-guide, someone who understands the technology of mythic hygiene and who acts as both companion and conscience. He does not resist the mission, but neither does he offer solutions. His tone is curious, supportive and perhaps amused. I imagined him knowing much more than he says.

The scenario unfolds as a ritual of preparation. The dialogue with the Operator rehearses the passenger's purpose. What might he say to Moses? How might he intervene in the negotiation between God and Moses? However, as the elevator ascends, the screens show that events are already unfolding; the calf is complete, the people are gathering and he is forced to watch helplessly, arriving too late to have an impact.

One morning, while revising this scenario, I found myself unexpectedly within a violent fantasy – attacking a sadistic gym teacher. The affect was real: rage, adrenaline and racing heart. It seemed to suggest something about the scenario's emotional stakes. My desire to intervene in the myth, which was ethical, was also visceral, even violent. I was confronting not just a biblical narrative, but internalised responses to authority, punishment and helplessness. The gym teacher became a proxy for unaccountable power, just as Moses (or God) might represent in the golden calf episode. I decided to add the vision as a post-script to the scenario.

This scenario helped me to understand how amythia can express itself as the motivation to change one's inherited myths. I had entered the story with intention, but I did not yet know how to intervene. The elevator's malfunction was an expression of this – my tools were incomplete and my ritual technology underdeveloped. In hindsight, this was not failure – it was foundational ritual work. Ritual design for mythic hygiene. The scenario enacted the very dilemma it was created to solve. It became an origin myth for the larger project – a form of the ritual design workshop I would later formalise.

[4.3.5] 'Myth of the Muse'

'Myth of the Muse' is an exemplar for creative practice that applies ritual design to mythic hygiene. This scenario re-envisioned myth in search of more personally meaningful and functional myth. The scenario and these accompanying notes for reflective practice illustrate how creative practice is the site of research into the research question.

The scenario plays with the nature of ritual in three layers: (a) the ritual Isaac experiences; (b) the lesson being facilitated for novice practitioners; (c) the creative practice through which the cosmology and morality of the author are being re-envisioned.

First, the scenario portrays ritual in action, whereby a woman/muse is guiding Isaac through mythic engagement, with immersion into the golden calf story. The ritual recalls elements of Bell's (1997) notion of 'ritualisation', meaning the transformation of ordinary actions through formalisation, repetition and symbolism. For example, Isaac removes the gold she is wearing and kisses her there. Traditionalism is expressed by tracing the ritual in progress to Isaac's mother, who trained this muse and others on ritual facilitation. The ritual immersion leverages a specialised state of consciousness, something like hallucinogen-augmented lucid dream that enables simulative experimentation with events. Speculatively, surprising and shocking visions of the massacre contribute to amythia and death anxiety, provoked by the spectre of brutal intratribal and familial violence, and by Isaac imaginatively experiencing his own death (multiple times) and the deaths of others. This parallels Lifton's (1979) claim that symbolic repair begins with a recognition of symbolic breakdown.

The second layer of ritual involves the muse facilitating a lesson for muses-in-training who are learning how to perform or facilitate the ritual, and who seem to be witnessing the scenario in real time, like student therapists watching a therapeutic session. A lesson is a ritual and a lesson in ritual facilitation is ritual design in action. The ritual and its related knowledge are a symbolic immortality project, meant to be passed along to Isaac and the

novice facilitators. Since symbolic immortality is a death anxiety buffer (Solomon et al., 2015), the scenario portrays a form of terror management therapy.

The third layer of ritual in this scenario re-envisioning cosmology and morality for the author – and potentially for readers. Cosmologically, the scenario portrays non-ordinary reality and time. A Visitor, who may be from the past or the future, speaks here in the present. There is also the suggestion that the massacre of the golden calf celebrants will always happen and is always happening. Morally, the scenario simulates decision-making; Isaac is exploring and experimenting with his options for preventing the massacre or mitigating its impact, e.g., by hiding people. The scenario is an example of ritual that re-envisioning myth as a method for reconsidering cosmology and morality.

The scenario demonstrates mythic transformation in action, retaining some aspects of the traditional Sinai narrative, such as disobedience and divine punishment, while making creative alterations. Moses, God and the Levites are held accountable and the community searches for new ways forward, using mythic hygiene as an approach. This illustrates a key premise of mythic hygiene: reinterpreting received myth can be a pathway toward more personally meaningful and functional myth, possibly fostering better psychosocial outcomes and a more just and peaceful world.

'Myth of the Muse' offers an exemplar of method-as-genre, a dramatisation of ritual design. The scenario demonstrates how facilitators might guide others through a process of mythic hygiene, while the instructional framing positions the text as a training tool, a performative manuscript for other guides. The scenario is laced with the speculative symptoms of amnesia: identity confusion and alienation from Isaac's tribal community; disorientation of time, space and consciousness; and heightened death anxiety through mortality salience via the immediate presence of violent death. There is no distinct resolution other than the search for new ways forward. Isaac's culminating vision is not utopian. It suggests a radical responsibility and commitment to participate in and protect the ongoing project of mythic hygiene.

Finally, 'Myth of the Muse' portrays a prototype for Sinai Sessions that the main character engages with in the ritual design workshop; the scenario can be interpreted as an origin myth for such sessions. The scenario performs and theorises ritual design for mythic hygiene. It reimagines Exodus 32 through the lens of terror management, symbolic repair and experimental ritual. As a case study, it affirms the potential of creative writing to operate

as rituals of mythic hygiene through which one might confront, reimagine and renew the implicit myths that shape our lives.

[4.3.6] 'Day 6'

Day 6 is an exercise in re-envisioning myth. It is a prototypical Sinai Session that goes up and down Sinai on a mission to collaborate with God on new myth and ritual. Instead of God delivering commandments, the people confront God with his culpability for the massacre, and then pose a collaborative question: What do we do while waiting for the next Holocaust?

This myth has Moses meeting Sisyphus on his way up Sinai, where the two partake of the Golden Calf, the substance that induces the alternative state of consciousness used in Sinai Sessions. They thereby join the orientation workshop. This experience prepares Moses for his confrontation with God. Moses and Sisyphus observe evidence of cultural dysfunction – of global amythic death anxiety. It is suggested that the massacre of the golden calf led to this outcome, that the golden calf myth is a dysfunctional myth. The hope is that, by changing the story, the outcome might change. This is a myth of mythic hygiene.

It is hypothesised that a profound sense of oneness might reduce human evil and horrors. If we did not distinguish between us and them, then we would not harm the 'other' as this would be equated with self-harm. The cosmos experimentally integrates into an Omega Point. As they descend Sinai, a ritual is designed for hanging onto the essence of this experimental cosmology. The traditional *Shema* is revised. Instead of "the Lord is one," we see and hear "All is one, as if one," transforming the declaration of monotheism to pantheism, while acknowledging that this is a hypothetical and experimental myth and ritual.

Day 6 is a ritual enactment of a re-envisioned myth – the myth of mythic hygiene – to see what feels right – 'feeling right' being a sign of a 'potentially functional myth.' The community approaches God with Tablet #1, which has the question for collaborative problem solving: How might changes to mythic narratives and ritual practices prevent the next Holocaust? And they return with Tablet #2 on which is drafted the revised *Shema*. This is just one of many trips up and down Sinai – one experience of experimental mythic hygiene among many.

Finally, the purpose of this myth includes regulating death anxiety by integrating death more meaningfully into life. In Day 6, this is portrayed through the ritual death of a priest. We hear that a Bar Mitzvah is the time when death is more explicitly discussed and integrated into

life, with subsequent birthdays being used as opportunities to discuss death, including aspirations for one's life (before death), and for what one's death might look like – ritual design for one's death ritual. This is aspirational, given that death might come by accident, rapid disease or an act of god. The purpose is to integrate death positively into life through the act of ritual design – as a strategy for regulating death anxiety.

[4.4] Insights

[4.4.1] My experience of amythia

I exhibit some signs of amythia, but not in distressing or pathological ways. I have a persistent undercurrent of questioning and a pattern of compensatory behaviours rather than acute symptoms. I frequently find myself wrestling with questions of cosmology and morality, ruminating over the nature of life, what matters and what ought to be done. These moments sometimes arrive with anxiety, especially upon awakening. This feels like a kind of existential groundlessness described by thinkers like Rue, Jung, Campbell, Eliade and Becker. My writing ritual often seems to convert the anxiety into a more rationalised, intellectual curiosity, which might be the compensatory nature of my ritual.

Amythia can strengthen death anxiety and while I do not fear annihilation or non-existence, I do fear dying with regrets such as not taking appropriate advantage of this one life or not making a useful contribution. As per Becker, I want to drop something into the confusion. In this sense, symbolic immortality feels central to my experience. I do not think I engage in the more defensive expressions of worldview protection or xenophobia – unless, of course, I am deceiving myself.

My amythia is discerned in questioning the existence of the self and free will. Intellectually, I do not believe these exist while, existentially and emotionally, I feel I have no choice but to behave as though they do exist. This is more a curiosity than crisis, but the lack of resolution feeds ruminations. In theory, core mythic narratives provide answers to such questions.

I do not suffer from the clinical depression or persistent hopelessness that the literature suggests can arise with amythia. When writing, I often stumble upon feelings of guilt and shame, and this generates anxiety. In earlier periods of my life, I experienced a dulling of affect – a kind of emotional flattening, particularly during times marked by career or family

difficulties, and I coped through various modes of distraction and escape, such as films, food and writing.

Most strikingly, I feel I have over-relied on rationalism and literalism, privileging the logical, linear and analytical, perhaps at the expense of imagination. Writing rituals have offered a way to push against that tendency, which might be considered a compensatory strategy. These rituals provide opportunity for creativity, imagination, metaphor, symbol and, ultimately, for ritual design and mythic hygiene. It feels like a necessary corrective and therapeutic strategy. I see my prolonged engagement with higher education – in religious studies, anthropology and now creative writing – as part of a compensatory pattern. I feel I have used academic study both to make meaning and to substitute for it, which reveals such study as a symptom of amythia and also as a strategy for addressing it.

Reflecting on all this, I now suspect that the ritualising of mythic re-envisioning – what I have been doing for years – might be a functional response to amythia. One does not need to be overwhelmed by anxiety, addiction or despair to be amythic, and amythia provokes ritual responses that may indeed protect against those maladies. My creative rituals may thus be working; I might be finding more functional myth.

[4.4.2] My experience of re-envisioning myth

Reflective practice has revealed how my efforts to re-envision myth, through my morning ritual, mirror many of the methods and characteristics proposed by theorists such as Jung, May, Eliade, Campbell and Rue. My practice may have begun intuitively, but over time I have come to understand it as methodical: a ritualised inquiry into cosmology, morality, identity and mortality. My ritual seeks symbolic engagement with the unconscious, seeking surface symbols, patterns and concerns that operate beneath my conscious awareness. This exemplifies Jung's (1961) notion of active imagination and May's (1991) emphasis on myth as a creative response to existential anxiety. I deliberately use this time to engage with ultimate concerns: mortality, guilt, shame and the question of purpose. What emerges from that inner work is sometimes further shaped into a creative artefact – a scenario, a ritual, a fragment of myth. Some days it is poetic, others analytical; sometimes it is a fragment of narrative or a conceptual sketch. Regardless of its form, it feels like active mythic hygiene and the ritual feels therapeutic.

Regarding cosmology, I strongly assume the reality of the phases of Big History (Christian, 2004) and evolution through natural selection. My evolving personal myth is not likely to

contradict these frameworks. I do not, for example, believe in supernatural entities or realms. Yet my writing rituals have included frequent imagining that pushes through these boundaries. I am forced to acknowledge that my beliefs are habits instilled early in my education. There will, I assume, be scientific revolutions in the future that may significantly revise or reframe current scientific thinking, and entirely new paradigms will very likely emerge (Kuhn, 1962). For me, re-envisioning myth is a ritual process of exploring and experimenting with my conception of possible cosmologies. Myth is a way of making those frameworks emotionally and morally meaningful. My cosmological thinking is open to revision and all related beliefs are admittedly hypotheses. In terms of what these myths aim to be, I seek meaningfulness above all – personally aligned with my lived experience and my actual understanding of the world. I aim for coherence, a sense of wholeness, even if temporary or illusory. Functional myth, for me, must both critique and integrate what I tend to believe about the universe.

Morally, re-envisioning myth feels driven by a sense of duty – a compulsion to contribute something that might help reduce suffering, even if only by illuminating the condition of mythic death anxiety and mythic hygiene as a form of therapy. This sense of duty is my own form of symbolic immortality project. My ritual practice intends inclusivity and plurality and I want mythic narratives to foster a planetary consciousness, with collaboration among all sentient beings.

The inner work related to re-envisioning myth is psychotherapeutic engagement, creative expression, ritualisation and iterative design, coming together in my morning ritual. That ritual is both the method and the site of my research. It is where I live out the questions with which I am engaging.

[4.4.3] Rejecting checklists for design

I have also learnt that my reflective practice did not include using methods and characteristics from the literature as a checklist for design. I have experienced something like that behaviour when I was designing workplace rituals and artefacts – that was indeed part of the argument in my previous thesis (Lewis, 2020), that designing rituals with the characteristics cited in the literature might then achieve some of the outcomes also cited. When engaged in creative practice, however, such construction feels forced and I feel a repulsion and rejection towards treating the literature like guidelines for design.

My reflective practice has helped me to better understand my creative practice and to critique and analyse my methodology. However, it does not lead to prescriptive intentions for revision. If I were, for example, crafting prototype scenarios that intended to analytically illustrate what the literature suggests about amythia, re-envisioning myth, death anxiety and symbolic immortality, then I would proceed differently – I would treat the literature as a checklist of design criteria.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

[5.1] Introduction

This concluding chapter draws together the threads of my research and complements *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* in responding to the research question: How might re-envisioning myth be seen as a ritualised symbolic immortality project that addresses amythia and regulates death anxiety?

The underlying logic of ritual design for mythic hygiene is as follows: reducing psychosocial ills and fostering a more just and peaceful world requires that we leverage our knowledge of human nature in the design of mythic and ritual interventions that reinforce desired values and goals. Terror management theory (TMT) provides powerful empirical evidence that human nature is deeply wired towards xenophobic attitudes and behaviours that lead to horrific violence and suffering. Meanwhile, insights into amythia suggest this can lead to a variety of psychological challenges while also exacerbating expressions of death anxiety. This knowledge can be leveraged in the experimental design of new personal myths and rituals. Over time, through iterative design and continual improvement, we can discover what works and apply mythic hygiene as a strategy for achieving our goals.

Reclaiming the Golden Calf portrays a participant in an orientation workshop and the storm of thoughts experienced as he engages in mythic hygiene, re-envisioning personal, family and cultural myths. The workshop is intended to be therapeutic preparation. Afterward, he might pursue the strategy further as a means to foster psychosocial wellbeing, and perhaps join the community he discovered, and collaborate on the community's mission to experiment with mythic hygiene as a strategy for fostering a more just and peaceful world. The scenarios that comprise the creative work are the main character's offerings, created during the workshop and based on his *Sinai Sessions* – journeys into mythic landscapes, supported by specialised technologies of consciousness.

This chapter begins with a summary of key insights from my practice-based research, outlines limitations of this research, suggests directions for future inquiry and closes with final reflections. The primary answer to the research question, however, is the ritual artefact called *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, which enacts and demonstrates ritual design for mythic hygiene as a method and genre of creative practice.

[5.2] Key insights

By key insights, I mean ideas that emerged during my practice-based research, that were not pre-conceived, were often surprising and that now feel important to my conception of ritual design for mythic hygiene – including how this can be usefully considered a methodology and genre of creative practice.

[5.2.1] Ritual design for mythic hygiene has become a personal myth

Terror management theory (TMT) predicts how we respond to mortality salience and existential threat and helps to explain some of the horrors of human nature, particularly in relation to xenophobic attitudes and behaviours. We are wired to feed and protect our in-group and to eat (exploit) out-groups. When confronted with alternative worldviews, TMT predicts violent defence of one's own worldview. In short, natural selection has yielded a human nature that is disappointingly problematic – both beautiful and horrific.

Cultures are centred on core mythic narratives that reinforce the norms of communities. Myths reinforce the horrors of human nature as well as the beauties. Meanwhile, the absence of functional myth – amythia – yields various psychosocial ills, while also compounding expressions of death anxiety. I speculate that there is a condition called amythic death anxiety, where being amythic shapes or exacerbates one's experience and expressions of death anxiety. Bad myth fosters horrors; lack of myth fosters illness. If we want different outcomes, we need different myths. We need personally meaningful and functional myths that reinforce our chosen goals and values. For me, these goals include, socially, a more just and peaceful world and, personally, increased health and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, we do not know what kinds of myths and embodying rituals will help us progress toward these or other goals. Therefore, we ought to experiment. Ritual design for mythic hygiene is an experimental, therapeutic treatment for amythic death anxiety that (a) seeks more personally meaningful and functional myth, aligned with one's cosmology and morality, (b) mitigates the psycho-social consequences of amythia and, ultimately, (c) achieves (targets) chosen goals.

I call the above narrative 'the myth of ritual design for mythic hygiene'. This is now among my personal myths. It evolved through creative practice and practice-based research and is

an interpretation of the world that makes sense to me. It may indeed be scientifically defensible – a true myth – but that is for professional scientists to determine.

[5.2.2] Re-envisioning cultural myth can revise cosmology and morality

My research reveals that creative writing rituals that re-envision cultural myth can, through creative practice and practice-based research, generate new components of a personal myth, including a revised cosmology and morality. Creatively engaging the story of the golden calf was a starting point for re-considering what I believed, while the literature on death anxiety, terror management theory and amythia provided intellectual and empirical support. My emerging personal myth incorporates a cosmology of human nature, recognising that humanity has evolved and inherited strategies that, while adaptive for survival and reproduction, also produce horrific consequences: evil, violence and suffering. Confronting this cosmology yielded a moral question: If we are so fortunate as to live between Holocausts, what might we do with that opportunity? My emerging personal myth incorporates this moral position: We ought to practice and experiment with mythic hygiene to foster psychological healing and a more just and peaceful world – because Holocausts, genocides and other human evils will continue unless human nature can somehow be transcended or mitigated. Hypothetically, mythic hygiene is a necessary, though not sufficient, strategy for approaching those goals.

[5.2.3] Mythic hygiene comes with challenges and cautions

My research has illuminated significant challenges in re-envisioning personal myth as well as concerns of possible dangers. The first challenge involves the nature of meaning itself and its relationship to truth.

Humans are meaning-making animals and our interpretative beliefs help us navigate the world. Myth evolved as a strategy for reproductive success. Its purpose is not to be true, but to be functional, and many beliefs may be functional without being true. Positive illusions (Taylor, 1989) are beliefs considered more adaptive than objective truth. While searching for more personally meaningful and functional myth, I discovered this question: Am I open to positive illusions or am I trying to insist on true myth? Which is more important to me: reducing one's problematic expressions of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety, or a strict adherence to truth? Perhaps re-envisioned myth functions like a placebo, which can produce positive effects even when patients are fully aware they are taking a placebo (von Wernsdorff et al, 2021). Experimental mythic hygiene may require this kind of

awareness that one is 'trying on' new myths. Methods of reflective practice will then be essential to assess meaningfulness and functionality.

Re-envisioning myth, then, is less a pursuit of philosophical or scientific truth than of personal truth – functional meanings that help individuals regulate death anxiety and live purposefully. The thinkers reviewed in Chapter 4 who emphasise the therapeutic power of re-envisioning myth highlight the need to re-enchant the world. In effect, they suggest that the modern cosmology of scientific materialism, while accurate, might not serve on its own as a functional myth.

The second challenge and caution is that mythic hygiene, even with the best of intentions, can foster evil and increase suffering. Amythia and dysregulated death anxiety make the mind especially receptive to new myths that promise identity, meaning, belonging and symbolic immortality. Right-wing populism, for example, embeds xenophobic attitudes into myths that emphasise in-group/out-group distinctions, legitimising aggression toward outsiders (Wodak, 2015). Similarly, some myths may draw people into gangs or cults or radicalise them towards violence. Myth and ritual are technologies that can be applied to any purpose. A hammer can build a house or kill. Likewise, mythic hygiene is value-neutral until specific values and goals are chosen.

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, the values and goals of the fictional community are articulated in the refrain: a more just and peaceful world. For me, this includes egalitarianism, pluralism, empathy, tolerance and collaboration – in contrast with the authoritarian and patriarchal values implied by the massacre of those who celebrated around the golden calf.

[5.2.4] Mythic hygiene began with cultural myth and progressed to personal myth

While my thesis was triggered by my response to the story of the golden calf and initial ideas for changing that story, practice-based research took me far beyond that story. I became focused more on creatively imagining an underlying condition that motivate the desire to re-envision myth, *amythic death anxiety*, and a methodology for therapeutically addressing that condition, *ritual design for mythic hygiene*. These, in turn, led to deeper investigations into personal and family myth.

After my strong reaction to Exodus 32 and imagining changes to the myth, I considered rewriting some portion of that chapter to be a more personally meaningful and satisfying

myth. It felt as though the motivation to re-envision myth was a symptom of an underlying condition, which I eventually named amythic death anxiety. I imagined that the creative writing rituals through which one re-envisions myth were a response to amythic death anxiety. I began calling this therapeutic response mythic hygiene. Based on my review of literature related to death anxiety and amythia, I imagined that mythic hygiene could be particularly efficacious if conceived as a symbolic immortality project and ritualised within one's creative practice.

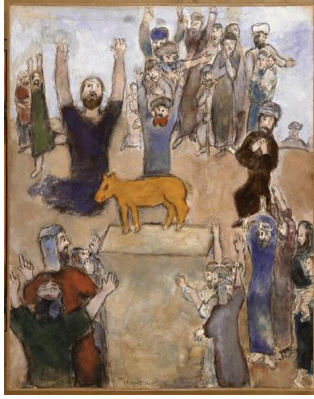
Meanwhile, explorations into personal and family myth became more prominent than revisiting the story of the golden calf. Most scenarios in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* do not reference the biblical story directly. Re-envisioning personal myth included exploring themes from childhood and adolescent experiences, from interactions with parents and teachers, and – similar to considering cultural myth – reflecting on the implications for my own mythic foundations. What is this universe I inhabit? What and who do I think I am? What is going on here? What feels important?

However, over the course of the research period, the golden calf and the massacre of the celebrants, regularly returned as a grounding narrative and became a unifying symbol for ritual design for mythic hygiene.

[5.2.5] Re-envisioning myth may yield new images and symbols

The image of people celebrating around the golden calf became a meaningful symbol for me that represented the new community I was imagining in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*. They are peaceful, joyful and ecstatically celebrating their freedom and gratitude – freedom from the bondage of authoritarian and patriarchal violence and oppression, and freedom to worship in their own way – a community of religious diversity, pluralism and tolerance.

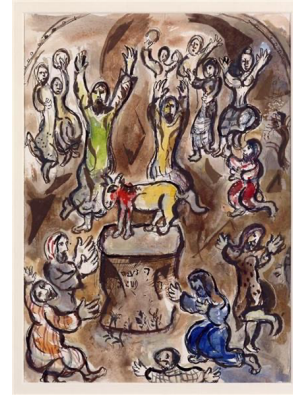
Marc Chagall's images of the golden calf became important images for me that expressed this symbol (Figure 13). I grew up with Chagall's work in my environment, e.g., prints on the wall and books on the shelf. Shortly before this research started, I reviewed all of Chagall's work related to Exodus and the golden calf episode, and I used Chagall images to illustrate portions of a family Passover Seder delivered online in April 2021.



The Hebrews Adore the Golden Calf (1931)



Adoration of Golden Calf (1960)



The Adoration of the Golden Calf (1966)

Figure 13: Examples of Marc Chagall's artwork of the golden calf celebration

These images became important ritual objects and ritual moments. Looking at them yielded two radically diverse interpretations and psychological impacts. First, these represented the celebration and ecstasy of freedom and gratitude. Then, they represented the massacre, which I imagined starting at that moment. Chagall's *Golden Calf* imagery is an example of how re-envisioning myth can transform one's perception of and response to images and symbols. The same image supports radically divergent meanings, e.g., celebration, idolatry and violence. This personal response is entirely independent of what Chagall may have been thinking or intending while creating these pieces. Their emotionally transformative power, as I discovered through the processes of experimental mythic hygiene, is what makes them useful as personally meaningful ritual objects.

During my research, I also imagined an original symbolic image representing authoritarian and patriarchal violence and based on Exodus 32:27, which is a verse to which I regularly returned during my creative work and which triggered this thesis:

He [Moses] said to them, 'Thus says יהוה, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay sibling, neighbor, and kin' (*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, 2006).

My symbol is a portion of a man, from the navel to knees, with a sword along the thigh and with copious splattering of blood on sword, thigh, fabric and circumcised phallus. This is an image of a Levite man during the massacre, having just murdered siblings, neighbours and kin.

Cannibalism and, in particular, cannibalism of family emerged as a metaphor for the massacre. I took inspiration from the paintings of *Saturn Devouring His Son* by Goya and Rubens (Figure 14), which, for me, symbolised the act of killing one's family. This image became incorporated into the scenario 'Genealogy of an Absurd Jew'. Part of re-envisioning myth includes envisioning new images and symbols that emerge with new narratives.



Rubens, *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1636)



Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son* (c. 1820)

Figure 14: Versions of Saturn Devouring His Son

[5.2.6] Changes to the story revealed methodology and motivations

Going into this research, I did not know whether my writing would yield a new story – a new version of the myth of the golden calf, as though I was proposing a new Exodus 32. I knew I was going to creatively engage with the myth, but I did not know exactly what that meant. Ultimately, the changes expressed in my work were part of the denouement following the massacre:

[a] After the massacre, Miriam facilitates a 'truth and reconciliation' process during which God, Moses and the Levites are held accountable for the massacre. [b] God is eternally sequestered to the top of Sinai yet is considered deserving of a seat at the table, even by those who do not believe he exists. [c] Moses eternally travels up and down Mount Sinai, mediating between the community and God, facilitating a collaborative dialogue through which new ways forward are sought – ways that might prevent such a massacre from ever

happening again. [d] The Levites form a new priesthood, dedicated to the protection of those who celebrate around the golden calf – ecstasy being a vulnerable state. They become champions of the new values of the community: tolerance, diversity and egalitarianism. [e] The community remains at Sinai, rather than wandering the desert and conquering Canaan.

I decided that Miriam, Moses's sister, would be the key instigator, leader and facilitator following the massacre. Moses's sister holds him accountable. She had been a dutiful sister since his infancy, but his order to the Levites to slaughter the celebrants was a breaking point. I imagined that Miriam conspired to arrest Moses and the Levites who participated in the massacre. She then facilitates the truth and reconciliation process, designed to hold the offenders accountable and to determine new ways forward without the authoritarian and patriarchal oppression of Moses, the Levites and God.

In summary, there are fundamental role reversals between the traditional myth and my changes to the story, in particular, power reversals and who is perceived as good and bad. While the above elements are part of a new myth of the golden calf, I do not present a new myth in the creative work. The changes to the story are mentioned across various scenarios.

There is one important change before the massacre, a change to Exodus 32:14 as discussed in Chapter 1.

Traditional verse:

And יהוה renounced the punishment planned for God's people.

Examples of my new versions:

God said to Moses: You must kill those in your family who celebrated around the Golden Calf, or I will destroy all your people – now, go down, Moses.

God said to Moses: You must kill some of your family, or I will kill all of them – now, go down, Moses.

Upon completion of my research, I could see more clearly what I was attempting with these changes. I wanted members of the community to be so outraged by the massacre – as outraged as I was upon reading the story – that the historical trajectory of the community changes radically at that point.

Reclaiming the Golden Calf suggests that the community facilitating the workshop in ritual design for mythic hygiene are the descendants of that community at Sinai. They celebrate

feasts and festivals during which new myths and rituals are created and shared, in search of more meaningful and functional myth.

[5.2.7] Changing the story can change the world

At the start of my research, I knew that the fictional community I was imagining believed that changing stories could change the world; this was a foundational belief and commitment of the community. However, I did not know how that might work. As the main character engaged in mythic hygiene – and as I engaged with relevant literature – I began to conceive possibilities.

There is modest empirical support for the proposition that changing stories can change lives. Since personal identity is constructed through life stories, re-authoring these narratives can improve wellbeing (McAdams, 1993; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy, a clinical approach grounded in this idea, helps individuals externalise problems and reconstruct more empowering life narratives, with emerging evidence suggesting therapeutic benefits (Bohlmeijer et al., 2007). More speculatively, sociological and anthropological studies reveal that myths and shared narratives constitute social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Geertz, 1973), and terror management theory shows that such cultural stories buffer death anxiety and regulate behaviour. Shifts in these narratives can reshape social cohesion, conflict and cooperation (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). Together, these findings and speculations affirm that narrative changes at both personal and cultural levels have at least the potential to transform psychological experience and social outcomes.

A premise within the world of my creative work is that changing the story might change the world. This might be true for individuals and for societies. It is an empirical issue – we must experiment. First, one needs to clarify the kind of world one wants, and then one might leverage mythic hygiene to seek myth and ritual that can move the world in that direction.

[5.2.8] The Golden Calf Elevator & Café and the Master of Scenarios represent a technological afterlife

Through reflective practice, clarity emerged over the purpose and ontological status of the Golden Calf Elevator & Café and the Master of Scenarios. They are both symbolic immortality projects. The café is a virtual environment that can be visited and engaged with,

within which mythic hygiene workshops are facilitated. Inside the café is a Master of Scenarios, a virtual human that represents the designer(s) of the café. The Master of Scenarios is designed and trained by the human it represents for the purpose of continuing to participate in mythic hygiene after death. The Master of Scenarios is a technological emulation of the human trainer, facilitating the workshop. Together, the café and the virtual human inhabitant are a form of technological afterlife.

During the orientation workshop, participants learn about mythic hygiene and progress their own symbolic immortality projects, including (if they so choose) creating aspects of their virtual afterlife, which might include the environment in which they wish to be visited and a virtual representation of themselves. In other words, the café and the Master of Scenarios are technologies that help people create their own versions of the café and their own Master of Scenarios.

In such a future, part of one's life strategy would include the ongoing development of these projects, because a sense of symbolic immortality is a death anxiety buffer, and helps to embed a healthy attitude toward death, including motivating one to contribute to the future. Ultimately, this could increase a sense of meaning and purpose, promoting psychosocial health. In this future, there would be many Masters of Scenarios out in the world, engaging humanity and each other. They would not be static representations of the deceased person they represent, but would learn and grow over time.

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, the son stumbles upon his mother's café – her virtual afterlife. She is surrounded by music, artists, intellectuals, lively conversation – and she is the star of the show. The son finds the community that is committed to mythic hygiene and enters their café where the mythic hygiene orientation workshop is facilitated. Inside the café are technologies for attaining specialised states of consciousness that support mythic engagement, something like a synthesis of hallucinogenic and lucid dream state that enables participants to enter mythic landscapes and emulate their participation. This is a way to experiment with morality by considering what is important and how one might behave in various situations.

I believe such technologies are inevitable, given the present development of artificial intelligence. When the 'World Wide Web' was introduced in the early 1990s, I imagined that websites would become virtual representations of individuals. The café and Master of Scenarios are elaborations of that vision.

In the future, humans will regularly engage with virtual humans, some of which represent people who are no longer alive, including family members and historical figures.

Communities will emerge that curate particular historical individuals. One might learn about Marcus Aurelius, for example, by speaking with him, interviewing him and listening to his stories as though he is sitting at your table, while a community of Marcus Aurelius experts or devotees will continually develop and improve the virtual version.

Individuals might conceive a group of such virtual personalities – people that they particularly admire and wish to learn from – as their own personal Council. One might evolve one's council over their lifetimes, just as they evolve their Master of Scenarios. Their Council might hang out in their café, as I illustrate in my work.

Through creative practice and practice-based research, my project evolved from (a) imagining psychological journeys as mythic landscapes in which one re-envisioned myth, with the aid of one's council, to (b) a world in which this activity takes place in the context of a technological afterlife, in which one participates in a ritual design for mythic hygiene workshop as a symbolic immortality behaviour.

[5.2.9] The lines between autobiography and fiction become blurred

My creative practice included reflecting on the relationship between autobiographical and autoethnographic knowledge and the creation of fiction and fantasy. Upon the conclusion of the research, I acknowledge that, even given the methodology I developed over the research period (detailed in Chapter 2), I do not have a deliberate approach or methodology for when and how fictionalisation happens.

My writing often engages my personal, family and cultural myths, which is not to say actual memory and experience, but on what arises in consciousness as I try to unearth implicit myth. Rarely does an entirely fictional scenario arise in my mind. Rather, at some point, I feel an impulse to fictionalise, which creatively synergises memories, associations and fantasies. My scenarios can be placed at many points across a spectrum that ranges from entirely autobiographical to entirely fictional.

As an example, over the course of my research period, my actual mother began taking on a much larger role in relation to the mother character in my creative work. Here, the boundary between autobiography and fiction became quite blurred. The son stumbling upon his mother's symbolic immortality project became enmeshed with what my mother left behind –

my memories of her beliefs and values – and this influenced the evolution of my creative work. For example, my mother wrote a master’s thesis in the humanities (Lewis, 1973) that opened with a diagnosis of the modern human condition – increasing alienation and dehumanisation. I converted her language into a signature song that the mother sings in the café. I began imagining that my mother’s thesis was a symbolic immortality project that she left behind for me and that my thesis was a kind of continuation. She clarified a diagnosis of alienation and dehumanisation, which I began conceiving as the social result of amythia and dysregulated death anxiety. My project of continuation included imagining a speculative therapeutic response: ritual design for mythic hygiene.

One of the most surprising aspects of my research was how *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* started with a response to the biblical myth, as well as implications for re-envisioning cosmology and morality, and migrated into an extensive and meaningful dialogue with my deceased mother.

[5.2.10] Engaging genealogy supports symbolic immortality

Engaging family genealogy, I discovered, created an increased sense of symbolic immortality. While this notion is typically a sense of continuity going forward into the future, I discovered that it also includes continuity going into the past.

My research drew upon family history and family myth, both of which leveraged genealogical research I conducted over the previous 15 years. During this research period, I crafted a narrative of my family history for our Passover Seder in 2023. Instead of ritually re-telling the biblical myth of the exodus from Egypt, we took turns reading from the story of our family’s roots in the Pale of Settlement, their migration to the United States and to Philadelphia. The narrative ended with us sitting together at the table having the Seder. This was a simple example of re-designing ritual to be more personally meaningful, particularly as I do not believe the exodus from Egypt to be an historical event. More importantly, though, was the felt sense of connection to the past and connection to family.

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, I imagined the mother and son discussing family history and the mother describing tensions related to identity, family roles, gender roles and the influence of the Holocaust on her childhood imagination. This engagement with generational history also creates that sense of connection, continuity and symbolic immortality.

[5.2.11] Personal mythic hygiene is preparation for a social mission

Ritual design for mythic hygiene, as I conceive it in this thesis, is an approach to personal methodology rather than to social or collective methodology. However, the personal approach is conceived as helping an individual prepare to engage in a more collaborative, social mission. Speculatively, some individuals may be too wedded to their implicit myths and worldviews or suffering too much from the psychosocial consequences of a mythic death anxiety to collaborate on new cultural myth. Therefore, a preparatory process may be required.

In *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, at the end of this workshop, the son might determine that he is prepared to progress toward the collaborative mission of the community that is facilitating the workshop. I do not portray this happening – it is an open-ended consideration. The workshop serves as a bridge, helping individuals prepare themselves personally and to decide whether they want to engage socially by joining the community that facilitates ritual design for mythic hygiene.

[5.2.12] Creative writing is ritual

My writing ritual through which this work takes place is an analogue to the Sinai Sessions portrayed in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*. In other words, I recognise that my own ritualised creative writing practice includes entering a specialised state of consciousness, like the immersive mythic landscape of the Sinai Sessions. I have been using writing as ritual for over 40 years and this seems to be my body's response to certain anxieties and sensitivities to the environment. This current thesis has been, in part, an attempt to put a more defined framework and understanding around that long-standing behaviour. Re-envisioning personal myth asks: If ritual enacts myths, and myth explains the ritual, what is that myth? Rituals of creative writing are among the methodologies for seeking answers.

In one scenario, 'World's Largest BBQ Pit', I describe a morning writing ritual that helped me to psychologically prepare for each day as a public school teacher. The present research helped me to better understand the role that ritual played in reducing anxiety and in re-envisioning personal myth. For example, at that time, I was writing a fictional story about an emerging romantic relationship, a simulation of sorts of relationships I was having at the time. I was also writing an ongoing and never-sent letter to an acquaintance that captured aspects of my life to find meaning and insights – an exploration in the re-envisioning of personal myth. Finally, I was writing a more explicitly mythic and epic story of two warring

kingdoms trying to reconcile their cultural differences. I was not particularly aware of my motivation in these cases; I was simply compelled to write. In retrospect, through the lens of this research, including the creation of that particular scenario, I came to an increased understanding of how I employed creative writing as ritual.

[5.2.13] Reclaiming the Golden Calf yielded multiple design concepts

When I began this research, I assumed I would eventually arrive at a single guiding design concept – a metaphor or principle around which I would focus and shape the creative work. Instead, mythic hygiene yielded several overlapping metaphors and constructs, including the following. Each is a partial answer to 'what is *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*'?

[a] Symbolic immortality project

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a ritualised and idealised symbolic immortality project, embedded into my morning writing ritual. The project bundles together fantasies and ideals for what can be left behind after death: a virtual representation of oneself that one trains and leaves behind to collaborate on mythic hygiene into the future, and an idealised methodological contribution whereby experimental mythic hygiene fosters psychosocial wellbeing and a more just and peaceful world.

[b] Workshop as ritual design laboratory

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a fictionalised design for workshops, retreats and related gatherings, applying ritual design for mythic hygiene toward chosen goals. Such workshops could include therapeutic retreats for those experiencing amythia, a programme for Levitical priests-in-training, a strategy development retreat for organisations, a collaborative design workshop for absurdist Judaism and a collaborative charter-development workshop for a novel consulting business. All these forms would include learning and practice in re-envisioning implicit and explicit myths related to chosen goals.

[c] Artefact in response to amythic death anxiety

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a creative text that embraces absurdity and nihilism, while resisting the destructive aspects of human nature. The artefact illustrates a wrestling match between an individual and their particular illusions of time, space, self and free will. It offers hopeful experiments in personal ritual and mythic reconstruction; it re-reads Exodus 32 as a

site for renewal, a response to the evil embedded into human nature, a lament for the beauty and ugliness of our species, a hopeful and experimental method for transcending human nature, a lashing-out against god, physics and the evolution of sentient life, a method for developing a personal approach to religious naturalism, and a morning ritual for reminding oneself of one's identity and mission.

[d] Haggadah of mythic hygiene

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a ritual facilitation guide for annual and life-cycle rituals of mythic hygiene. Like a Passover Haggadah, the work includes story, song, poetry, commentary and performed ritual acts. The work can be conceived as the facilitation of family rituals – birthdays, death-days and re-enactments that re-author relationships through myth. Through such rituals, one can reconstruct relationships such as between parents, children, siblings and extended family. In the work, rituals of mythic hygiene are embedded in the human life cycle. For example, the mother facilitates an annual birthday ritual with her son during which they watch DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Here, the mother declares, during the golden calf scene: 'That is not the story.' I re-imagine the nature of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah to be a transition into adulthood from which point, going forward, one mindfully begins incorporating notions of death, and symbolic immortality, into life.

[e] Libretto for mixed-media operatic performance

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a script or libretto for theatre, film, opera or related performances and realisations. It is a rather long letter of introduction and invitation, designed to orient and inspire potential collaborating artists – like you.

[f] Moral argument of mythic hygiene

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is not a work of moral philosophy. However, due to the content of the main character's mythic explorations, and in response to a conception of human nature that emphasises the inevitability of atrocity in human history and affairs, the work suggests moral imperatives. We should ask what we ought do between Holocausts. The work suggests we should (presumably among many other strategies) engage in experimental mythic hygiene and continue collaborating even after death. Among the greatest moral challenges, I suggest, is how we might respond to the knowledge that horrific suffering is taking place here and now – quite likely within a few kilometres of where one sits at any given time.

[g] A prompt for a system not yet invented

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is a design-prompt that, when the appropriate system is available, will realise the Golden Calf Elevator & Café and the Master of Scenarios. In the future, one might then enter the café, participate in a ‘ritual design for mythic hygiene’ workshop and progress one’s own symbolic immortality projects – including, perhaps, the design of one’s own virtual afterlife and virtual representative. The café and workshop environment would include a simulative game based on the golden calf story. Perhaps I will see you on Sinai.

[5.3] Contributions to knowledge

Creative contribution

The creative contribution of this research lies in framing ritual design for mythic hygiene as a genre of creative practice, including creative writing. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* demonstrates that creative writing can be designed as a ritual act that re-envisioning myth, produces symbolic immortality offerings, addresses amythia and regulates death anxiety, thereby supporting meaning-making, reducing anxiety and, in principle, nurturing the psychosocial health of the artist. Most practice-led creative writing research explores themes, representations or processes, but does not explicitly theorise the creative act as ritual with existential and therapeutic outcomes (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Smith & Dean, 2009; Nelson, 2013). By positioning ritual design for mythic hygiene as both method and genre of creative practice, this research establishes a new framework for how creative writing can function.

Theoretical and methodological contribution

By synthesising insights from the literature on death anxiety, terror management theory, amythia and re-envisioning myth (Becker, 1973; Campbell, 1949; Eliade, 1959; Jung, 1969; Lifton, 1979; Rue, 2005; Solomon et al., 2015), this research has generated an exploratory but systematic methodology for mythic hygiene. I have advanced the hypothesis of amythia death anxiety as a distinct, speculative condition and developed a framework for ritual design for mythic hygiene as a response. Importantly, this is not a medical proposition, but an interpretive proposition – a way of thinking about how the speculative condition is expressed in creative practice. This is significant because it contributes to death anxiety

studies by offering a new construct that might deepen our understanding of how meaning systems influence psychological wellbeing (Becker, 1973; Solomon et al., 2015). It also contributes to creative writing studies by extending practice-led methods into ritual design, where writing is not only expressive but also performative and ritualised (Nelson, 2013; Schechner, 2013). My thesis advances theoretical discourse, potentially shaping new methodological practices for research in the arts.

Practical contribution: Workshop design

My research contributes practical knowledge supporting the experimental design of workshops in ritual design for mythic hygiene. Such workshops could offer structured methods for individuals to maximise wellbeing and address intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges, for artists to apply ritual design for mythic hygiene as a method and genre of creative practice, and for professionals to use ritual design for mythic hygiene as a method for innovation and continual improvement across fields. These applications demonstrate that the research does not remain abstract but provides transferable strategies for psychosocial health, creative innovation and organisational practice.

Taken together, these contributions establish ritual design for mythic hygiene as a creative genre, an exploratory methodology and a practical framework. The originality of this research lies in articulating amythic death anxiety and symbolic immortality through creative practice and also in proposing a transferable approach that can be tested, adapted and expanded by scholars, artists and practitioners.

[5.4] Limitations and future research

This thesis has explored ritual design for mythic hygiene as a speculative and creative practice, rather than an empirical investigation. Its central propositions – including the novel concept of amythic death anxiety – remain interpretive and hypothetical. While this creative framing has been productive for generating insights, it also signals limitations and opportunities for future research in psychological theory, therapeutic practice and technological applications.

Gender diversity in theoretical frameworks

While the creative work expresses strong female agency and feminist themes, the theoretical influences informing this project are predominantly drawn from (Western) male

thinkers. This reflects the contingencies of the author's research trajectory and intellectual formation rather than a deliberate exclusion of diverse perspectives. This lack of greater diversity is acknowledged as a limitation. The resulting tension – between the gendered character of the influences and the perceived qualities of the creative work – highlights that creative outcomes are not always determined by theoretical sources. Expanding the diversity of theoretical engagement is recognised as a potential area for further development of both the theoretical constructs (ritual design for mythic hygiene and amythic death anxiety) and creative engagements with personal, family and cultural myth.

Research related to amythic death anxiety

The conception of amythic death anxiety presented here is speculative. No empirical studies have yet investigated whether individuals who lack meaningful mythic frameworks (amythia) are more likely to experience dysfunctional or dysregulated death anxiety (Solomon, personal communication, 2025). It remains unknown whether such a condition is associated with statistically predictable attitudes and behaviours or whether it manifests in ways distinct from related constructs in the psychology of meaning (cf. Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). Future psychological research could test whether amythia correlates with maladaptive coping, anxiety or hostility toward outgroups, thereby providing empirical grounding for this thesis's speculative claims.

In addition, psycho-historical approaches might investigate how conditions of modernity, including the decline of traditional mythic systems, have exacerbated existential dislocation and contributed to sociopolitical phenomena such as xenophobia and polarisation (Bauman, 2001; Berger, 1967). Related research could also examine how social media ecosystems amplify death-denying behaviours or facilitate induction into cultic systems and whether re-envisioning myth may serve as a counter-practice to such dynamics.

Research related to the therapeutic efficacy of re-envisioning myth

While many theorists argue persuasively for the psychological importance of myth (Campbell, 1949; Jung, 1963; Eliade, 1963), empirical evidence for amythia being a root cause of psychological suffering or for the therapeutic efficacy of re-envisioning myth remains limited and indirect. Some fields – such as narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and expressive writing research (Pennebaker, 1997) – offer indirect evidence that re-authoring stories can improve psychological functioning. However, a systematic synthesis of

these literatures has not been undertaken in this thesis. Future research could compare and integrate these approaches to develop more rigorous workshop models for mythic hygiene.

A further avenue concerns the essential characteristics of newly constructed myths. As suggested in this thesis, new myths must be meaningful and plausible to be functional. For some, plausibility may require alignment with scientific worldviews; for others, resonance with spiritual or cultural traditions may be crucial. Research could investigate which characteristics of newly created myths best nurture symbolic immortality and self-esteem in prosocial rather than destructive ways (Lifton, 1979; Becker, 1973).

Research related to emerging technologies

This thesis speculates regarding the role of emerging technologies in supporting rituals of mythic hygiene and symbolic immortality projects. Three areas in particular warrant investigation:

[a] Virtual environments. Increasingly immersive virtual environments may provide ritual spaces for mythic exploration and experimentation. As these environments approach sensory realism, they may enable experiences comparable to controlled lucid dreams, in which participants might design and inhabit mythic scenarios. Future research could explore the psychological and social implications of such environments for symbolic immortality and mythic hygiene.

[b] Virtual intelligent agents. Virtual humans and related intelligent agents are advancing rapidly, nearing conversational sophistication that may pass the Turing test (Jones & Bergen, 2025). In the future, individuals may train virtual agents to serve as personal assistants, companions or even symbolic immortality projects – representations of the self that persist after death (Rothblatt, 2014). Research is needed to examine the ethical, psychological and cultural implications of these technologies, including their potential to actualise fictional constructs such as the Golden Calf Elevator & Café and the Master of Scenarios.

[c] Technologies of consciousness. Profoundly altered states of consciousness have long been integral to ritual and mythic practice. Recent clinical research into psychedelics suggests potential therapeutic benefits, including reductions in depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress (Griffiths et al., 2016). Future studies might examine how such states can be intentionally combined with ritual design to facilitate mythic hygiene. Questions include how neurophysiological insights can inform the safe induction of states conducive to re-

envisioning myth and how these practices might be integrated into structured symbolic immortality projects.

The limitations of this thesis arise from its creative and speculative character and, most of all, from its idiosyncratic approach, based entirely on my personal trajectory for ritual design and mythic hygiene. It has not sought to provide empirical validation, systematic literature synthesis or technological prototyping. Instead, it offers a generative framework that invites further research across the fields of psychology, therapy and technology. Future investigations into the empirical understanding of amythic death anxiety, the therapeutic efficacy of re-envisioning myth and the application of emerging technologies could refine my creative speculations, broadening their plausibility, functionality and strengthening contributions to creative practice and psychosocial wellbeing.

[5.5] Closing thoughts

Creative writing as ritual behaviour

Creative writing can serve as a ritualised symbolic immortality behaviour with which you create something you intend to leave behind, something that could make a useful contribution, that your great-grandchildren could experience as a way of gaining insights into their great-grandparent – should they desire to do so. Since a sense of symbolic immortality is a death anxiety buffer, such behaviour can foster psychological wellbeing. In addition, if the creative writing focuses on re-envisioning myth in search of personally meaningful and functional myth, with plausibly believed (or hypothesised) cosmology and chosen morality, then one might mitigate the psychosocial ills that accompany amythia. Finally, ritualising this behaviour might realise ritual outcomes in one's life, including meaning-making and reduced anxiety. These are entirely plausible effects, according to the literature, and therefore, useful in my own creative practice and personal myth, including the myth of ritual design for mythic hygiene.

My 40-year ritual of writing as introspective exploration has repeatedly asked: What is important and what one ought do? My thesis lands on one kind of answer. The horrors of the world are primarily due to our unfortunate inheritances of human nature, which have passed along violent, oppressive and xenophobic tendencies. With greater awareness of empirically informed dynamics of human nature, we have a greater capability to steer its expression away from aspects we do not like and towards chosen values and goals. We ought to experiment with mythic hygiene as a strategy for designing interventions that might mitigate some of the horrors. We must be experimental because we do not know what works.

As suggested in *Reclaiming the Golden Calf*, this approach could be conceived as a religious perspective – a form of religious naturalism, without dogma, other than a commitment to leverage mythic hygiene towards a just and peaceful world. Although, to be fair, such a movement could also deteriorate into a dangerous cult. A strong myth can reinforce horrific behaviours as well as pro-social behaviours.

Can changing the story change the world?

Changing the story as a strategy for changing the world is worthy of investigation, particularly when one is fortunate enough to be living between Holocausts, and when one is

feeling impotent to stop a current genocide. A personal approach to mythic hygiene might prepare one to then collaborate on collective approaches. *Reclaiming the Golden Calf* assumes that changing our stories can change the world – beginning with the individual engaged in mythic hygiene. It is plausible that adjusting our symbolic architectures can contribute to wellbeing. However, even with the empirical support within this thesis, my particular approach to ritual design for mythic hygiene remains a creative endeavour – not a scientific one.

Reclaiming the Golden Calf is my demonstration for how re-envisioning myth can function as a ritualised symbolic immortality project that responds to amythia and that regulates death anxiety. What I can claim with certainty is this: I am engaged in mythic hygiene; it feels meaningful and reduces anxiety; it supports a sense of symbolic immortality, and it feels like a satisfying (though modest) contribution. These may, of course, be positive illusions. My reaction to the story of the golden calf may have been my body's response to amythic death anxiety, motivating me to experiment with mythic hygiene as a compensatory strategy that ultimately influences how I think, feel and behave. And now, that hypothetical insight is part of my evolving personal myth.

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