

LYNNE ANN DESPELDER  ALBERT LEE STRICKLAND



Eleventh Edition

THE *Last Dance*

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ENCOUNTERING
DEATH & DYING

The Last Dance

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ELEVENTH EDITION

Encountering Death and Dying

LYNNE ANN DESPELDER

Cabrillo College

ALBERT LEE STRICKLAND

**Mc
Graw
Hill**
Education



THE LAST DANCE: ENCOUNTERING DEATH AND DYING, ELEVENTH EDITION

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In memory of
Coleen DeSpelder
who lived with lightness
through the shadows of terminal illness
April 2, 1954—May 17, 2001

and to our parents

Bruce Erwin DeSpelder
and
Dorothy Roediger DeSpelder

Luther Leander Strickland
and
Bertha Wittenburg Strickland

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Brief Contents

Preface xxi

CHAPTER 1: Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change 3

CHAPTER 2: Learning About Death: Socialization 51

CHAPTER 3: Perspectives on Death: Historical and Cultural 91

CHAPTER 4: Death Systems: Mortality and Society 141

CHAPTER 5: Health Care: Patients, Staff, and Institutions 175

CHAPTER 6: End-of-Life Issues and Decisions 215

CHAPTER 7: Facing Death: Living with Life-Threatening Illness 259

CHAPTER 8: Last Rites: Funerals and Body Disposition 295

CHAPTER 9: Survivors: Understanding the Experience of Loss 335

CHAPTER 10: Death in the Lives of Children and Adolescents 379

CHAPTER 11: Death in the Lives of Adults 405

CHAPTER 12: Suicide 435

CHAPTER 13: Risks, Perils, and Traumatic Death 473

CHAPTER 14: Beyond Death / After Life 515

CHAPTER 15: The Path Ahead: Personal and Social Choices 553

Name Index 577

Subject Index 589

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Contents

Preface xxi

CHAPTER 1

Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change 3

Expressions of Attitudes Toward Death	4
Mass Media	4
In the News	4
Entertaining Death	6
Language	7
Music	10
Literature	12
Visual Arts	15
Humor	18
Living with Awareness of Death	20
Contemplating Mortality	21
Dimensions of Thanatology	21
Death Anxiety and Fear of Death	22
Terror Management	24
Studying Death and Dying	25
The Rise of Death Education	25
Pioneers in Death Studies	26
Factors Affecting Familiarity with Death	28
Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates	29
Causes of Death	32
Geographic Mobility and Intergenerational Contact	33
Life-Extending Technologies	34
The Internet and the Digital Age	35
Examining Assumptions	37
Death in a Cosmopolitan Society	37
Exploring Your Own Losses and Attitudes	39
Further Readings	40
Notes	40

CHAPTER 2

Learning About Death: Socialization 51

A Child's Reasoning	52	
A Mature Concept of Death	53	
Understanding Death Through the Life Course		55
Infancy and Toddlerhood	58	
Early Childhood	60	
Middle Childhood or School-Age Period		61
Adolescence	62	
Emerging Adulthood	64	
Early Adulthood	65	
Middle Adulthood	65	
Later Adulthood	65	
The Evolution of a Mature Concept of Death		66
Agents of Socialization	67	
Family	68	
School and Peers	69	
Mass Media and Children's Literature		69
Religion	72	
Teachable Moments	73	
The Death of a Companion Animal		74
The Mature Concept of Death Revisited		77
Further Readings	83	
Notes	83	

CHAPTER 3

Perspectives on Death: Historical and Cultural 91

Traditional Cultures	94	
Origin of Death	94	
Names of the Dead	96	
Causes of Death	96	
Power of the Dead	97	
Western Culture	99	
The Deathbed Scene	100	
Burial Customs	101	
Charnel Houses	102	
Memorializing the Dead		102
The Dance of Death	104	

Death Masks	105	
Invisible Death?	108	
Cultural Viewpoints	108	
People of Native American Heritage		108
People of African Heritage	111	
The LoDagaa of Northern Ghana		113
Traditions Among African Americans		114
People of Hispanic Heritage	115	
Attitudes Toward Death in Mexico		115
Dia de los Muertos	116	
People of Asian Heritage	119	
Paper Offerings	123	
Ch'ing ming and O-bon Festivals		124
People of Jewish Heritage	124	
People of Celtic Heritage	124	
People of Arab Heritage	126	
People of Oceanian Heritage	127	
Mixed Plate: Cultural Diversity in Hawaii		127
Characteristics of Hawaii's Peoples		128
Death and Local Identity	129	
Death in Contemporary Multicultural Societies		130
Further Readings	130	
Notes	131	

CHAPTER 4

Death Systems: Mortality and Society 141

Certification of Death	142	
The Coroner and the Medical Examiner		143
Autopsies	146	
Assessing Homicide	148	
Capital Punishment	151	
Defining Death	152	
Conventional Signs of Death and New Technology		153
Conceptual and Empirical Criteria	155	
Four Approaches to the Definition and Determination of Death		156
Irreversible Loss of Flow of Vital Fluids	156	
Irreversible Loss of the Soul from the Body	157	
Irreversible Loss of the Capacity for Bodily Integration		157
Irreversible Loss of the Capacity for Consciousness or Social Interaction	159	
The Uniform Determination of Death Act		160

Organ Transplantation and Organ Donation	163
Medical Ethics: A Cross-Cultural Example	166
The Impact of the Death System	168
Further Readings	168
Notes	168

CHAPTER 5

Health Care: Patients, Staff, and Institutions 175

Modern Health Care	176
Health Care Financing	178
Rationing Scarce Resources	179
The Caregiver-Patient Relationship	180
Disclosing a Life-Threatening Diagnosis	181
Achieving Clear Communication	182
Providing Total Care	184
Care of the Dying	184
Hospice and Palliative Care	185
The Origins of Hospice and Palliative Care	189
Challenges for Hospice and Palliative Care	190
The Future of Hospice and Palliative Care	192
Home Care	193
Social Support	195
Elder Care	195
Trauma and Emergency Care	197
Death Notification	200
Caregiver Stress and Compassion Fatigue	201
A Changing Health Care System	204
Further Readings	205
Notes	205

CHAPTER 6

End-of-Life Issues and Decisions 215

Principles of Medical Ethics	216
Informed Consent to Treatment	217
Principles of Informed Consent	217
Preferences Regarding Informed Consent	219

Choosing Death	221	
Withholding or Withdrawing Treatment		225
Physician-Assisted Death	226	
The Rule of Double Effect	227	
Euthanasia	228	
Palliative Care and the Right to Die		228
Nutrition and Hydration	229	
Seriously Ill Newborns	230	
Advance Directives	232	
Using Advance Directives	236	
Advance Directives and Emergency Care		238
Inheritance: Wills, Probate, and Living Trusts		239
Wills	240	
The Formally Executed Will	243	
Amending or Revoking a Will	244	
Probate	245	
The Duties of the Executor or Administrator		245
Laws of Intestate Succession	247	
Living Trusts	247	
Insurance and Death Benefits	248	
Considering End-of-Life Issues and Decisions		250
Further Readings	251	
Notes	251	

CHAPTER 7

<i>Facing Death: Living with Life-Threatening Illness</i>		259
Personal and Social Meanings of Life-Threatening Illness		261
Coping with Life-Threatening Illness	262	
Awareness of Dying	262	
Adapting to “Living-Dying”	263	
Patterns of Coping	265	
Maintaining Coping Potency	267	
Treatment Options and Issues	268	
Surgery	270	
Radiation Therapy	271	
Chemotherapy	272	
Alternative Therapies	272	
The Placebo Effect	276	
Unorthodox Treatment and Common Sense		276

Pain Management	278	
The Language of Pain	278	
Treating Pain	279	
The Dying Trajectory	280	
The Social Role of the Dying Patient		283
Being with Someone Who is Dying		286
Further Readings	287	
Notes	287	

CHAPTER 8

Last Rites: Funerals and Body Disposition 295

Psychosocial Aspects of Last Rites	298	
Announcement of Death	298	
Mutual Support	299	
Impetus for Coping with Loss	301	
Funerals in the United States	302	
The Rise of Professional Funeral Services		303
Criticisms of Funeral Practices	305	
New and Rediscovered Memorial Choices		307
Selecting Funeral Services	309	
Funeral Service Charges	310	
Comparing the Costs	311	
Professional Services	311	
Embalming	312	
Caskets	314	
Outer Burial Containers	315	
Facilities and Vehicles	315	
Miscellaneous Charges	316	
Direct Cremations and Immediate Burials		316
Funeral and Memorial Societies	316	
Body Disposition	317	
Burial	319	
Cremation	321	
Memorialization	322	
Laws Regulating Body Disposition		323
New Directions in Funerals and Body Disposition		324
Remembrance Rituals and Linking Objects		326
Making Meaningful Choices	327	
Further Readings	329	
Notes	329	

Survivors: Understanding the Experience of Loss

335

Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning	336
Tasks of Grief	339
Models of Grief	340
Working Through Grief	341
Continuing Bonds with the Deceased	342
Telling the “Story”: Narrative Reconstruction	343
The Dual Process Model of Coping	344
The Two-Track Model of Bereavement	345
Toward an Integrated Model of Grief	346
The Experience of Grief	347
Mental Versus Emotional Responses	347
The Course of Grief	347
The Duration of Grief	350
Complications of Grief	351
The Mortality of Bereavement	352
Variables Influencing Grief	354
Survivor’s Model of the World	354
Personality	354
Cultural Context and Social Roles	355
Perceived Relationship with the Deceased	355
Values and Beliefs	356
Coping Patterns and Gender	356
Mode of Death	358
Anticipated Death	359
Sudden Death	359
Suicide	360
Homicide	360
Disaster	361
Multiple Losses and Bereavement Burnout	361
Social Support and Disenfranchised Grief	362
Unfinished Business	363
Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy	364
Support for the Bereaved	366
Bereavement as an Opportunity for Growth	368
Further Readings	369
Notes	369

CHAPTER 10

Death in the Lives of Children and Adolescents 379

Experiences with Death	381
Children as Survivors of a Close Death	382
The Bereaved Child's Experience of Grief	382
The Death of a Parent	383
The Death of a Sibling	385
Children with Life-Threatening Illnesses	387
The Child's Perception of Serious Illness	388
The Child's Coping Mechanisms	389
Providing and Organizing Care	390
Pediatric Hospice and Palliative Care	391
Decisions About Medical Treatment	391
Caring for a Seriously Ill Child	393
Support Groups for Children	393
Helping Children Cope with Change and Loss	395
Discussing Death Before a Crisis Occurs	395
Discussions When a Family Member Is Seriously Ill	396
Discussions in the Aftermath of Loss	397
Further Readings	399
Notes	400

CHAPTER 11

Death in the Lives of Adults 405

Death and the College Student	406
The Death of a Friend	407
The Death of a Parent	408
Parental Bereavement	409
Childbearing Losses	410
Miscarriage	411
Induced Abortion	412
Stillbirth	413
Neonatal Death	414
Sudden Infant Death Syndrome	415
Grief for "Unlived" Lives	416
The Death of an Older Child	417
The Death of an Adult Child	418
Coping with Bereavement as a Couple	419
Social Support in Parental Bereavement	420

Spousal Bereavement	420	
Factors Influencing Spousal Bereavement		421
Social Support for Bereaved Spouses		423
Aging and the Aged	424	
Further Readings	428	
Notes	429	

CHAPTER 12

Suicide 435

Comprehending Suicide	436	
Statistical Issues	437	
The Psychological Autopsy	438	
Explanatory Theories of Suicide	440	
The Social Context of Suicide	440	
Degree of Social Integration	440	
Degree of Social Regulation	442	
Psychoanalytic Insights About Suicide	442	
Toward an Integrated Understanding of Suicide		443
Some Types of Suicide	445	
Suicide as Escape	445	
Cry for Help	448	
Subintentioned and Chronic Suicide		449
Risk Factors Influencing Suicide	449	
Culture	450	
Personality	452	
The Individual Situation	452	
Life-Span Perspectives on Suicide	454	
Childhood	454	
Adolescence and Early Adulthood		455
Middle Adulthood	458	
Late Adulthood	458	
Contemplating Suicide	458	
Suicide Notes	460	
Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention		461
Prevention	462	
Intervention	462	
Postvention	463	
Helping a Person Who Is in Suicidal Crisis		463
Further Readings	466	
Notes	466	

CHAPTER 13

Risks, Perils, and Traumatic Death

473

Accidents and Injuries	474
Risk Taking	475
Disasters	477
Reducing the Impact of Disasters	480
Coping with the Aftermath of Disaster	481
Violence	483
Random Violence	484
Serial Killers and Mass Murderers	484
Familiicide	485
Steps Toward Reducing Violence	486
War	487
Technological Alienation	488
The Conversion of the Warrior	489
Coping with the Aftermath of War	491
Making War, Making Peace	493
Genocide	495
Terrorism	496
September 11, 2001	497
Rescue, Recovery, and Mourning	498
The Mind of the Terrorist	499
Horrendous Death	500
Emerging Infectious Diseases	501
The Response to AIDS	502
Living with AIDS	503
The Threat of Emerging Diseases	503
Traumatic Death	505
Further Readings	505
Notes	506

CHAPTER 14

Beyond Death / After Life

515

Traditional Concepts About Life After Death	516
Jewish Beliefs About Death and Resurrection	517
Classical Greek Concepts of Immortality	519

Christian Beliefs About the Afterlife	521
The Afterlife in Islamic Tradition	523
Death and Immortality in Asian Religions	524
Hindu Teachings About Death and Rebirth	525
The Buddhist Understanding of Death	527
After-Death States in Tibetan Buddhism	530
The Consolations of Religion	531
Secular Concepts of Immortality	532
Near-Death Experiences: At the Threshold of Death	534
NDEs: A Composite Picture	535
Dimensions of Near-Death Experiences	536
Interpreting Near-Death Experiences	537
Death Themes in Dreams and Psychedelic Experiences	541
Beliefs About Death: A Wall or a Door?	542
Further Readings	543
Notes	544

CHAPTER 15

The Path Ahead: Personal and Social Choices 553

Exploring Death and Dying	554
Cultural Competence	556
New Directions in Thanatology	558
Gaining a Global Perspective	559
Bridging Research and Practice	561
Creating Compassionate Cities	562
Living with Death and Dying	564
Humanizing Death and Dying	564
Defining the Good Death	565
Death in the Future	569
Postscript and Farewell	572
Further Readings	572
Notes	572

Name Index 577

Subject Index 589

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Preface

In *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, we offer a comprehensive and readable introduction to the study of death and dying, one that highlights the main issues and questions. The study of death—or thanatology, from the Greek *thanatos*, meaning “death”—is concerned with questions rooted at the core of our experience. Thus, the person who sets out to increase his or her knowledge of death and dying is embarking on an exploration that is partly a journey of personal discovery. This is a journey that has both cognitive (intellectual) and affective (emotional) components. Thus, *The Last Dance* embodies an approach to the study of death and dying that combines the intellectual and the emotional, the social and the psychological, the experiential and the scholarly.

The title *The Last Dance* relates to a book written by Carlos Castaneda about the warriors of the Yaqui Indian tribe in Central America. Because a warrior can die on any day, the warrior makes a dance of power in the face of death. Castaneda says that, to truly live, we must keep death over our left shoulder. In other words, death is part of life and, because we can die at any time, we should be dancing through life.

The painting on the cover, *The Dance of Life*, by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, evokes thoughts of the inexorable, compelling cycle of life. It depicts a festival dance on the Åsgårdstrand beach on a midsummer night. An indifferent moon sheds light on the water while the dancers dance a roundel, a ring dance. One woman is entering the dance, another is leaving. There is youth, innocent new life, and age.

We are sometimes asked how we came to write a college textbook on death and dying. Lynne says, “It’s as simple as the realization that students hated buying the many books needed for studying all of the topics important to learning about death and dying. And I hated having to assign all those books. One day at the start of a new semester, after getting the usual complaints from students, I whined to Al, ‘Why isn’t there just *one* book that a student could pick up and put under his or her arm that would cover all of these topics?’ Al’s response was, ‘Well, why don’t we write one?’”

So, some years ago, after five years dedicated to research and writing, *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying* was born. Each subsequent edition reflects the changes and transformations that have occurred in the field of death studies. This book provides a solid grounding in theory and research as well as in methods for applying what is learned to readers’ own circumstances, both personal and professional. It encourages a constructive process of self-discovery. *The Last Dance* is not an indoctrination to any particular point of view but, rather, an introduction to diverse points

of view. The values of compassion, listening, and tolerance for the views of others are emphasized. Readers may form their own opinions, but when they do we hope it is only after considering other possibilities in a spirit of open-mindedness. Unbiased investigation leads to choices that might otherwise be neglected or overlooked.

While retaining the popular features of earlier editions, this new edition of *The Last Dance* reflects the ongoing evolution of death studies. Although people sometimes think, “What changes about death?” the truth revealed in these pages is that much has changed in recent decades and continues to change in the present. Because of this fact, every chapter has been revised to integrate the latest research, practices, and ideas and to enhance clarity of presentation.

Throughout the text, we give attention to the ways cultural and ethnic viewpoints shape our relationship with death, and there is specific discussion of the viewpoints and traditions associated with people of African heritage, Hispanic heritage, Native American heritage, Jewish heritage, Celtic heritage, Arab heritage, Oceanian heritage, and Asian heritage, including the diverse cultures of Southeast Asia as well as the cultures of India, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. In the pages of *The Last Dance*, you will also find coverage of

- Ongoing developments in care of the seriously ill and dying, especially as they pertain to hospice and palliative care
- Death through the life course, from infancy through later adulthood, including a section on death and the college student
- New directions in mortuary services, including personalized funerals, “green burials,” and innovative options for body disposition and memorialization
- A changing health care system and its impact on dying and death
- How the Internet and social media are influencing our relationship to death, dying, and bereavement in the digital age
- Insights about grief gained through an appreciation of the dual process and two-track models of coping with bereavement, as well as other models that can aid in understanding bereavement, grief, and mourning, including discussion of working through grief, maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased, and “telling the story” or narrative approaches to coping with grief
- How achieving the “Care-Full Society” and striving toward the creation of “compassionate cities” could improve and enhance our encounters with death

In addition, this edition contains new and updated material on organ donation, grieving through social media, AIDS, physician-assisted death, use of opioids and medicinal marijuana in pain management, and school shootings and mass killings. Throughout this edition, there are updated statistics and changes reflecting new *DSM-5* information.

The study of death is unavoidably multidisciplinary. Accordingly, contributions from medicine, the humanities, and the social sciences are all found here in their relevant contexts. Throughout the book, principles and concepts are made meaningful by use of examples and anecdotes. Boxed material, photographs, and other illustrative materials expand upon and provide counterpoint to the textual presentation. Specialized terms, when needed, are clearly defined. We also urge readers to make use of the online resources described in the “Connect” section.

Chapter-by-Chapter Tour

Before you begin using *The Last Dance*, please join us for a quick tour through the text.

- In Chapter 1, we look at expressions of attitudes toward death in mass media, language, music, literature, and the visual arts. We ask what it means to live with an awareness of death, and we explore death anxiety, or fear of death. We conclude by examining the reasons people tend to be unfamiliar with death in modern, cosmopolitan societies.
- In Chapter 2, we investigate how we learn about death throughout the life course.
- In Chapter 3, we explore historical and cultural factors that shape attitudes and practices relative to dying and death.
- Chapter 4 shows how public policy affects our dealings with dying and death by means of a society's "death systems." Certification of death, the role of coroners and medical examiners, the functions of autopsies, procedures for legally defining and making a determination of death, medicolegal views of homicide and capital punishment, and rules regarding organ donation and transplantation are important aspects of the death system. An instructive cross-cultural example describing how Japan has dealt with ethical, moral, and legal questions involving brain death and organ transplantation wraps up this discussion.
- Care of dying persons is the primary focus of Chapter 5. Topics include health care financing; rationing of health resources; the relationship between caregivers and the patient; hospice, palliative care, and home care; elder care; trauma and emergency care; death notification procedures; and caregiver stress and compassion fatigue.
- Chapter 6 deals with a variety of issues and decisions that pertain to the end of life. Some of these issues and decisions become important in the context of diagnosis and treatment—for example, informed consent. Others come to the fore when individuals face a more immediate prospect of dying. These include choices about withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining medical treatment, physician-assisted death, and euthanasia, as well as issues involving artificial nutrition and hydration. Also discussed is the rule of double effect, which may be invoked when a medical intervention that is intended to relieve suffering leads to death. Some issues regarding the end of life can be dealt with before the crisis of a life-limiting illness—for example, making a will, setting up a living trust, obtaining life insurance, and completing advance directives to express wishes about medical treatment in the event one becomes incapacitated.
- Chapter 7, with its focus on how people live with a life-threatening illness, gives attention to the psychological and social meanings associated with such illnesses and offers insight about the ways individuals and families cope with "living-dying," from the time of initial diagnosis to the final stages of the dying trajectory. Discussion includes treatment options and issues, as well as pain management and complementary therapies. The chapter concludes with sections on the social role of the dying patient and advice about being with someone who is dying.
- The ceremonies and rituals enacted by individuals and social groups after a death form the content of Chapter 8. Death rites and customs create opportunities for

expressing grief and integrating loss. This chapter examines the nature and function of last rites, with particular attention to the history of mortuary services in the United States. Information about the options for funeral services and body disposition, as well as a discussion about making meaningful choices, completes the chapter.

- Chapter 9 is devoted to helping readers gain a comprehensive understanding of bereavement, grief, and mourning. A number of important models of grief are discussed, with the recognition that any notion that “one size fits all” is likely to be inadequate. An understanding of the ways people experience and express grief, and of the variables that influence grief, demonstrates that there are many ways to cope with grief and to provide support to the bereaved. The concluding section shows that, despite loss, bereavement can present opportunities for growth.
- Employing a life-span perspective, Chapters 10 and 11 deal with death-related issues associated with different stages of life, from early childhood through old age.
- Chapter 10 includes discussion of children with life-threatening illness and discussion of children as survivors of a close death. It provides guidelines for helping children cope with change and loss.
- Chapter 11 examines losses occurring in adulthood, such as miscarriage, still-birth, and neonatal death, and the death of a child, a parent, a spouse, or a close friend, as well as losses associated with aging.
- Chapter 12 offers insights into suicide and its risk factors, including the social and psychological context of suicide and suicidal behavior; life-span perspectives on suicide; psychological autopsies; suicide notes; and suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. The chapter concludes with advice about helping someone who is in a suicidal crisis.
- Chapter 13 broadens the scope of death-related risks and threats. These include accidents and injuries, disasters, violence, war, genocide, terrorism, emerging diseases, and other examples of horrendous and traumatic death.
- Questions about human mortality and its meaning are at the forefront in the final two chapters of the book. Chapter 14 describes a variety of both religious and secular viewpoints, as well as accounts of near-death experiences, to present a survey of concepts and beliefs concerning immortality and the afterlife. Whether death is viewed as a “wall” or as a “door” can have important consequences for how we live our lives.
- Chapter 15 emphasizes personal and social values that are enhanced by learning about death. Examples of new directions in thanatology include efforts to increase the interaction between research and practice, clarify the goals of death education, gain an international perspective, and create compassionate cities, as well as to improve cultural competence. What does it mean to live with death and dying? Bringing together a host of topics covered in earlier chapters, this final chapter presents food for thought that can stimulate consideration of how a “good death” might be defined.

For those who wish to pursue further study of particular topics, a list of recommended readings is provided at the end of each chapter, and citations given in the

chapter notes provide guidance to additional sources and references. Thus, while the text serves as an introduction to a broad range of topics in death studies, readers are pointed to resources for investigating topics that evoke special interest.



This edition is available online with Connect, McGraw-Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform. Connect also offers SmartBook for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. Ancillary content for *The Last Dance* is also available through Connect and through www.mhhe.com/despelder11e. These resources include the following:

- For instructors, Connect provides a Test Bank, Instructor's Guide, PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, and other premium content—ranging from Web resources to activities an instructor might use, such as a questionnaire to examine attitudes and experiences.
- For students, resources include a glossary, chapter quizzes, and web activities.

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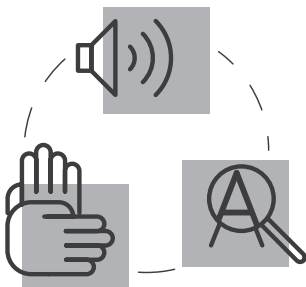
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The Last Dance



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Reflecting on death is often avoided, and yet it may offer a greater appreciation of the life we have.

CHAPTER 1

Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change

D*ead end. Dead on. Dead center. Dead heat. Deadwood. Deadbeat. Dead tired. Dead stop. Deadline. Dead reckoning. Deadlock. Dead ahead.*

Look at some of the connotations of the word *dead* in the English language. Are they positive or negative? There is no place to go when you get to a dead end, and there are usually unpleasant consequences when you miss a deadline. In contrast, however, dead reckoning gives us direction to a place where we are going.

This bit of linguistic exploration points up a paradox involved in the study of death and dying. How is our social world, our culture, set up to deal with death and the dead? Do we, consciously or unconsciously, relate to death as something to avoid? Or does death capture our attention as a defining moment, worthy of reflection and deliberate thought?

Of all human experiences, none is more overwhelming in its implications than death. Yet, we tend to relegate death to the periphery of our lives, as if it can be kept “out of sight, out of mind.”¹ A first step toward gaining new choices about death is to recognize that avoiding thinking about it estranges us from an integral aspect of human life. As one writer says, “The moment we begin to be we are old enough to die.”²

The study of death can “lead us to take seriously our finitude, our mortality, as something that provides significance to our lives.”³ Formally, *thanatology* is defined as the study of the facts or events of death and the social and psychological mechanisms for dealing with them. The word is a linguistic

heir of *Thanatos* from Greek mythology, where it is generally understood as a reference to “the personification of death.” A practical definition of thanatology includes ethical and moral questions, as well as cultural considerations. It is concerned not only with medicine and philosophy, but also with many other disciplines: history, psychology, sociology, and comparative religion, to name a few. In a commencement address at Stanford University, Apple founder Steve Jobs, who died on October 5, 2011, at fifty-six years of age, said, “Death is very likely the single best invention of life.” He called it “life’s change agent.”⁴

Expressions of Attitudes Toward Death

Direct, firsthand experience with death is rare. Nevertheless, death has a significant place in our social and cultural worlds. This is revealed through the manner in which death is portrayed by the mass media and in the language people use when talking about death, as well as in music, literature, and the visual arts. Notice how these varied expressions reveal thoughts and feelings about death, both individually and culturally.

Mass Media

Modern communication technology makes us all survivors of death as news of disasters, accidents, violence, and war is flashed around the world. When situations involve a perceived threat, people turn to the mass media for information. On September 11, 2001, for example, more than two billion people worldwide watched the attacks in real time or watched news reports about the attacks.⁵ The Internet not only increases the speed at which news is reported, it also allows us to follow along with updates from international news agencies and comments from social media giving further details and opinion.⁶ What do these secondhand sources tell us about death and dying?

In the News

When you read the newspaper or an online news source, what kinds of encounters with death vie for your attention? You are likely to find an assortment of accidents, murders, suicides, and disasters involving sudden, violent deaths. A school shooting takes place, and the news is announced with banner headlines. You see a story describing how a family perished when trapped inside their burning home, or a story describing how a family’s vacation came to an untimely end due to a fatal collision on the interstate.

Then there are the deaths of the famous, which are likely to be announced on the front pages, followed soon by feature-length *obituaries*. Prefaced by headlines, obituaries send a message about the newsworthiness editors attribute to the deaths of famous people. News organizations maintain files of pending obituaries for individuals whose deaths are considered newsworthy, and these obituaries are kept updated so they are ready when the occasion demands.

In contrast, the death of the average Joe or Jill is usually made known by a *death notice*—a brief, standardized statement printed in small type and listed

alphabetically in a column of vital statistics “as uniform as a row of tiny grave plots.”⁷ In some newspapers, obituaries for “ordinary Joes” are given more attention with “egalitarian obits,” which aim to “nail down quickly what it is we’re losing when a particular person dies.”⁸ Still, ordinary deaths—the kind most of us will experience—are usually mentioned only in routine fashion. The spectacular obscures the ordinary.

Whether routine or extraordinary, our encounters with death in the news media influence the way we think about and respond to death. Reports may have less to do with the *event* than with how that event is *perceived*. This point is illustrated by Jack Lule in his description of how black activist Huey Newton’s death was reported in newspapers across the country.⁹ Newton had a public career spanning two decades, yet most reports focused on the violent nature of Newton’s death while ignoring other aspects of his life.

People look to the media not only for information about events but also for clues about their meaning. This can present problems in determining what is appropriate to report in stories that involve death and survivors’ grief. Media coverage of horrific deaths sometimes leads to “revictimization” or “second trauma” after the initial trauma of the event itself. Reporters may seek to capture the experience of a tragedy at the expense of victims or their survivors. The journalistic stance “If it bleeds, it leads” often sets priorities. Do the media help us explore the meaning of death or merely seek to grab our attention with sensational news flashes? Robert Fulton and Greg Owen point out that the media may “submerge the human meaning of death while depersonalizing the event further by sandwiching actual reports of loss of life between commercials or other mundane items.”¹⁰ The distinction between *public* event and *private* loss sometimes blurs, and the grief experienced by survivors or the disruption of their lives is generally given little attention.

Deaths from cancer and heart disease don’t seem to interest us as much as deaths from plane crashes, roller coaster mishaps, or mountain lion attacks. Bizarre or dramatic exits grab our attention. Although the odds of dying from heart disease are about 1 in 4,¹¹ we seem more fascinated by death from bee stings (1 in 62,950), lightning (1 in 81,701), or fireworks (1 in 479,992).¹²

Media experts say that the “reality violence” on TV news really began with coverage of the Vietnam War, starting in the late 1950s.¹³ As a “living-room” war, replete with daily doses of violent images for more than a decade, it would exert a lasting influence on how news is presented. Viewers were given a succession of violent images: wartime casualties both friend and foe, the execution of a Viet Cong lieutenant by gunshot to the head on a Saigon street, pictures of napalmed children, and images of a burning monk. This is “action news,” and it is a marketable format that flourishes with such events as school shootings and the public death of a man on a Los Angeles overpass who, retrieving a shotgun, “blasted half his head away as police and news choppers hovered above.”¹⁴ Allan Kellehear says, “There is no shortage of death reportage in the media . . . however, what passes for death is frequently merely violence.”¹⁵ He adds: “As long as death and loss appear in newspapers and TV programmes in the context of ‘problems’ and ‘tragedies,’ our understanding of these will be coloured by these terms and concepts.”¹⁶

Media analyst George Gerbner observes that depictions of death in the mass media are often embedded in a structure of violence that conveys “a heightened sense of danger, insecurity, and mistrust.”¹⁷ Such depictions reflect what Gerbner and his colleagues call a “mean world syndrome,” in which the symbolic use of death contributes to an “irrational dread of dying and thus to diminished vitality and self-direction in life.”

According to Gerbner, the effect of violent images in the media is not to cause viewers to become more violent themselves; rather, viewers are likely to perceive the world as a frightening and scary place, a place of murder and mayhem, disease and plague, threats of war, a world populated by psychotic killers, child abductors, terrorists, and threatening animals. This perception of a mean world in which predators of every stripe—and every species—appear forever on the loose and in attack mode creates a sense of anxiety and fear that is out of proportion with reality.¹⁸

Entertaining Death

Television’s influence on our lives is well established. Programs such as *Six Feet Under*, *Bones*, and *CSI* may challenge certain taboos surrounding death, but this interest in death and dying mainly serves to make the corpse what some commentators call the new “porn star” of popular culture.¹⁹ Seldom do images portrayed in the mass media enhance our understanding of death by dealing with such real-life topics as how people cope with a loved one’s death or confront their own dying.

Besides its appearance in movies of the week and on crime and adventure series, death is a staple of newscasts (typically, several stories involving death are featured in each broadcast), nature programs (death in the animal kingdom), children’s cartoons (caricatures of death), soap operas (which seem always to have some character dying), sports (with descriptions such as “the ball is dead” and “the other team is killing them”), and religious programs (with theological and anecdotal mention of death). Despite this, the lack of stories depicting realistic themes portraying death, dying, and bereavement has been characterized as “an impoverishment of death symbolism” in the media.²⁰

Turning to programming directed toward children, recall cartoon depictions of death. Daffy Duck is pressed to a thin sheet by a steamroller, only to pop up again a moment later. Elmer Fudd aims his shotgun at Bugs Bunny, pulls the trigger, bang! Bugs, unmarked by the rifle blast, clutches his throat, spins around several times, and mutters, “It’s all getting dark now, Elmer. . . . I’m going. . . .” Bugs falls to the ground, both feet still in the air. As his eyes close, his feet finally hit the dirt. But wait! Now Bugs pops up, good as new. Reversible death!

Consider the western, which mutes the reality of death by describing the bad guy as “kicking the bucket”—relegated, no doubt, to Boot Hill at the edge of town, where the deceased “pushes up daisies.” The camera pans from the dying person’s face to a close-up of hands twitching—then all movement ceases as the person’s breathing fades away in perfect harmony with the musical score. Or, more likely, the death is violent: the cowboy gunfight at the OK Corral, high noon. The gent with the slower draw is hit, reels, falls, his body convulsing into cold silence.

People who have been present as a person dies describe a very different picture. Many recall the gurgling, gasping sounds as the last breath rattles through the throat; the changes in body color as flesh tones tinge blue; the feeling of a once warm and



One of the first things we teach to journalism students in the USA is to use “died” instead of “passed away” or “departed this life,” which is how most people can tell the difference between an obituary written by the funeral director and one written by a newspaper staff member. Even in American English, it seems nearly disrespectful to go to such lengths to avoid saying the obvious; when my time comes, I hope to have pre-written my own obit, which will say something to the effect that “Old Man Wilcox is dead. He has ceased to be. He has expired and gone to meet his maker. He is a stiff. Bereft of life, he rests in peace. Services will be held on Wednesday; cocktails will be served.”

Harlow Wilcox²¹

flexible body growing cold and flaccid. Surprised by the reality, they say, “Death is not at all what I thought it would be like; it doesn’t look or sound or feel like anything I see on television or in movies!”

Unrealistic portrayals of violent death fail to show real harm to victims, their pain, or appropriate punishment for perpetrators.

Thrillers featuring extreme violence and what has been called death porn have become a profitable genre for moviemakers. The road to more “blood and gore” in popular films was paved in part by the success of classic “slasher” or “dead teenager” movies, like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which included point-of-view shots from the killer’s perspective. In traditional horror films, the audience viewed the action through the eyes of the victim and thus identified with his or her fate. In slasher films, however, viewers are asked to identify with the attacker. (A similar form of identification can be found in violent video games.) The depictions of violence in such movies suggest that residual tendencies from our evolutionary background may attract human beings to “exhibitions of brutality and terror.”²²

Not all death-related movies have highlighted violence. Although zombie movies have been around since the 1930s, they have enjoyed a massive resurgence in popularity, expanding to entire marketing packages that may include video games, apps, toys, and clothing. The zombie genre has also developed beyond horror and thriller styles to distinct subgenres for comedy, romance, and science fiction. Exploring the worlds of zombies and the undead allows us to consider the place between life and afterlife.²³

When told of his grandfather’s death, one contemporary seven-year-old asked, “Who did it to him?” Death is generally portrayed on television or in movies as coming from outside, often violently, reinforcing the notion that dying is something that *happens to us*, rather than something we *do*. Death is an accidental rather than a natural process. As our firsthand *experiences* of death and violence have diminished, *representations* of death and violence in the media have increased in sensationalism.

Movies engage our psychological faculties in profound and unique ways.²⁴ In thinking about the films, DVDs, and television programs you’ve watched recently, what are your observations about the ratio of positive and negative images of dying and death?

Language

Listen to the language people use when talking about dying or death, and you are likely to discover that it is often indirect. The words *dead* and *dying* tend to be avoided; instead, loved ones “pass away,” embalming is “preparation,” the deceased is “laid to

TABLE 1-1 *Death Talk: Metaphors, Euphemisms, and Slang*

Croaked	No longer with us
Kicked the bucket	Taking the dirt nap
Gone	In the great beyond
Expired	On the other side
Succumbed	Asleep in Christ
Left us	Departed
Lost	Transcended
Wasted	Bought the farm
Checked out	With the angels
Laid to rest	Cashed in
Pushing up daisies	Crossed over Jordan
Called home	Perished
Was a goner	Ate it
Bit the dust	It was curtains
Annihilated	Out of his/her misery
Liquidated	Ended it all
Terminated	Resting in peace
Gave up the ghost	Dropped the body
Rubbed out	That was all she wrote
Snuffed	Joined the ancestors
Bit the grass	Subject just fataled
Took the last journey	Gone west

rest,” burial becomes “interment,” the corpse is “remains,” the tombstone is a “monument,” and the undertaker is transformed into a “funeral director.” Such euphemisms—substitutions of indirect or vague words and phrases for ones considered harsh or blunt—tend to suggest a well-choreographed production surrounding the dead. Hannelore Wass, a pioneering death educator, notes that euphemisms substituting for plain-spoken “*D* words” turn up even in the language of death and dying experts as terminal care becomes “palliative care,” and dying patients are described as “life threatened.”²⁵ Death may be described as “a negative patient-care outcome” and an airline crash as an “involuntary conversion of a 727.”²⁶

When plain talk about death is subverted by substitutions, reality is devalued and depersonalized. For example, description of the horror of death in war is often cloaked by euphemisms—individuals killed in battle are described in terms of “body counts” and civilian deaths are termed “collateral damage.” The language people use when talking about death often reflects a desire to avoid blunt reality. Euphemisms, metaphors, and slang make up a large part of death talk (see Table 1-1).

However, the use of euphemism and metaphor does not always imply an impulse to deny the reality of death or avoid talking about it. These linguistic devices are also used to communicate subtler or deeper meanings than those associated with plainer speech. For example, terms like *passing* or *passing on* may convey an understanding of death as a spiritual transition, especially among members of some religious and ethnic traditions.

Similarly, sympathy cards provide a way for people to express condolences to the bereaved without directly mentioning death.²⁷ Some cards refer to death metaphorically, as in sentiments like “What is death but a long sleep?” while others apparently deny it in verses like “He is not dead, he is just away.” Images of sunsets and flowers create an impression of peace, quiet, and perhaps a return to nature. The fact of bereavement, losing a loved one by death, is generally mentioned within the context of memories or the healing process of time. It is interesting to check the greeting-card rack to see if you can find a card that plainly uses the word *dead* or *death*. By acknowledging loss in a gentle fashion, sympathy cards are intended to comfort the bereaved.

After someone dies, our conversations about that person usually move from present tense to past tense: “He *was* fond of music,” “She *was* a leader in her field.” Using this form of speech, which grammarians term the *indicative voice*, is a way of acknowledging the reality of death while distancing us from the dead. One way to continue to include the “voice” of the deceased in present circumstances lies in the use of the *subjunctive*, which has been described as the mode of “as if,” of what “might be” or “could have been.” It is a “zone of possibility,” rather than certainty.²⁸ We hear examples of this when people say things like “He would have been proud of you” or “She would have enjoyed this gathering tonight.”

Language usage also tells us something about the intensity and immediacy of a person’s encounter with death, as in the form of “danger of death” narratives—stories about close calls with death. In such stories, a shift in tense typically occurs when the narrator reaches the crucial point in his or her story, the point when death seems imminent and unavoidable. Consider the following example: A man who had experienced a frightening incident while driving in a snowstorm began telling his story in the past tense as he described the circumstances. As he came to the point when his car went out of control on an icy curve and began to slide into the opposing lane of traffic, however, he abruptly switched to the present tense, as if he were *reliving* the experience of watching an oncoming car heading straight for him and believing in that moment that he was about to die.²⁹

Word choices can also reflect changes in how a death event is experienced at different times. For example, after a disaster occurs, as the focus of rescue efforts changes, so does the language used to describe the work of emergency personnel and search-and-rescue teams. As hours stretch into days, *rescue* work becomes *recovery* work.

Scholars point out that language appears to influence many aspects of human thought. In fact, what we normally call “thinking” is a complex set of collaborations between linguistic and nonlinguistic representations and processes.³⁰ Look again at the words and phrases used in death talk (see Table 1-1). Notice how language offers clues about the manner of death and the speaker’s attitude toward the death. Subtle distinctions may reflect different attitudes, sometimes involving cultural frameworks. Consider, for instance, the difference between *passed away* and *passed on*. Paying attention to the euphemisms, metaphors, slang, and other linguistic devices people use when talking about death is a way to appreciate the variety and range of attitudes toward dying and death.