

Professional Leave Report Cover Sheet

Name: Daniel Kosloff

Department: Psychology

College: Science & Mathematics

Leave taken: Sabbatical Difference in Pay Professional Leave without Pay

Time Period: Fall 2023

- Spring
- Academic Year
- Other

Your report will be sent to your Dean for your PAF and to the Library Archives.

SABBATICAL REPORT FOR DR. SPEE KOSLOFF

Thank you for the opportunity to work on my book during a Fall 2023 sabbatical. This report satisfies APM 360 requirements.

A) Accomplishments of the leave in relation to the goals of the original proposal.

The period was fruitful, as I made significant progress on the work, bringing several chapters to completion or nearly so and making substantive progress on remaining material. I served in residence at Skidmore College in Saratoga Spring, NY, and enjoyed various productive exchanges with psychologists, philosophers, classists, and literary scholars.

B) Modifications, if any, to the original proposal, and the circumstances that necessitated these modifications.

I did not modify the proposal.

C) Objectives of the original proposal (if any) that were not accomplished.

Unexpectedly, I required open-heart surgery in November, and the symptoms prior and post-surgical recovery substantially hampered my ability to complete the book.

D) Anticipated outcomes for the near future as a consequence of the leave's activities.

Since my complete recovery as of February, I have largely been able to pick up where I left off. It is my hope and aim to continue and complete the work within the next 1-2 academic years.

SABBATICAL PROPOSAL FOR DR. SPEE KOSLOFF

I am applying for sabbatical, to be taken during the Fall 2023 semester, in order to write my first book, to be entitled, “Human Fragility and Cultural Transcendence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Foundations and Future of Our Social Existence.” The text, which I began writing this past Summer, will be the culmination both of my empirical and theoretical work as an experimental social psychologist and interdisciplinary scholar, and of my pedagogical development as a teacher of psychology and faculty contributor to the Smittcamp Family Honors College General Education curriculum. In addition to serving as a trade book for the general public, the text will be used as primary reading for my Honors 13 course, *Human Fragility and Cultural Transcendence*, taught to fulfill the D2 area (Social Science) in the Smittcamp General Education sequence.

Proposed work

This book will explore human nature through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing primarily upon the social and natural sciences to critically examine a central theme: that humans are paradoxical creatures. On one hand, *Homo sapiens* is a relatively slow, weak, vulnerable specimen in the animal kingdom, and one that is cognitively sophisticated enough to grasp its own physical fragility. Yet, we are also creative, symbol-wielding, value-driven, socially embedded agents. Cultures afford senses of meaning so powerful and enduring that we, as participants in our cultures, can psychologically transcend even our most obvious physical limits. We can perceive ourselves as valued and even heroic agents in a meaningful universe, rather than as finite material things. And yet, such psychological transcendence does not actually eliminate our frailty. Even as our cultures persist from generation to generation, the human animal bears agitating and mostly unconscious knowledge of its fragility. In fact, I will make the case that many of the challenging issues facing human civilizations (i.e., individual, social, and environmental problems) are partly products of subconscious tensions between our culturally grounded pursuits of transcendence and our persistent underlying existential anxiety. Moreover, I will contend that increasing our awareness of those tensions may partly defuse them, and that reliance on scientific method – with its emphasis on careful observation and rigorous skepticism – is the most stable path to doing so.

First, I will present an account of the physical and social emergence of *Homo sapiens* on planet Earth, revealing when and where the psychological dynamics of fragility and transcendence likely emerged in the history of cultural evolution. There, I will draw upon relevant theories, models, and data from evolutionary science, anthropology, and related fields. Next, I will examine how that foundation carries over into the contemporary lives of people, integrating experimental research from social psychology and related fields to evince the motivational role subconscious existential concerns play in everyday human social behavior. I will primarily emphasize that people seek to avoid awareness of their status as fragile creatures, preferring instead to psychologically embed themselves in cultural belief systems; and that, in doing so, we risk adopting monolithic, rigid worldviews that are breeding grounds for uncritical thought and tribalistic tendencies. Finally, I will address the role that expanded, scientifically rooted awareness of the fragility-transcendence dynamic could play in ameliorating aversive social outcomes.

Throughout the writing, I will – in the vein of the great Carl Sagan – aspire to encourage the general public and my students to recognize scientific epistemology as key to the project of ensuring human survival and happiness. I will drill down to granular specifics (e.g., regarding evolutionary processes), while also incorporating broad themes and topics (e.g., the nature of consciousness). At every step of the way, I will ensure that all content is couched in an engaging and at times humorous narrative fit for a lay audience.

My qualifications

As an experimental social psychologist, my primary expertise is in experimental existential psychology – the scientific study of the impact of existential concerns (e.g., with freedom, isolation, identity, death) on human social thought and behavior. The majority of my work in that domain has focused on experimental tests and theoretical extensions of terror management theory, a framework developed to explain and examine effects of existential concerns with potential death-related anxiety on human strivings for meaning and cultural heroism. Following on the interdisciplinary work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, terror management theory posits that the awareness of mortality engenders in human beings a unique potential for paralyzing terror; to mitigate that emotional outcome, humans rely on a dual-component anxiety buffer consisting of faith in a cultural worldview and a sense of personal value (i.e., self-esteem). Unfortunately, reliance on those protective psychological structures has been shown to contribute to intergroup conflict and egocentric behavioral orientations. My research background has thus positioned me uniquely well to write the book I am proposing to compose on sabbatical. More specifically, to date I have authored 13 empirical papers documenting my experimental studies of the impact of subconscious existential concerns on human social behavior, and I have authored 11 chapters in edited volumes within the same content area (a complete reference list is presented in Appendix A at the end of this proposal). I believe those contributions to the literature support that I am a leading scholar on the subject of human fragility and cultural transcendence.

Additionally, I am a deeply interdisciplinary thinker. I studied English literature and philosophy as an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts institution (Skidmore College) before acquiring post-baccalaureate certification in psychology from Columbia University. In graduate school, I conducted research in both social psychology and psychophysiology. I maintain close attunement to diverse matters in the natural and social sciences, as well as the arts and humanities (as I am a jazz musician, as well). My commitment to interdisciplinary practices is reflected in my teaching and service at Fresno State. I was an active member of the University General Education Committee from 2016-2019, have been the Department of Psychology's coordinator for the General Education writing component for PSYCH10 since 2014, and was a contributing faculty member to the Smittcamp Family Honors College General Education restructuring in 2017-2018. In fact, as a result of the latter, my course, *Human Fragility and Cultural Transcendence* (Honors 13), was created. I teach a section of that class every Fall. That course and the book I am writing have had a bidirectional impact on one another. Thus, further speaking to my qualifications for the proposed work, I am fortunate to have had many semesters engaging with undergraduate students regarding this material, learning which contents are most likely to make an impact, in which ways they are most effectively sequenced, explained, applied, and brought to life through examples.

Benefits to the university

The proposed sabbatical will be of benefit to my department, the college, and the university in the following ways:

- *It will facilitate my pedagogical growth.* As noted earlier, the proposed book largely was inspired by my Smittcamp General Education course (Honors 13). Composing a complete, comprehensive, original text will aid the organization and instructional delivery of that course, and will enable students to access a wealth of material from a single primary source. I am also eager to increase the continuity from my voice as a lecturer to the style of assigned readings, which will occur if the writing is my own original work.
- *It will enhance my research program.* In the process of writing the book, I will assuredly discover novel empirical research questions that drive my laboratory work, publication, and grant writing efforts. That has previously occurred for me after authoring theoretically rich works. For example, in a chapter I recently wrote for Elsevier's "The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism" (Kosloff & Solomon, 2020), I delved into theoretical questions regarding associations between prejudice, religious fundamentalism, and other known forms of religiosity. That, in turn, fueled my research program, leading to results I presented at international and national conferences, and an ongoing line of empirical research. I am certain that writing an entire book will spur numerous programmatic avenues of research.
- *It will expand my role as a research mentor.* As just described, the writing process will enhance my research program; this, in turn, will create opportunities for students to be involved in my laboratory. The research lines that grow from the proposed work will provide excellent contexts for training interested Honors undergraduate and graduate students in appropriate research methods relevant to this domain of psychology.
- *It will expand my scholarly network.* In the course of writing this book, I look forward to instigating engagements with a diverse array of interdisciplinary scholars. Doing so will serve to build bridges between Fresno State and faculty at other prestigious institutions. I plan to reach out to various relevant societies (e.g., International Society for the Science of Existential Psychology, The Julian Jaynes Society, The Ernest Becker Foundation), as well as individual experts. For example, I look forward to communications with Dr. Terrence Deacon, Professor of Anthropology and member of the Cognitive Science Faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, whom I had the pleasure of first meeting when I arranged his invited address to our college in 2014. Further, as described later in this application, I plan extensive communications with Dr. Sheldon Solomon, one of the co-creators of terror management theory and a leading interdisciplinary scholar in the study of cultural evolution and existential psychology.
- *It will enhance Fresno State's scholarly profile.* A book that garners positive publicity will add to Fresno State's scholarly profile. As noted earlier, I intend the text to be suitable as a popular trade book. As such, the proposed work may bring welcome public attention to the university, advancing Fresno State's reputation as an advocate for interdisciplinary scientific progress.

CSU resources needed to support this project

I do not require CSU resources to support the proposed work. When the work is completed, I will be grateful for any assistance that can be provided to help promote my book.

Demonstration of objectives to be met

My proposed sabbatical work will meet several of the objectives listed in APM 360 (Section IV, item 2), as follows:

- *“Studies leading to a greater command of subject matter.”* I have spent the better part of my academic career seeking detailed knowledge of human prehistory and cultural evolution, trying to integrate diverse perspectives from the natural and social sciences in order to grasp how and why human social organization centers on symbols of meaning and heroism in the ways it does. My home discipline of social psychology has provided a critical foundation, enabling me to test hypotheses regarding motivational effects of existential concerns in human cultural affairs. But I need to deepen and broaden this understanding by synthesizing my established understanding of contemporary social psychological research with modern advances in human evolutionary biology (particularly brain evolution), anthropology (emphasizing archaeological evidence from 40kya to present), comparative psychology (emphasizing animal intelligence, communication, and sociality), semiotics (e.g., the work of Charles Sanders Peirce), and various forms of interdisciplinary scholarship (e.g., works by psycho-historian Julian Jaynes, historian Oswald Spengler, classicist Walter Burkert, and philosopher Susanne Langer). The opportunity to explore intersections of these works in the process of writing my book during sabbatical will dramatically amplify my social psychological expertise, as well as my grasp on themes and data bridging social psychology to other fields, and, most centrally, my command of the causes and consequences of human fragility and cultural transcendence.
- *“Studies leading to improved curricula.”* As noted earlier, a primary inspiration for this book is my Smittcamp General Education course. It is hard to overstate what a tremendous benefit the existence of my planned book will be to the class. I am already thrilled to have discovered, year after year, that students respond to this challenging content with lively intellectual engagement and readiness to connect with it on a personal level. But I get chills projecting just how complete and profound the experience of the course will become when students have a fully formed, spirited narrative exploration of these matters literally in hand. Moreover, the book will challenge me to take such deep dives into relevant scientific content that I will assuredly discover myriad complex and intriguing questions about human social nature and the methodologies we might use to answer them – questions to pose in class and critically ponder with my students in the pursuit of balanced, encompassing, enlightened understanding. Lastly, I am fairly certain that the depth and range of this book will render it suitable also to serve as the foundation for a new graduate-level course, so I am hopeful that too will be a benefit to our curriculum resulting from my efforts during sabbatical.
- *“Travel with a well-defined professional or scholarly objective.”* As noted earlier in this application, over the course of my sabbatical I will consult various scholars whose insight and expertise will assist my intuition and understanding. I foresee that, in many of those cases, I will be able to benefit sufficiently through remote communication, but in at least one specific case I simply must travel to achieve the thorough consultation I require. I will need to spend 1-2 weeks with Dr. Sheldon Solomon, Professor of Psychology at Skidmore College, who is one of the world’s preeminent terror management researchers and scholars specializing in the interdisciplinary study of human cultural evolution and experimental existential psychology. I began working with Dr. Solomon as an undergraduate student, and have published numerous empirical papers and book chapters with him in the time since. In light of Dr. Solomon’s

extensive knowledge of scientific literatures bearing on the very questions I seek to answer in my book, I believe that, if I am to write the best version of this book I can, I need concentrated time within him in person, debating and analyzing various historical and prehistorical timelines, research outcomes, and theoretical models. Furthermore, Dr. Solomon has published several books, and so is well-positioned to offer me guidance regarding the process of finding a publisher amenable to my book. I have made preliminary arrangements to travel to and work directly with Dr. Sheldon Solomon (Appendix B presents a letter from Dr. Solomon verifying his intent to collaborate with me in these manners).

Activities and timeline

The activities I am proposing cannot be accomplished in less than the requested leave time. The research and writing process, along with the necessary travel requirements I just described, will demand too much time and effort to perform while simultaneously managing my semesterly teaching workload and service commitments. Fortunately, *the activities I am proposing can be completed in the time period requested.* I am confident that I will be able to write the book in the Fall 2023 semester, and have outlined the following timeline for completion of the proposed work:

- Summer 2023
 - Background reading and research;
 - Draft outline of the full work (sections and chapters);
 - Compile thorough list of prospective consultants (individual scholars, as well as relevant scholarly organizations);
 - Make travel and lodging arrangements for residency in the Psychology Department at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, NY, where I will work for 1-2 weeks with Dr. Sheldon Solomon;
 - Continue writing.
- August & September 2023
 - Residency at Skidmore College;
 - Email and/or phone/Zoom consultations with relevant scholarly personnel;
 - Finalize outline of the full work (sections and chapters);
 - Seek a publisher;
 - Continue writing.
- October 2023
 - Continued email and/or phone/Zoom consultations with relevant scholarly personnel;
 - Continue seeking a publisher;
 - Complete first third of the book.
- November 2023
 - Continued email and/or phone/Zoom consultations with relevant scholarly personnel;
 - Continue seeking a publisher;
 - Complete second third of the book.
- December 2023
 - Continue seeking a publisher;
 - Complete the book.

APPENDIX A

Relevant citations

Below is a list of empirical papers and book chapters I have published on subject matter germane to the work proposed in this sabbatical application.

Burke, B. L., **Kosloff, S.**, & Landau, M. (2013). Death goes to the polls: A meta-analysis of mortality salience effects on political attitudes. *Political Psychology*, 34(2), 183–200.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12005>

Goldenberg, J. L., **Kosloff, S.**, & Greenberg, J. (2006). Existential underpinnings of approach and avoidance of the physical body. *Motivation and Emotion*, 30(2), 127–134.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9023-z>

Greenberg, J., & **Kosloff, S.** (2008). Terror management theory: Implications for understanding prejudice, stereotyping, intergroup conflict, and political attitudes. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(5), 1881–1894. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00144.x>

Greenberg, J., **Kosloff, S.**, Solomon, S., Cohen, F., & Landau, M. J. (2010). Toward understanding the fame game: The effect of mortality salience on the appeal of fame. *Self and Identity*, 9(1), 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860802391546>

Greenberg, J., Landau, M. J., **Kosloff, S.**, Soenke, M., & Solomon, S. (2016). How our means for feeling transcendent of death foster prejudice, stereotyping, and intergroup conflict: Terror management theory. In T. Nelson (Ed.), *The handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination: Second edition* (pp. 107–148). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203361993-11>

Greenberg, J., Sullivan, D., **Kosloff, S.**, & Solomon, S. (2006). Souls do not live by cognitive inclinations alone, but by the desire to exist beyond death as well. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 29(5) 474–475. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X06359109>

Kosloff, S., Anderson, G., Nottbohm, A., & Hoshiko, B. (2019). Proximal and distal terror management defenses: A systematic review and analysis. In C. Routledge & M. Vess (Eds.), *Handbook of terror management theory* (pp. 31–63). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-811844-3.00002-0>

Kosloff, S. & Greenberg, J. (2009). Pearls in the desert: Death reminders provoke immediate derogation of extrinsic goals, but delayed inflation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(1), 197–203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.08.022>

Kosloff, S., Greenberg, J., Sullivan, D., & Weise, D. (2010). Of trophies and pillars: Exploring the terror management functions of short-term and long-term relationship partners. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(8), 1037–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0146167210374602>

Kosloff, S., Greenberg, J., Weise, D., & Solomon, S. (2010). Mortality salience and political preferences: The roles of charisma and political orientation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(1), 139–145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.09.002>

Kosloff, S., Landau, M. J., & Burke, B. (2016). Terror management and politics: Comparing and integrating the "conservative shift" and "political worldview defense" hypotheses. In L. A. Harvell & G. S. Nisbett (Eds.), *Denying death: An interdisciplinary approach to terror management theory* (pp. 28–46). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641393-3>

Kosloff, S., Landau, M. J., Sullivan, D., & Greenberg, J. (2008). A terror management perspective on the quiet ego and the loud ego: Implications of ego volume control for personal and social well-being. In H. A. Wayment & J. J. Bauer (Eds.), *Transcending self-interest: Psychological explorations of the quiet ego* (pp. 33–42). American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/11771-003>

Kosloff, S., Landau, M. J., Weise, D., & Greenberg, J. (2009). Eight years in the wake of 9/11: A terror management analysis of the psychological repercussions of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In M. J. Morgan (Ed.), *The impact of 9/11 on psychology and education* (pp. 7–22). Palgrave MacMillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230101593_2

Kosloff, S., Maxfield, M., & Solomon, S. (2014). Multimethod assessment of existential concerns: A terror management perspective. In B. Bornstein & C. Hopwood (Eds.), *Multimethod clinical assessment* (pp. 121–149). The Guilford Press. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-31892-004>

Kosloff, S., & Solomon, S. (2020). The paradox of faith: How existential concerns motivate both prosocial and antisocial religious behaviors. In K. E. Vail III & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The science of religion, spirituality, and existentialism* (pp. 435–454). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-817204-9.00031-7>

Kosloff, S., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., Cohen, F., Gershuny, B., Routledge, C., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). Fatal distraction: The impact of mortality salience on dissociative responses to 9/11 and subsequent anxiety sensitivity. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 28(4), 349–356. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_8

Landau, M. J., & Greenberg, J., & **Kosloff, S.** (2010). Coping with life's one certainty: A terror management perspective on the existentially uncertain self. In R. M. Arkin, K. C. Oleson, & P. J. Carroll (Eds.), *Handbook of the uncertain self* (pp. 195–215). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203848753>

Landau, M. J., **Kosloff, S.**, & Schmeichel, B. (2011). Imbuing everyday actions with meaning in response to existential threat. *Self and Identity*, 10(1), 64–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860903557243>

Martens, A., Greenberg, J., Schimel, J., **Kosloff, S.**, & Weise, D. R. (2010). Disdain for anxious individuals as a function of mortality salience. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(7), 1172–1183. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.707>

Maxfield, M., Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski T., Weise, D. R., **Kosloff, S.**, Soenke, M., et al. (2014). Increases in generative concern among older adults following reminders of mortality. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 79(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.2190/AG.79.1.a>

Solomon, S., & **Kosloff, S.** (2021). God is sometimes great! The glory and shame of religion. In D. Liechty (Ed.), *Facing up to mortality: Interfaith/interreligious explorations* (pp. 1–25). Lexington Books. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781793655424/Facing-Up-to-Mortality-Interfaith-Interreligious-Explorations>

Sullivan, D., **Kosloff, S.**, & Greenberg, J. (2013). A terror management perspective on the creation and defense of meaning. In J. A. Hicks & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The experience of meaning in life: Classical perspectives, emerging themes, and controversies* (pp. 17–30). Springer Science + Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_2

Vail, K. E., **Kosloff, S.**, Vess, M., & Ashish, D. (2012). Faith and finitude: Exhuming the death-denying function of religious belief (pp. 291–322). In P. McNamara & W. J. Wildman (Eds.), *Science and the world's religions*. Praeger Press. <https://www.abc-clio.com/products/A3161C/>

Weise, D., Pyszczynski, T., Cox, C., Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & **Kosloff, S.** (2008). Interpersonal politics: The role of terror management and attachment processes in shaping political preferences. *Psychological Science*, 19(5), 448–455. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02108.x>

APPENDIX B

Letter of intent to collaborate (from Dr. Sheldon Solomon)



September 22, 2022

RE: Sabbatical Proposal for Dr. Spee Kosloff

Dear Dr. Kosloff (Spee!),

This is to confirm that I (and the psychology department) would be delighted to have you in residence at Skidmore as part of your Fall 2023 sabbatical. I look forward to exchanging ideas as you write "Human Fragility and Cultural Transcendence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Foundations and Future of Our Social Existence," and you are most welcome to join the weekly meetings of our reading and research group in evolutionary/existential/positive psychology. During your stay at Skidmore you will have TLC 129 (Tisch Learning Center) for your office.

Sincerely,

Sheldon Solomon

Sheldon (Solomon)
Professor of Psychology