

INTRODUCTION: Does Anyone Need Death Education?

Since the 1960s in the United States there has been a death and dying movement. Central to this movement has been the claim that everyone needs death education. Many universities began offering courses on death. The movement has tried, with limited success, to have courses offered in secondary and elementary schools.

The reflections in this book have emerged out of the struggle to teach the young. For the past twenty years I have taught a course called The Meaning of Death to undergraduate students in a large urban university. The course is limited to fifty students who sign up in the first few days of registration. Throughout the years of this course I have remained ambivalent about teaching such a course. At the beginning I feared that the course might attract the suicidal, the morbid or perhaps students looking for an easy course. Almost never has that been the case. The students are among the best and brightest that I meet, and as psychologically balanced as any group of college students can be these days.

The young think of death as far away and, for the most part, they are right. I am always surprised, therefore, that at least some young people do wish to reflect on dying and the meaning of death. I have always been uneasy about the academic integrity of the course, starting with the presumptuous title that was not of my choosing: The Meaning of Death. I have to admit in the first class that I don't know the meaning. Perhaps meanings would be a better word in the title but the problem goes deeper, namely, whether death is the proper subject matter for a college course. It is cross listed in two schools and has had four departmental listings, which is indicative of its maverick nature. Because it is listed as a religion course, some students are religious studies majors who might come expecting the study of ancient sacred texts on death. Many other students who sign up for the course are indifferent or hostile to religion.

In the first years of the course I realized that the most common reason for a student choosing the course is that someone close to the student had recently died or is at present dying. The student may be looking for therapy more than for an academic course. I explain in the first class meeting that the course is not aimed at therapy but it will delve into any place and any medium that might help in our understanding of death. This casual transgression of academic disciplines does not seem to bother students but it does concern me. I do not think this approach is a good model for other courses. I use this grab bag approach because I do not know how else to get hold of death.

From this twenty years of experience I can see the value of a college course offered as an elective. As for requiring high school and elementary school students to study death and dying, I am skeptical. Advocates of death education say that the traditional college age is too late for beginning one's education in this area. That is true and I return below to the need to begin death education as early as possible. Before describing how to answer the need, however, are we certain about the need itself.

A New Need?

Is there a need for death education and, if so, is that something new? Has the world always needed it but failed to recognize the need until recently? I noted above that the movement seems to have emerged in the late 1960s. Is there any special significance to that date? Was this movement part of a package deal that saw all aspects of the culture and its education shaken up? Like other fads of that time it may have peaked long ago and now is the preserve of a few faithful followers. Or like other aspects of the 1960s, it might be a movement that is still gathering momentum. As it was in 1968 (or 1468) the fundamental issue is not going away. The death rate on earth is one hundred percent; one out of one dies

The question is whether this time and this place is in need of a particular change in education. Are there factors that have reshaped the fundamental idea of mortality, forcing us to face new questions about the universal experience of dying? Anyone can list both positive and horrific factors of the past century that have affected the human experience of dying. Whether or not that list essentially changes the experience of dying cannot be confidently asserted by anyone.

A common claim is that we need death education because the issue of death is hidden in contemporary culture. Is it true that individually and collectively people avoid the subject of death? At first glance, the claim seems wildly off the mark. Popular culture seems saturated with violence and killing, war and terrorism. Whether one watches the news or a drama on television, death is usually the lead story. The blockbuster movies that Hollywood sends around the world are most often technically brilliant but powerfully violent exercises concerned with death.

The person who claims that death is a taboo topic must either be oblivious of the surrounding cacophony or else is speaking paradoxically. I think that someone who says that the culture is silent on death is referring to the absence of reflection on one's personal mortality. That is, the reality of one's own death is seldom engaged or discussed. The culture does its best to hide from general view the sick and the dying. The constant portrayal of death on the movie or television screen can be interpreted as part of the evasion of real dying. Watching characters on a screen be blown away can lead to a belief that one is facing death while in fact the experience is a distancing of oneself from one's own mortality. Death is what happens to other people.

The claim is also made that the absence of reflection on dying is a recent development. Any clear comparison with the past on this point is hampered by the limitation of material from previous eras and our inability to know the experience of ordinary people from 5000 or even 500 years ago. We can try to construct a picture from materials such as funeral markings, religious rituals, popular poetry and diaries. We have the pronouncements of a few philosophers and religious leaders but the relation between their words and society at large is not clear.

Plato, as the first great philosopher in the West, is often cited as expressing the attitude of ancient thought concerning death. Plato put the case simply and starkly that philosophy is a meditation upon death.¹ He argues that those who philosophize aright study nothing but dying and being dead.² The trial and death of Socrates comes to us from Plato's writings. The attitude of Socrates to his dying undoubtedly shaped the outlook of his young disciple, Plato. The death of Socrates, along with the death of Jesus of Nazareth, became in the West the preeminent examples of how one's dying should be approached, namely, with clarity, courage and hope in a better life. Dying was what human life moved toward and therefore dying was what a human being constantly prepared for.

The philosophical marker that is often cited as a radical altering of this pattern is a seventeenth-century statement of Spinoza's. Directly contradicting Plato, Spinoza wrote that the free man thinks of nothing less than of death; his wisdom is a meditation not upon death but upon life.³ The statement, published in 1677, the year of Spinoza's own death, may be emblematic of a change that was in the air in seventeenth-century Europe and whose effects continued into the twentieth century. The focus of the new sciences shifted concern from death to life, a change that might be seen as healthy and hopeful. At a later date, however, some commentators have seen the move as a flight from death, a living in pretense. The modern affirmation of life is seen to be a denial of death.

If modernity is deeply committed to a denial of death, then the belief that the modern era is ending or has ended (Postmodernism⁴) could be tested by the resurfacing of death in dramatic ways. And the argument can be made that that is just what occurred throughout the twentieth century. Of course, what is modern continued to be celebrated in many quarters. For example, Harvey Cox's world-wide best seller in 1965, *The Secular City*, acclaimed the arrival of the modern in religion and, predictably, had almost nothing to say about death. The twentieth-century questioning of modernity arrived in the United States later than it did in Europe. Many of the most prominent philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century had direct experience of the particularly disillusioning war between 1914 and 1918. The devastating experience of that great war shows up in the work of many writers in the first half of the century.

The philosophical work often cited as signaling a turn from the theme of modern progress to one of acknowledging the stark reality of death is Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, published in 1927. Not only does death return, it becomes the defining element of human life (or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*). As soon as a human being is born, he is old enough to die right away.⁵ Although a man is a being toward death,⁶ this characteristic is not evident in most writing, Heidegger contends, because human beings do everything possible to avoid thinking about death.⁴

A similar theme emerged in the writing of Sigmund Freud, who like Heidegger, cast a shadow across the twentieth century. Freud, almost in spite of himself, eventually came to posit a death drive which struggles with the force of life and finally wins out. The

aim of all life is death, @Freud wrote, All living creatures strive to die; indeed death appears to be an object of desire.⁵ Thus in Heidegger, Freud and their descendants death returned with a vengeance, not as a gentle reminder or a fact of life but as an overwhelming power and obsessive concern.

The writings of Heidegger or Freud may have brought into the open the modern flight from death. It would be too much to claim that their work was the cause of the shift away from contentment with modern progress. A new prominence of death was no doubt the result of a confluence of scientific, political, aesthetic and cultural causes. I will comment on two of the most obvious and powerful causes of the emergence of death: war in an era of world-wide communication and medical technology in its fight against death.

Warfare has presumably always been a reminder of human mortality. It brings early death to masses of healthy young people. However, the scale of war has changed dramatically, beginning with the United States's Civil War in which over 600, 000 young men were killed. Offense had outstripped tactics of defense. That war was a prelude both to World War I and to civil wars in the late 1900s. Sandwiched between these later and earlier wars was the horror of World War II, including the Holocaust, and a half century of Cold@war in which the annihilation of hundreds of millions of people was coolly contemplated.

Large numbers of deaths can obscure rather than heighten awareness of an individual's dying. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, war came into the living room. Television became increasingly capable of instantaneous transmission of deadly combat. The rise of the death and dying movement coincided with the war in Vietnam, the first televised war. Television was sometimes accused of deadening people's sensitivity to war and killing. It probably did have that effect but it also had a cumulative effect: disgust and despair at the killing of over two million people in a war whose purpose was never clear. Since that war, the United States has often sent its military when the television cameras have shown great suffering. The United States has also tended to pull out its military when television pictures of dead U.S. soldiers bring pressure on the government.

World-wide communication is a force for spreading the ideals of justice, rights and democracy. The same media can be exploited in the service of killing for what is believed to be a noble cause. Dramatic killings can achieve disproportionate effect through television and the Internet. The bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001 killed fewer than three thousand people. That number would not rank it in the top thousand calamities of the twentieth century, let alone all human history. But people from around the world could view the dramatic unfolding of the event; several million people watched the incineration as it happened. A documentary film, that included footage from 118 amateur photographers, claimed that the bombing was the most documented event in history.⁶ Did this event change the perception of life and death in New York, the United States or the rest of the world? Some permanent effect is likely in

the lives of those who were close to the event. What it has done on any large scale to people's attitude to death will take decades to become clear.

The second major influence in the contemporary perception of death is the marvels of modern medicine and its attendant technology. The change here would seem to be for the good; human beings are able to live longer and to live more healthily. Until 1900, fewer than half of the people who entered hospitals returned alive. The physician's little black bag contained very little help in staving off death. Most deaths occurred in the home so that family members, including children, gained familiarity with death.

In the United States, however, the funeral industry had been founded in the mid-nineteenth century. Death became more isolated from ordinary life even as the claim was made that dying was more natural. Together with the rural cemetery, the new funeral profession tried to prettify death. But starting about 1880 new medicines and machines made dying a more complicated process watched over by the expert called a doctor.

The big leap in medical technology did not occur until the second half of the twentieth century. Fantastic feats of surgery and the use of wonder drugs transformed the care of the sick. New problems appeared in deciding when and how death happens. The fact that more than eighty percent of deaths in the United States occur in hospitals has the effect of removing death from the general public's awareness. Death is kept out of sight, if not out of mind. Today's diseases and the research information about those diseases can provide a person with knowledge that he or she has a month, six months or a year to live. If as Dr. Johnson said, getting hanged in a fortnight wonderfully concentrates the mind, then being told that one has liver cancer forces one to reflect upon one's own dying.

Not surprisingly, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* was published just as the revolution in health care had begun.⁷ Technology was extending people's lives and also the process of dying. There was now a population who were simply waiting to die. Kubler-Ross's study would have been inconceivable fifty years earlier. Published quietly by a small press, the book found a ready audience. It was on the best seller list for years and continues to be read today.

If death had been in the closet until the late 1960s, Kubler-Ross's book seemed to signal that death was now an in-topic. Philippe Aries, a maverick historian who had changed the perception of childhood, turned his attention to dying.⁸ Aries gave a series of lectures in 1973 on the theme that death is a taboo topic that no one writes on. When the published lectures appeared in 1974, the book was reviewed in the *New York Times* with a series of other books just published on death.⁹ That fact might indicate that the book's thesis was incorrect and that death was out in the open. Aries was not convinced. A sudden explosion of writing is not conclusive evidence that a topic is being thoughtfully examined in its proper context. In the decades that have followed there has been an increase in the number of books, especially textbooks, on death.

Dying in Education

A few years ago the ABC television program *20/20* did a segment on *Death Education*.¹⁰ The treatment of the topic revolved around a high school course that included a visit to the morgue, and an elementary school class's visit to a funeral home. Like many stories on television news magazines, this one had a shock appeal and was directed especially at parents. The commentator, Tom Jarrel, advised parents to find out if death education was being taught in their local school and, if so, whether the course was optional. All but one of the teachers interviewed on the program were patently unprepared to be teaching a course on death. A teacher shown to be using an unorthodox form of therapy said she had one day's training. A student who tried to commit suicide said that the course had made death seem desirable. Fourth graders required to touch a dead body showed fear and revulsion on their faces.

The television producers could have found more positive examples to give the program balance. Even with its bias, however, the program raised a serious question concerning what schools should do about the reality of death. What is appropriate for death education, where and when should it occur?

The people on the program repeatedly referred to *teaching death education*. They were using a standard phrase but one that obscures understanding. We cannot begin to explore how death belongs in education so long as *death education* is the name given to a course in school. That usage prevents any discussion of how dying should be included in education from infancy to old age, and within the family, school and other institutions. Logically, the only people who teach death education are those who teach the teachers of dying and death.

Education in regard to death has two kinds of teaching: 1) teaching someone how to die 2) teaching someone how to understand death. At the beginning of a course on death, I acknowledge that the first of these two kinds of teaching is the more important, but I cannot do that in a classroom. Someone else has to teach them how to die. The small but important job that the classroom can do is provide a language for people to understand death.

Teaching People How To Die

Teaching is showing someone how to do something. Most teaching in the world is nonverbal. Starting in childhood and continuing throughout our lives, the examples of fellow human beings shape our own attitudes and lay out a path for us. The teaching may have begun with the death of a parent or a grandparent or the death of a public figure. By middle age, everyone has been taught how to die by a parent, a relative or a friend. Quiet influence is especially the case when it comes to the dying as teachers. Often unwittingly, the dying person becomes a powerful teacher. In the play, *Wit*, the professor who is dying of cancer discovers that she has become a different and perhaps

more effective teacher than she was in the classroom.

Not surprisingly, two of the best known contemporary works on death begin with the respective authors acknowledging the dying patients as the teachers. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross writes in the Preface of *On Death and Dying*: "We have asked him [the patient] to be our teacher so that we may learn more about the final stages of life."¹ Similarly, Sherwin Nuland, at the beginning of *How We Die*, writes: "Even when I had no idea I was learning from one another of the vast number of men and women whose lives have entered mine, they were nevertheless teaching me, usually with equal unawareness of the gift they were bestowing."²

We learn how to die because we are taught how to die. Not everyone is a ready learner and many people disregard the lessons that are all about them and within their own bodies. When one is young it is easy to dismiss much of the teaching; other people die but surely one's own death is not imminent. Some children, teenagers and young adults do have to be fast learners because of their surroundings or their own ill health. In middle age and old age, suffering is a powerful teacher. The infirmities of age as a premonition of death stimulate reflection on one's own mortality. Erasmus said that his kidney stone was his great teacher, "That is our philosophy, that is the true meditation on death."³

Practically every religious tradition has recognized that to teach someone how to live includes teaching him or her how to die. And since dying is such a difficult part of life, a part we might like to deny or hide, dying is one of the first things taught, usually in the form of ritual.¹⁴ Birth is a form of death to a previous intra-uterine life so that the infant already has some experience of dying on which to build an education. Infancy for humans is a dependent and fragile existence. A concept of death is not present but an infant survives with a sense of the precariousness of life.

Young children cannot and should not be shielded from some encounter with death. Philippe Aries, in his study of deathbed scenes, found that until two centuries ago the pictures always included children.¹⁵ Then adults began to shield children from all direct knowledge of death. The intention was to preserve the child's innocence and so was born a separate part of life called childhood. The creation of some of the protections of childhood was not all bad. Children should not have to be overwhelmed by life's complexities and horrors. But dying is an unavoidable aspect of life. Trying to cut off the child from encountering death requires a truncated sense of life and the effort is bound to fail. The task for adults, especially parents, is to allow death its place in ways that do not terrify or overwhelm.

Many small children experience the death of a pet animal. The occasion is a teachable moment in the child's short life. The child should be allowed to recognize and accept what has happened. Adults need do little explaining, although a funeral ritual is often helpful. What parents should not do is rush in a replacement cat, dog or goldfish in the attempt to deny that any serious change has occurred. A child grieving for a time

over a departed animal is not unhealthy.¹⁶

A more serious experience that is common for children is the death of a grandparent or another relative. Most likely the death occurs in a hospital or nursing home where children are not often found. Among religious and ethnic groups for whom viewing the body is standard practice, the question of the child's presence is always raised. If children are brought to a funeral home, they should be carefully prepared beforehand as to exactly what they will see, hear and touch. When possible, a child should be brought to view the body before other people arrive. When children ask challenging questions, as they do, the answers should be as simple and truthful as possible. If the child wants to know where grandma has gone, the adult should formulate an answer in terms that make sense within the family's tradition.¹⁷

Less directly but surely, every child meets death in stories, movies, television programs and in the daily events of the local setting or the world news. Children do not shy away from stories about death. Fairy tales, the secret literature of childhood, are filled with stories of violence and death. Not every story is appropriate for every child. Exposure to too much mayhem, whether fictional or real, is not good for children. The issue is always restraint and guidance on the part of adults so that death is kept in perspective and one's emotional response is proportionate to the occasion. A child absorbs the adult's attitude to death, the effect of which is greater than any explanations.

Teaching People To Understand Death

The reason why courses in school are called *death education* is the assumption that unless something is taught in school it is not part of one's education. If confronted with that proposition, most professional educators will say that they recognize teaching and learning beyond the schoolroom. However, that is not the way they ordinarily speak. Teaching is assumed to be telling things to children; teachers are assumed to be people who work in classrooms. Any other use of language is considered an extension of the primary meanings of teaching and teacher.

Death is one of several important issues that does not fit easily into school curricula. Its most obvious relative is sex which for more than a century has been a contentious issue in schools.¹⁸ Advocates of death education sound similar to enthusiasts of sex education: the ignorance of students and the negative attitudes in the culture require schools at every level to offer courses that will shape positive student attitudes. The urgency of the situation demands aggressive techniques to reverse prior beliefs and attitudes. The earlier that students are exposed to sex education and death education the more likely they are to develop positive attitudes to sex and death.

Why do schools talk about *teaching sex education* and *teaching death education*? Why is *education* part of the course name? Subjects that are secure in school curricula have recognizable names such as physics, mathematics or history. Often the

curriculum name includes the idea of study or discussion: biology, psychology, sociology; the course teaches a language to study life, soul, society or dozens of other subject areas. When something does not fit into the curriculum, the term "Education" is often attached (driver education, physical education, sex education, drug education, moral education, religious education). It is a kind of overstatement to shore up support but actually stirs up doubts about academic integrity. It also subverts the classroom's genuine contribution to education in an area that the school does not and cannot control.

. In many countries religious education and moral education are curricular subjects. Parents may be hoping that the students are learning morality and (their own) religion, but the schools shy away from claiming to teach religion or morality. In such curriculum areas, schools worry about remaining "Objective" so they introduce a second layer of abstraction: they teach "Amoral (or religious) education." "Morality" and "Religion" are already abstract and objective terms; teaching religion is not the same as teaching Christianity, teaching Lutheranism or teaching baptism. Nonetheless, for many people "Religion" still suggests a subjective attitude. In contrast, teaching religious education, moral education or sex education allows the denial that a teacher is imposing any actual view of religion, morality or sex. The parent may know what morality is but the school knows what moral education is. The risk in this second level of abstraction is that the subject matter becomes abstruse technicalities that hide but do not replace whatever biases inevitably operate in the lives of curriculum makers and classroom instructors.

Dying, as the most extreme subject matter, might throw light on this important educational issue. If one can deal with death in education, other things might fall into place. Conversely, the controversies surrounding sex education or moral education might suggest which paths to follow and which mistakes to avoid in trying to include death in education. Professional educators have tried to replace the term sex education (for example, with sexuality education) but "sex education" has retained a popular hold. The term "sexology" might be appropriate as a curriculum name but it has not had much success.

Death, in contrast, does have an academic name, thanatology, meaning the study of death. Although many people would assume that the term thanatology is an invention of the 1960s, it was coined in the mid-nineteenth century slightly before the term "sociology." Any aspect of existence can be a legitimate classroom topic if there has developed a language for discussion and methods of research in that area. When a sufficiently large body of literature exists, the subject can be taught and learned in a classroom setting. Despite the fuzziness of its method, thanatology is something taught in the university, something in which one can get a degree.

Just as psychology or anthropology are not courses taught in elementary school, so also it does not seem that thanatology is a fit candidate. There is need for elementary school teachers to know psychology and there are psychological questions raised by

young children. Those psychological questions are best addressed in the particular contexts in which they arise. Similarly, one can hope that any teacher of the young would have engaged the reality of death and reflected upon various aspects of human mortality. Questions about death can arise in just about every school course imaginable. The questions ought to be answered as candidly and as truthfully as possible. On matters of sex, death, or religion, children often simply wish to hear an adult speak without embarrassment, evasion or smugness.

The classroom is a place for a peculiar kind of conversation about things one already knows. While the library and the Internet are chief sources of information, the classroom is a place to question the information, to challenge biases and to sharpen needed distinctions. By crossing the threshold of a classroom the student agrees to nothing less and nothing more than to put his or her words on the table for examination. The student should already know how to read, speak and write; the classroom is for learning how to read, speak and write better. One person may do most of the talking but the form of speech should always be dialogical: posing questions, provoking thought, inviting replies. The restrictions of a school course should generally exclude requiring students to do such things as to visit a morgue or a funeral home.

While it is the case that *the* truth about death will not be achieved, the same can be said about much else in life. If things continue to be said about one of life's important aspects, classrooms should provide that the speech does not sink into banal clichés and that the conversationalists are not oblivious of helpful sources. Anyone who speaks on death has to know when to be reticent; at all times he or she has to exercise humility. The person with strong religious convictions needs to show some restraint in claiming to know exactly what happens at death. The same principle applies to people who are absolutely certain that nothing follows death. A dose of agnosticism (Not know) would be helpful for all parties. The fact that no scientific proof is available does not make continuing inquiry useless. Rather, it raises interesting questions about the nature of evidence, belief and choice as applied to death and much else.

The result of taking a course on thanatology is not that one solves the mystery or riddle of death. By confronting the worst that life offers one is relieved of the burden of always hiding the truth and avoiding reality. Strangely enough, a course on death is less likely to bring on morbidity than joy. It is a chastised joy, to be sure, when one opens her or his eyes to suffering and death but the joy is genuinely concerned with life.

Colleagues jokingly ask me why I do not teach a course called The Meaning of Life rather than one with the title The Meaning of Death. My response is that a course on the meaning of death is a focused way to ask the meaning of life. A course on the meaning of death ought to be able to avoid the psychological gimmicks that are offered on all sides as the solution to a happy and successful life. As William James warned, 'The skull will grin at the banquet table unless human beings admit the unwanted guest and provide it with its proper place.'¹⁹

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1. Plato, *Phaedo*, 64.
 2. Spinoza, *Ethics*, (London: Dent, 1986), iv, 67.
 3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 228.
 4. *Ibid.* 236-46.
 5. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1920).
 6. The HBO film *9/11*, first shown on May 26, 2002.
 7. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).
 8. His book on the history of childhood is *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
 9. *Western Attitudes to Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
 10. The program was broadcast on Sept. 21, 1994.
 11. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, Preface.
 12. Sherwin Nuland, *How We Die*, (New York: Knopf, 1994), Acknowledgments
 13. Erasmus quoted in Philippe Aries, *Hour of Our Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 298).
 14. Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).
 15. Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, 536-38.
 16. James Quackenbush and Lawrence Glickman, Helping Adjust to the Death of a Pet, *Health and Social Work*, 9(1984), 42-48.
 17. On this question, see Daniel Schaefer, *How Do We Tell the Children* (New York: New Market Press, 1988).
 18. Jeffrey Moran, *Teaching Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
 19. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958,