

Lynne Ann DeSpelder ❀ Albert Lee Strickland



Tenth Edition

*The*  
*Last Dance*

ENCOUNTERING DEATH & DYING

# *The Last Dance*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# *The Last Dance*

TENTH EDITION

---

## *Encountering Death and Dying*

LYNNE ANN DESPELDER

*Cabrillo College*

ALBERT LEE STRICKLAND

Mc  
Graw  
Hill  
Education



THE LAST DANCE: ENCOUNTERING DEATH AND DYING, TENTH EDITION

Published by McGraw-Hill Education, 2 Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121. Copyright © 2015, 2011, and 2009 by Lynne Ann DeSpelder and Albert Lee Strickland. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written consent of McGraw-Hill Education, including, but not limited to, in any network or other electronic storage or transmission, or broadcast for distance learning.

Some ancillaries, including electronic and print components, may not be available to customers outside the United States.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4

ISBN: 978-0-07-803546-3

MHID: 0-07-803546-5

Senior Vice President, Products & Markets: *Kurt L. Strand*

Vice President, General Manager, Products & Markets: *Michael Ryan*

Vice President, Content Production & Technology Services: *Kimberly Meriwether David*

Senior Brand Manager: *Maureen E. Prado Roberts*

Managing Development Editor: *Penina Braffman*

Marketing Specialist: *Alexandra Schultz*

Director, Content Production: *Terri Schiesl*

Lead Content Project Manager: *Jane Mohr*

Buyer: *Nichole Birkenholz*

Cover Designer: *Studio Montage, St. Louis, MO.*

Cover Images: *Edvard Munch, The Dance of Life, 1889–1900. Oil on canvas. 49¼" × 74¾". National Gallery, Oslo.*

Media Project Manager: *Jennifer Bartell*

Compositor: *Laserwords Private Limited*

Typeface: *10/12 New Baskerville*

Printer: *R. R. Donnelley*

All credits appearing on page or at the end of the book are considered to be an extension of the copyright page.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

DeSpelder, Lynne Ann, 1944–

The last dance : encountering death and dying / Lynne Ann DeSpelder, Cabrillo College, Albert Lee Strickland.—Tenth edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-07-803546-3 (alk. paper)

1. Death—Psychological aspects—Textbooks. 2. Death—Social aspects—Textbooks. I. Strickland, Albert Lee. II. Title.

BF789.D4D53 2014

155.9'37—dc23

2013041273

The Internet addresses listed in the text were accurate at the time of publication. The inclusion of a website does not indicate an endorsement by the authors or McGraw-Hill Education, and McGraw-Hill Education does not guarantee the accuracy of the information presented at these sites.

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

*This page intentionally left blank*

# *Brief Contents*

*Preface* xxi

*Prologue, by David Gordon* 1

*CHAPTER 1: Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change* 5

*CHAPTER 2: Learning About Death: Socialization* 49

*CHAPTER 3: Perspectives on Death: Historical and Cultural* 89

*CHAPTER 4: Death Systems: Mortality and Society* 139

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

*CHAPTER 6: End-of-Life Issues and Decisions* 213

*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* 341

*CHAPTER 10: Death in the Lives of Children and Adolescents* 385

*CHAPTER 11: Death in the Lives of Adults* 417

*CHAPTER 12: Suicide* 447

*CHAPTER 13: Risks, Perils, and Traumatic Death* 489

*CHAPTER 14: Beyond Death / After Life* 531

*CHAPTER 15: The Path Ahead: Personal and Social Choices* 569

*Epilogue, by David Gordon* 599

*Notes* 601

*Credits and Sources* 671

*Name Index* 677

*Subject Index* 693



*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

Preface	xxi
Prologue, by David Gordon	1

## CHAPTER 1

---

<i>Attitudes Toward Death: A Climate of Change</i>	5
Expressions of Attitudes Toward Death	6
Mass Media	6
In the News	6
Entertaining Death	8
Language	10
Music	12
Literature	15
Visual Arts	18
Humor	23
Living with Awareness of Death	25
Contemplating Mortality	26
Dimensions of Thanatology	26
Death Anxiety and Fear of Death	27
Terror Management	29
Studying Death and Dying	31
The Rise of Death Education	31
Pioneers in Death Studies	32
Factors Affecting Familiarity with Death	34
Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates	35
Causes of Death	37
Geographic Mobility and Intergenerational Contact	38
Life-Extending Technologies	40
The Internet and the Digital Age	42
Examining Assumptions	43
Death in a Cosmopolitan Society	44
Exploring Your Own Losses and Attitudes	46
Further Readings	47

## CHAPTER 2

---

### *Learning About Death: Socialization*

49

A Child's Reasoning	50
A Mature Concept of Death	51
Understanding Death Through the Life Course	53
Infancy and Toddlerhood	57
Early Childhood	58
Middle Childhood or School-Age Period	60
Adolescence	62
Emerging Adulthood	64
Early Adulthood	64
Middle Adulthood	65
Later Adulthood	66
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	72
Religion	76
Teachable Moments	76
The Death of a Companion Animal	78
The Mature Concept of Death Revisited	81
Further Readings	87

## CHAPTER 3

---

### *Perspectives on Death: Historical and Cultural*

89

Traditional Cultures	92
Origin of Death	92
Names of the Dead	94
Causes of Death	95
Power of the Dead	97
Western Culture	98
The Deathbed Scene	100
Burial Customs	102
Charnel Houses	102
Memorializing the Dead	104
The Dance of Death	104

Death Masks	106
Invisible Death?	107
Cultural Viewpoints	108
People of Native American Heritage	108
People of African Heritage	112
The LoDagaa of Northern Ghana	114
Traditions Among African Americans	116
People of Hispanic Heritage	117
Attitudes Toward Death in Mexico	118
Día de los Muertos	118
People of Asian Heritage	122
Paper Offerings	127
Ch'ing ming and O-bon Festivals	128
People of Jewish Heritage	129
People of Celtic Heritage	129
People of Arab Heritage	132
People of Oceanian Heritage	132
Mixed Plate: Cultural Diversity in Hawaii	133
Characteristics of Hawaii's Peoples	133
Death and Local Identity	134
Death in Contemporary Multicultural Societies	136
Further Readings	137

## CHAPTER 4

---

### *Death Systems: Mortality and Society* 139

Certification of Death	140
The Coroner and the Medical Examiner	141
Autopsies	144
Assessing Homicide	147
Capital Punishment	150
Defining Death	151
Conventional Signs of Death and New Technology	153
Conceptual and Empirical Criteria	155
Four Approaches to the Definition and Determination of Death	157
Irreversible Loss of Flow of Vital Fluids	157
Irreversible Loss of the Soul from the Body	157
Irreversible Loss of the Capacity for Bodily Integration	159

Irreversible Loss of the Capacity for Consciousness or Social Interaction	160
The Uniform Determination of Death Act	162
Organ Transplantation and Organ Donation	165
Medical Ethics: A Cross-Cultural Example	170
The Impact of the Death System	172
Further Readings	173

## CHAPTER 5

---

### *Health Care: Patients, Staff, and Institutions* 175

Modern Health Care	176
Health Care Financing	178
Rationing Scarce Resources	180
The Caregiver-Patient Relationship	181
Disclosing a Life-Threatening Diagnosis	182
Achieving Clear Communication	183
Providing Total Care	185
Care of the Dying	185
Hospice and Palliative Care	187
The Origins of Hospice and Palliative Care	191
Challenges for Hospice and Palliative Care	192
The Future of Hospice and Palliative Care	195
Home Care	196
Social Support	198
Elder Care	199
Trauma and Emergency Care	201
Death Notification	204
Caregiver Stress and Compassion Fatigue	207
A Changing Health Care System	209
Further Readings	210

## CHAPTER 6

---

### *End-of-Life Issues and Decisions* 213

Principles of Medical Ethics	214
Informed Consent to Treatment	215

Principles of Informed Consent	215
Preferences Regarding Informed Consent	217
Choosing Death	221
Withholding or Withdrawing Treatment	225
Physician-Assisted Death	226
The Rule of Double Effect	229
Euthanasia	229
Palliative Care and the Right to Die	230
Nutrition and Hydration	231
Seriously Ill Newborns	232
Advance Directives	233
Using Advance Directives	238
Advance Directives and Emergency Care	240
Inheritance: Wills, Probate, and Living Trusts	241
Wills	242
The Formally Executed Will	245
Amending or Revoking a Will	246
Probate	248
The Duties of the Executor or Administrator	248
Laws of Intestate Succession	250
Living Trusts	251
Insurance and Death Benefits	253
Considering End-of-Life Issues and Decisions	255
Further Readings	256

## 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	263
Awareness of Dying	263
Adapting to “Living-Dying”	264
Patterns of Coping	266
Maintaining Coping Potency	269
Treatment Options and Issues	272
Surgery	275
Radiation Therapy	276
Chemotherapy	277
Alternative Therapies	277
The Placebo Effect	280
Unorthodox Treatment	281

Pain Management	282
The Language of Pain	283
Treating Pain	283
The Dying Trajectory	286
The Social Role of the Dying Patient	289
Being with Someone Who is Dying	292
Further Readings	293

## CHAPTER 8

---

### *Last Rites: Funerals and Body Disposition*

295

Psychosocial Aspects of Last Rites	298
Announcement of Death	298
Mutual Support	301
Impetus for Coping with Loss	302
Funerals in the United States	303
The Rise of Professional Funeral Services	304
Criticisms of Funeral Practices	306
New and Rediscovered Memorial Choices	309
Selecting Funeral Services	311
Funeral Service Charges	313
Comparing the Costs	314
Professional Services	314
Embalming	315
Caskets	317
Outer Burial Containers	318
Facilities and Vehicles	319
Miscellaneous Charges	319
Direct Cremations and Immediate Burials	319
Funeral and Memorial Societies	321
Body Disposition	321
Burial	324
Cremation	326
Memorialization	328
Laws Regulating Body Disposition	329
New Directions in Funerals and Body Disposition	330
Remembrance Rituals and Linking Objects	333
Making Meaningful Choices	334
Further Readings	339

*Survivors: Understanding the Experience of Loss*

341

Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning	343
Tasks of Mourning	346
Models of Grief	347
Working Through Grief	347
Continuing Bonds with the Deceased	348
Telling the “Story”: Narrative Reconstruction	350
The Dual Process Model of Coping	351
The Two-Track Model of Bereavement	352
Toward an Integrated Model of Grief	353
The Experience of Grief	355
Mental Versus Emotional Responses	355
The Course of Grief	355
The Duration of Grief	358
Complications of Grief	359
The Mortality of Bereavement	362
Variables Influencing Grief	364
Survivor’s Model of the World	364
Personality	364
Cultural Context and Social Roles	365
Perceived Relationship with the Deceased	365
Values and Beliefs	367
Coping Patterns and Gender	367
Mode of Death	369
Anticipated Death	370
Sudden Death	371
Suicide	371
Homicide	372
Disaster	372
Multiple Losses and Bereavement Burnout	373
Social Support and Disenfranchised Grief	373
Unfinished Business	375
Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy	376
Support for the Bereaved	379
Bereavement as an Opportunity for Growth	380
Further Readings	382



## CHAPTER 10

---

### *Death in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*

385

Experiences with Death	388
Children as Survivors of a Close Death	391
The Bereaved Child's Experience of Grief	392
The Death of a Parent	393
The Death of a Sibling	395
Children with Life-Threatening Illnesses	399
The Child's Perception of Serious Illness	400
The Child's Coping Mechanisms	401
Providing and Organizing Care	402
Pediatric Hospice and Palliative Care	403
Decisions About Medical Treatment	405
Caring for a Seriously Ill Child	406
Support Groups for Children	407
Helping Children Cope with Change and Loss	409
Discussing Death Before a Crisis Occurs	409
Discussions When a Family Member Is Seriously Ill	411
Discussions in the Aftermath of Loss	412
Further Readings	415

## CHAPTER 11

---

### *Death in the Lives of Adults*

417

Death and the College Student	418
The Death of a Friend	420
The Death of a Parent	420
Parental Bereavement	423
Childbearing Losses	424
Miscarriage	426
Induced Abortion	426
Stillbirth	428
Neonatal Death	429
Sudden Infant Death Syndrome	430
Grief for "Unlived" Lives	431

The Death of an Older Child	432
The Death of an Adult Child	433
Coping with Bereavement as a Couple	434
Social Support in Parental Bereavement	435
Spousal Bereavement	436
Factors Influencing Spousal Bereavement	436
Social Support for Bereaved Spouses	439
Aging and the Aged	440
Further Readings	445

## CHAPTER 12

---

### *Suicide*

447

Comprehending Suicide	448
Statistical Issues	449
The Psychological Autopsy	451
Explanatory Theories of Suicide	453
The Social Context of Suicide	453
Degree of Social Integration	453
Degree of Social Regulation	455
Psychological Insights About Suicide	456
Toward an Integrated Understanding of Suicide	457
Some Types of Suicide	459
Suicide as Escape	459
Cry for Help	461
Subintentioned and Chronic Suicide	464
Risk Factors Influencing Suicide	464
Culture	466
Personality	467
The Individual Situation	468
Life-Span Perspectives on Suicide	471
Childhood	471
Adolescence and Early Adulthood	472
Middle Adulthood	475
Late Adulthood	476
Contemplating Suicide	476
Suicide Notes	479
Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention	481

Prevention	482	
Intervention	483	
Postvention	484	
Helping a Person Who Is in Suicidal Crisis		485
Further Readings	487	

## CHAPTER 13

---

### *Risks, Perils, and Traumatic Death*

489

Accidents and Injuries	490	
Risk Taking	491	
Disasters	494	
Reducing the Impact of Disasters	498	
Coping with the Aftermath of Disaster	499	
Violence	501	
Random Violence	503	
Serial Killers and Mass Murderers	503	
Familiicide	505	
Steps Toward Reducing Violence	506	
War	507	
Technological Alienation	508	
The Conversion of the Warrior	509	
Coping with the Aftermath of War	511	
Making War, Making Peace	513	
Genocide	516	
Terrorism	517	
September 11, 2001	519	
Rescue, Recovery, and Mourning	521	
The Mind of the Terrorist	521	
Horrendous Death	523	
Emerging Infectious Diseases	524	
The Response to AIDS	525	
Living with AIDS	527	
The Threat of Emerging Diseases	527	
Traumatic Death	529	
Further Readings	529	

## CHAPTER 14

---

### *Beyond Death / After Life* 531

Traditional Concepts About Life After Death	532
Jewish Beliefs About Death and Resurrection	534
Classical Greek Concepts of Immortality	536
Christian Beliefs About the Afterlife	538
The Afterlife in Islamic Tradition	542
Death and Immortality in Asian Religions	543
Hindu Teachings About Death and Rebirth	544
The Buddhist Understanding of Death	547
After-Death States in Tibetan Buddhism	550
The Consolations of Religion	551
Secular Concepts of Immortality	552
Near-Death Experiences: At the Threshold of Death	554
NDEs: A Composite Picture	555
Dimensions of Near-Death Experiences	556
Interpreting Near-Death Experiences	558
Death Themes in Dreams and Psychedelic Experiences	562
Beliefs About Death: A Wall or a Door?	565
Further Readings	566

## CHAPTER 15

---

### *The Path Ahead: Personal and Social Choices* 569

Exploring Death and Dying	570
Cultural Competence	572
New Directions in Thanatology	574
Gaining a Global Perspective	576
Bridging Research and Practice	580
Creating Compassionate Cities	581
Living with Death and Dying	584
Humanizing Death and Dying	585
Defining the Good Death	587

Death in the Future	591
Postscript and Farewell	596
Further Readings	597
<i>Epilogue, by David Gordon</i>	599
<i>Notes</i>	601
<i>Credits and Sources</i>	671
<i>Name Index</i>	677
<i>Subject Index</i>	693

# 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 Asgaardstrand 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 new 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 is 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 physician-assisted suicide, remembrance rituals and linking objects, grief counseling and grief therapy, horrendous death, the placebo effect, familicide, and the death of a companion animal.

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. Accompanying this edition is a companion Online Learning Center, [www.mhhe.com/despelder10e](http://www.mhhe.com/despelder10e), designed to promote mastery of the material covered in the text itself. We urge readers to make use of these features.

## *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, stillbirth, and neonatal death, and the death of a child, a parent, a spouse,

or a close friend, as well as losses associated with aging. A new section on death in the lives of college students has been added for the tenth edition.

- 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 bridge 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.

## *Supplements*

In addition to the textbook itself, there are a number of instructor and student resources available.

- The Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/despelder10e](http://www.mhhe.com/despelder10e) provides instructors with a Test Bank, Instructor’s Guide, PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, and other premium instructor’s content. This premium content contains numerous files ranging from instructor’s resources on the Web to activities an instructor might use such as a questionnaire to examine attitudes and experiences.
- For students, the Online Learning Center, [www.mhhe.com/despelder10e](http://www.mhhe.com/despelder10e), offers a glossary, and each chapter has quizzes, Web activities, chapter objectives, key terms, and flashcards.

## *Acknowledgments*

*The Last Dance* has been reviewed by professors in a broad range of academic disciplines. Their suggestions have helped to make this text an outstanding teaching tool. Formal reviews have been provided by Jennifer T. Aberle, Colorado State University; Susan Adams, University of Central Arkansas; Joel R. Ambelang, Concordia University, Wisconsin; Lisa Angermeier, Indiana University at Bloomington; Patrick Ashwood, Hawkeye Community College; Thomas Attig, Bowling Green State University; Ronald K. Barrett, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles; Michael Beechem, University of West Florida, Pensacola; Laura Billings, Southwestern Illinois College; John B. Bond, University of Manitoba; Tashel Bordere, University of Central Missouri; Sandor B. Brent, Wayne State University; Tom Bruce, Sacramento City College; John P. Colatch, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania; Elizabeth M. Collier, The College of New Jersey; Richard Cording, Sam Houston State University; Charles A. Corr, Southern Illinois University; Gerry R. Cox, Fort Hays State University; Illene N. Cupit, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay; Steven A. Dennis, Utah State University; Kenneth J. Doka, College of New Rochelle; Donald J. Ebel, Minnesota State University; Alishia Ferguson, University of Arkansas; Stephen J. Fleming, York University, Toronto; Audrey K. Gordon, Oakton Community College; Judy Green, Walsh University, Ohio; Debra Bence Grow, Pennsylvania State University; John Harvey, Western Illinois University; Russell G. Henke, Towson State University; Lorie Henley, Finger Lakes Community College; David D. Karnos, Eastern Montana College; Linda C. Kinrade, California State University, Hayward; Dennis Klass, Webster University; Anthony Lenzer, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Daniel Leviton, University of Maryland; Paul C. Luken, Arizona State University West, Phoenix; J. Davis Mannino, Santa Rosa Junior College; Coleman C. Markham, Barton College, North Carolina; Wendy Martyna, University of California, Santa Cruz; Samuel J. Marwit, University of Missouri; Debbie Mattison, University of Michigan School of Social Work; Marsha McGee, Northeast Louisiana University; Walter L. Moore, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Lachelle Norris, Tennessee Tech University; Tina Olson, Arizona State University; Leah Rogne, Minnesota State University; Vincent M. Rolletta, Erie Community College; Cheri Barton Ross, Santa Rosa Junior College; Lee Ross, Frostburg State University, Maryland; Rita S. Santanello, Belleville Area Community College, Illinois; Thomas W. Satre, Sam Houston State University; Edwin S. Shneidman, University of California, Los Angeles; Virginia Slaughter, The University of Queensland; Judith M. Stillion, Western Carolina University; Gordon Thornton, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Jeffrey S. Turner, Mitchell College; Mary Warner, Northern State University, South Dakota; Hannelore Wass, University of Florida, Gainesville; Jack Borden Watson, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas; John B. Williamson, Boston College; C. Ray Wingrove, University of Richmond;

Robert Wrenn, University of Arizona, Tucson; Joseph M. Yonder, Villa Maria College of Buffalo; Margaret H. Young, Washington State University; and Andrew Scott Ziner, University of North Dakota. In addition to those named, other colleagues and students have generously shared ideas for enhancing and improving the text. We thank all who have offered helpful suggestions about the book through its successive incarnations.

We also thank our collaborators who have helped prepare ancillary instructional materials over the course of various editions of *The Last Dance*. These include Barbara Jade Sironen, Patrick Vernon Dean, Robert James Baugher, Matt and Kelley Strickland, and Carol Berns, who deserves special thanks for her work on this edition's test bank and other resources for instructors, as well as on the Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/despelder10e](http://www.mhhe.com/despelder10e). In addition, we are grateful to staff members at many museums, libraries, and governmental institutions who have assisted us in our research and in gathering both text and art resources over the years.

Over the course of ten editions of *The Last Dance*, we have had the pleasure of working with many talented people who exemplify excellence in publishing. At McGraw-Hill, among the many individuals who helped bring this book to press, we want to particularly thank Mike Sugarman, publisher *par excellence*; Terri Schiesl, production maven, who at the outset got the ball rolling down the right track; and Erin Guendelsberger, developmental editor, who guided the typescript into production with attention to detail, good cheer, and thorough professionalism. To all whose help was instrumental in bringing this edition of *The Last Dance* to readers, our heartfelt thanks.

L. A. D.  
A. L. S.

## *Additional McGraw-Hill Resources*

- Craft your teaching resources to match the way you teach! With McGraw-Hill Create™, [www.create.mcgraw-hill.com](http://www.create.mcgraw-hill.com), instructors can easily rearrange chapters, combine material from other content sources, and quickly upload personal content such as a course syllabus or teaching notes. Find the content you need in Create by searching through thousands of leading McGraw-Hill textbooks. Arrange your book to fit your teaching style. Create even allows you to personalize your book's appearance by selecting the cover and adding your name, school, and course information. Order a Create book and you'll receive a complimentary print review copy in three to five business days or a complimentary electronic review copy (eComp) via e-mail in minutes. Go to [www.create.mcgraw-hill.com](http://www.create.mcgraw-hill.com) today and register to experience how McGraw-Hill Create™ empowers you to teach your students your way.
- With the CourseSmart eTextbook version of this title, students can save up to 50 percent off the cost of a print book, reduce their impact on the environment, and access powerful Web tools for learning. Faculty can also review and compare the full text online without having to wait for a print desk copy. CourseSmart is an online eTextbook, which means users need to be connected to the Internet in order to access it. Students can also print sections of the book for maximum portability. For further details, contact your sales representative or go to [www.coursesmart.com](http://www.coursesmart.com).

# P R O L O G U E

---

*I don't know how much time I have left. I've spent my life dispensing salves and purgatives, potions and incantations—miracles of nature (though I admit that some were pure medicine-show snake oil). Actually, half the time all I offered was just plain common sense. Over the years, every kind of suffering person has made his or her way here. Some had broken limbs or broken bodies . . . or hearts. Often their sorrow was an ailing son or daughter. It was always so hard when they'd lose a child. I never did get used to that. And then there were the young lovers. Obtaining their heart's desire was so important to them. I had to smile. I always made them sweat and beg for their handful of bark, and for those willful tortures I'll probably go to hell . . . if there is one. My God, how long has it been since I had those feelings myself? The fever, the lump in the throat, the yearning. I can't remember. A long time . . . maybe never. Well, there have been other passions for me. There's my dusty legion of jars. Each one holds its little secret. Barks, roots, soils, leaves, flowers, mushrooms, bugs—magic dust, every bit of it. There's my book—my "rudder," a ship's pilot would call it. That's a good name for it. Every salve, every purgative . . . they're all in there. (Everything, that is, except my stained beard, scraggly hair, and flowing robes—they'll have to figure those out on their own.) And then there's my walking stick (always faithful) . . . and the ballerina. And ten thousand mornings, ten thousand afternoons, ten thousand nights. And the stars. Oh, I have had my loves.*

*It hurts to move. My shelf and jars seem so far away, though I know that, if I tried, I could reach them. But no. It's enough, and it's time . . . almost. I hope he makes it back in time. He burst through my door only two days ago. A young man, well spoken. Tears were streaming down his face. He looked so bent and beaten that I could not*

refuse him. He told me that his wife had died over a month ago and that he had been inconsolable since.

"Please help me," he pleaded, "or kill me." He covered his face with his hands. "Perhaps they're the same thing. I don't know anymore."

I let him cry a while so I could watch him, gauge him. When at last he looked up, with my good hand I motioned him to take a seat. Then, between coughing fits, I went to work. "Do you see that toy there?" I said. "The little ballerina . . . yes, that's it. Pick it up."

"Pick it up?"

"It won't bite. Pick it up." (He probably thought it was a trick—that's what they expect.) He grasped it carefully with one hand, then wiped his eyes with the other. "That's better," I continued. "That's just a toy to you. You don't know what meaning to put to it yet. So, I want you to look at that ballerina."

He was hesitant, but I waited stubbornly until he looked down and fixed his attention on the little toy dancer. I went on: "I knew a young man once who was very handsome—always had been. He not only turned every head, he was strong and smart, and his family was wealthy. His main concern each day was which girl he should court that evening. He had planned that, after several seasons of playing at love, he would marry a beautiful girl, have beautiful children, and settle down to spend the money his father had promised him. And he had plans for that money. He had already purchased the land he wanted to live on and was having built there the biggest house in the area. He was going to raise and race horses, I think. One morning, he got on his favorite horse and went for a ride. He whipped that horse into a gallop; it stepped in a hole and threw him. The young man broke his neck and died." I stared at my guest and waited.

"That's a tragedy," he finally croaked.

"For whom? For those he left behind, perhaps. But was it for him? When he opened his eyes that morning, he didn't know he would die that day. He had no intention of dying for another sixty years, if then. None of us does." The young man looked confused. "His mistake was that he forgot that he could die that day."

"That's a morbid thought," he replied, and he looked as though he had just smelled something putrid.

"Is it? A moment ago, you asked me to end your grieving by ending your own life. Suppose I oblige?" I stared at him for a few moments with my most practiced penetrating glare. "Suppose I did agree to kill you. How would you spend your last few minutes?"

He was still a little wary of me but relieved that I seemed to be suggesting a hypothetical situation rather than a serious course of action. He considered the possibilities for a while, then straightened in his chair. "Well, I guess I would step outside and take a last, best look at the sky, the clouds, the trees."

"Suppose you lived that way all the time?" He stared at me, then looked down at his hands, searching them. "That young man I told you about . . . perhaps the tragedy for him was not that he died, but that he failed to use the eventual certainty of his death to make himself live! Did he woo each of those ladies as though it might be his last romance? Did he build that house as though it might be his last creation? Did he ride that horse as though it would be his last ride? I don't know; I hope so." My young guest nodded, but he was still sad. I pointed to the toy ballerina he was holding. "That was given to me by a young lady who understood these things."

*He looked at the figure closely. "Is she a dancer?"*

*"Yes, she is, and she is dead." The young man looked up, once again off balance. "She has been dead for, oh, a very long time." After all these years, a tear fell onto my cheek. I let it go. "She was many things. A child, a woman, a cook and a gardener, a friend, lover, daughter. . . . But what she really was—who she was—was a dancer. When she was dying, she gave that doll to me, smiled, and whispered, 'At the moment of my death, I will take all of my dancing and put it in there, so my dancing can live on.'"*

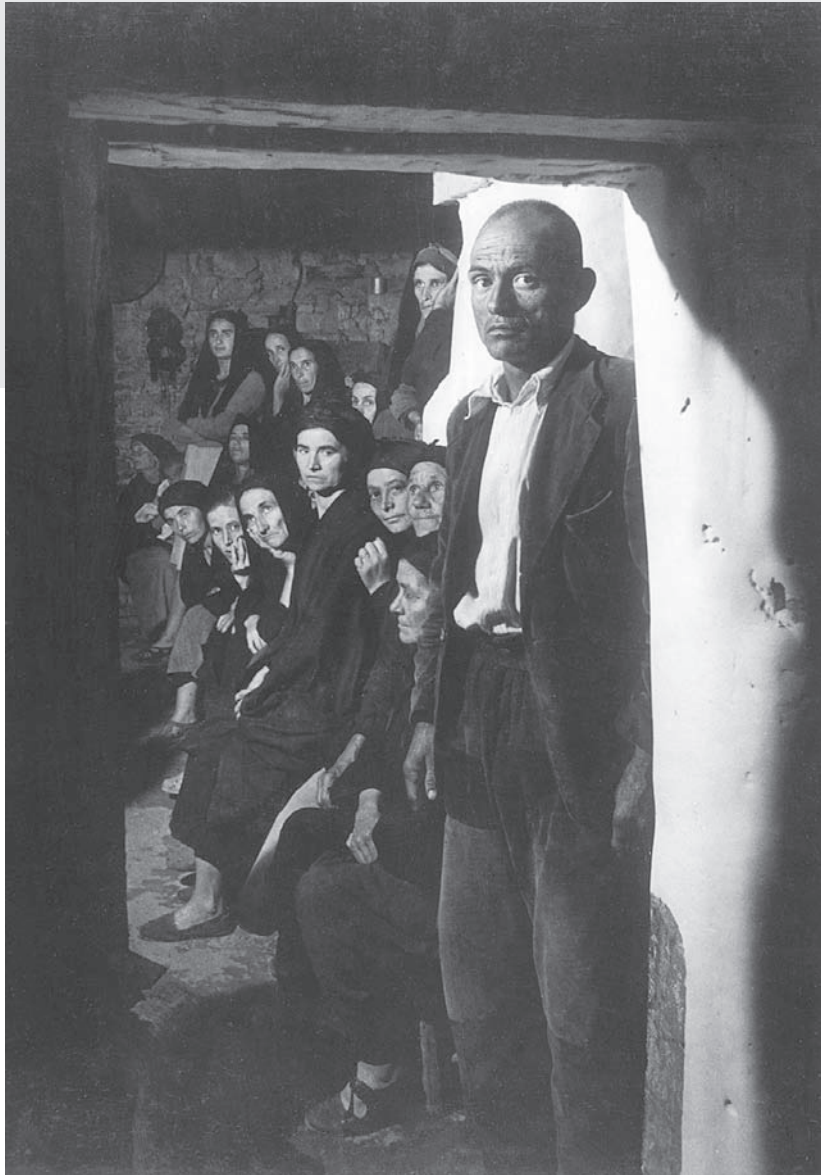
*Tears welled in my guest's eyes.*

*"I can help you," I said, "but first there is something that you must do." He became very attentive. "Go to town, and knock on the door of the first house you come to. Ask the people inside if their family has ever been touched by death. If so, go to the next house. When you find a family that has not been touched by death, bring them to me. Do you understand?" He nodded, and I sighed. "I'm tired now."*

*He got up, set the ballerina back on the table, and started for the door. I stopped him. "Young man!" He faced me from the doorway. "Come back as soon as you can."*

David Gordon





W. Eugene Smith. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, © Heirs of W. Eugene Smith

*In a Spanish village, neighbors and relatives peer through the doorway upon the deathbed scene of a villager.*

# 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

The study of death can “lead us to take seriously our finitude, our mortality, as something that provides significance to our lives.”<sup>3</sup> 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 said, “Death is very likely the single best invention of life.” He called it “life’s change agent.”<sup>4</sup>

## *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.<sup>5</sup> 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 blogs giving further details and opinion.<sup>6</sup> 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 jetliner crashes, 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



Herbert Johnson, Library of Congress

grave plots.”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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 a heart attack are about 1 in 5, we seem more fascinated by death from bee stings (1 in 62,950), lightning (1 in 81,701), or fireworks (1 in 479,992).<sup>11</sup>

Media experts say that the “reality violence” on TV news really began with coverage of the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> Allan Kellehear says, “There is no shortage of death reportage in the media . . . however, what passes for death is frequently merely violence.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

### *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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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 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