

Death, Dying, and Bereavement in a Changing World

Alan R. Kemp

Pierce College

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PREFACE

Death, dying, and bereavement are different today than in times past. As Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* said, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto.” Before modernization, life was different. Industrialization ushered in a new world of technology. Today, we are arguably on the cusp of yet another change, a postmodern world, in which information technology, globalization, and new ways of relating loom big. The world in which we live has changed. “Back in the day,” as they say, someone might reasonably expect to die the “good death,” at home, cared for by family and friends. With the arrival of industrialization and advances in medical technology, it has become far more likely to die in a hospital or nursing home, surrounded by the latest medical technology.

Today, we are not always even sure what death is. Do we mean being “clinically dead”—unable to breathe on one’s own and have a heart that is still beating? Or do we mean “brain dead,” sometimes called being a “heart-beating cadaver”? When I began working on this project I felt there was a need for a book that tried to provide a context for understanding our changing encounters with death, dying, and bereavement.

I also believed there was a need for a book that helps students integrate the various dimensions of experience with death, dying, and bereavement. Indeed, something else I am very concerned about is assisting readers in understanding the topic from a multidimensional perspective. This includes approaching it in an integrated way, looking at the physical, social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

Ernest Becker (1973) is credited with coining the term *denial of death* to describe modern-day attitudes toward death. To use the term *denial* also implies that we human beings are somehow at odds with consciousness about the unpleasant reality of death. Although it may be true that human societies engage in all kinds of practices that are designed to protect us from coming too close to this grim eventuality, death’s profound presence is never very far away. Regardless of how we choose to relate to it, death is that most universal of all human experiences.

People in all places and at all times have found ways to relate to death and dying. Beliefs, attitudes, and practices about the end-of-life issues are integral to virtually all human cultures. In the modern technological world in which we live here in North America, there exists a highly evolved system of health care that attempts to combat disease of all kinds and ward off death. Our educational system is rooted in a model of “scientific empiricism” that demands that we try to control the variables we study in order to establish cause-and-effect relationships between them. Because of advances in knowledge, technology, and medicine, life expectancy has been increased to a remarkable degree, at least in the technologically advanced parts of the world.

Modern approaches to mental health and self-help promote ways to help people get the most out of life and live it to its fullest. Despite all this, the end of life remains a pervasive part of the human experience. It is not my intent to be morbid in what I have

said here. Life is rich, and precious, and wonderful. It is to be appreciated all the more because our days are numbered. The possibilities in life are replete and its dimensions are many. I hope we can find ways to bridge gaps in our understanding and integrate what we know about life and its counterpart, death. To do so, we explore the relationships that exist between the many facets of living and dying. For me, this means delving into beliefs and meaning; aspirations and what people feel drawn to; human experience and emotion; courage, hope, and growth; ritual and spiritual practices; what it means to live in the fellowship of communities; and what it means to exist within the social institutions that are so integral to our society.

WHAT IS IN THIS BOOK?

Death, Dying, and Bereavement in a Changing World has six parts and a total of fifteen chapters. Part I has four chapters that provide an introduction and context. Chapter 1 opens with the topic of “lifting the pall.” The pall, a cloth placed over the casket during a funeral, is a metaphor for “denial of death,” the title of the Pulitzer Prize–winning book by Ernest Becker. The text introduces thanatology, the study of death, dying, and bereavement; reviews key events in the development of the field; discusses the multidisciplinary nature of the field; introduces the four-facet model (physical, social, psychological, and spiritual dimensions); and explores the present-day conversation between theory, research, and practice. Chapter 2 focuses on our changing experience as shaped by society, science, and technology. Whereas in times past people ideally died at home, surrounded by friends and family, today seven out of ten people die in a hospital or nursing home. Science has increased average life expectancy by 30 years in just a century, and our industrialized and bureaucratized health-care system has changed *how* we die. In Chapter 3, we will look at death and human development, exploring encounters with death across the life span, the nature of children’s consciousness about death, and what happens when the life cycle naturally concludes. Chapter 4 focuses on cross-cultural and interfaith dimensions. The title begins with *Coureur de Bois*, a French-Canadian term denoting the idea of travelers sharing stories about all the places they have been and things they have seen. We will look at the relationship between culture, spirit, and death; review theoretical perspectives on the role of spirituality and religion; and survey five key religious perspectives.

The three chapters of Part II examine death itself. Chapter 5 takes a historical and cross-cultural look at the business of undertaking. It begins with a discussion of clinical death and looks at what happens when the heart stops beating, breathing stops, the body cools, rigor mortis sets in, and the body begins to decay. The text reviews burial practices from ancient times to the emergence of the modern “funeral service industry.” Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of our contemporary “death system” but also explores criticisms of “McDeath,” the corporate commercialization of death. It explores the use and abuse of the Amended Funeral Rule. It also examines alternatives: funeral consumers’ societies, home funerals, and green burial. Chapter 7 addresses traumatic

death—that is, death that is sudden, violent, and/or inflicted. Within this context, we will explore death from murder, suicide, terrorism, and pandemics, such as AIDS.

Part III is concerned with dying, or the process of getting dead. It has two chapters. Chapter 8 looks at what is involved in facing death and what it means to make the transition from feeling “temporarily immortal” to being “terminal.” The chapter discusses Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s classic stages of dying and Dr. William Bartholome’s experience with the “Angel of Death,” and examines “death trajectories.” In Chapter 9 you will learn about “intensive caring,” the term I use when discussing modern hospice and palliative care—the “gold standard” when it comes to end-of-life care. We will discuss its evolution and key players. As our discussion draws to a close, we will explore the pitfalls and falling through the cracks.

Part IV, which focuses on bereavement, grief, and mourning, has two chapters. Chapter 10 considers the “normal” bereavement, grief, and mourning. We will look at the classic “grief work” model first articulated by Sigmund Freud and further developed by a whole generation of theorists. Then we will explore the “new science of bereavement research,” which may be turning the old ideas on its head. Chapter 11 focuses on complicated grief—what happens when grief is experienced too intensely or for too long. We will investigate the evidence that supports innovative approaches to treatment.

Part V contains two chapters that deal with the legal and ethical borderlands. Chapter 12 explores physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. You will learn that physician-assisted suicide is now legal in Oregon and Washington state and is tolerated in Montana. Typically, the physician prescribes a drug the patient takes to end his or her life. Some patients, however, such as those suffering from Lou Gehrig’s disease, may not be able to act on their own. This is the segue to discussion of the issue of voluntary euthanasia, what happens when someone else takes steps to end the life of a patient who wants to die. Although illegal in all U.S. jurisdictions, it is tolerated in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Chapter 13 addresses the issues of withdrawing life-support systems and organ transplantation. The text reviews “brain death” and harvesting human organs, and discusses what to do when a person is in a “persistent vegetative state,” “coma,” or “locked-in syndrome.”

Part VI contains two chapters. Chapter 14 addresses a single question, but it is a big one: What happens after we die? According to terror management theory (TMT), discussed in Chapter 1, human beings are different from other animals in that we can conceptualize our own deaths, leading to death anxiety and a host of other problems. Also according to this theory, we have come up with two strategies to deal with it: culture (including the use of religion) and self-efficacy, or the sense of personal empowerment. Most religions tell us that part of us survives death. In this chapter, we will explore in some detail what the various religious traditions say about life after life. We will also contemplate speculations based on the so-called near-death experience. Chapter 15 looks at what is ahead. It reviews the current trends in death, dying, and bereavement and speculates on the future, including the experiences of the “X-ers,” “Nexters,” and “Texters.”

HOLISTIC AND INTEGRATED APPROACH

The field of thanatology is multidimensional and multidisciplinary. It is an enterprise that strives to integrate diverse perspectives and facets of life (Corr, 1992; Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association, 2004; Ferris et al., 2002; Last Acts, 2003a, 2003b). This makes it unique in academia.

Parker Palmer, an academically trained sociologist, is now more renowned as a social commentator and educational revolutionary. He is among a growing number of educators, spiritual leaders, and researchers advocating for a more integrated, or holistic, approach to education generally (Griffiths & Edwards, 1989; Miller, 2000; Palmer, 1993, 1998). Palmer suggests that in our need to specialize (e.g., psychology, sociology, and thanatology), we have also carved up the pursuit of knowledge, dividing rather than uniting (Palmer, 1993). One of his concerns is that in doing so we have also separated ourselves from each other and become less appreciative of the mysteries of life in general.

Perhaps in an effort to put the whole venture of education into context, Palmer (1993) observes that higher education can trace its origins to the monasteries of medieval Europe, where monks emphasized three key areas of activity: (1) reading scripture, (2) praying and contemplating, and (3) developing spiritual community. He suggests that of these came three key values of academia: (1) respect for the body of scholarly literature, (2) an emphasis on research and analysis, and (3) respect for a collegial community of scholars. Palmer observes that scholars and monks alike had in common a dedication to study, contemplation, and a deep interior life. He laments that when society rejected the excesses of the medieval period and adopted a more scientific approach to knowing, we may have also inadvertently lost something.

With the advent of science, technology, and industrialization came an emphasis on action. Palmer (1993) suggests that in a renewed effort to uncover greater meaning in life, we may want to strike a balance between doing and being. Today, average life expectancy has increased dramatically and infant mortality has declined. However, we may need to ask if how we live and die has really improved.

In pursuit of uncovering new wisdom about life from the study of death, this text intends to both build on contemporary scholarship and endeavor to reclaim our humanity. I like the parallels Palmer makes between academia today and the monastic traditions that gave rise to it. In the following table, I draw some parallels between monastic and academic traditions and extend the model to include several learning tools, or activities, used throughout this text.

This book is committed to the idea that in our quest to uncover wisdom about life through the study of death, we should make it one of both mind and heart. It should, of course, include all the rigors of any other academic pursuit, but also honor our deeply personal quest to understand.

To complement the scholarly literature, I have integrated the concept of *story*, some related to individual experience, others that are more cultural. To balance an

A Comparison of Academic and Monastic Traditions and the Learning “Tools” Integrated into this Text

Monastic Heritage	Academic Tradition	Text Learning “Tool”
Sacred scripture	Body of literature	Story
Prayer and contemplation	Research and analysis	Reflection
Spiritual community	Collegial community of scholars	Sharing that fosters a community of learners

exploration of research and analysis I invite you to *reflect*. I will at times *share* the results of experience and reflections and encourage you to do the same. Although the emphasis in academia today is on the building of a body of knowledge and a collegial community of scholars, I hope we can also cultivate our own community of learners.

A review of the literature can inform us about what others have uncovered; the exploration of story makes us participants. Research and analysis leads to the discovery of new truth; reflection may well lead us to uncover hidden truths about ourselves and events. Interaction within the community of scholars leads to the growth of new knowledge, but sharing experience with each other may contribute to the growth of new understanding.

As we all know, story is one of the most engaging ways to bring ideas to life. It is also among the most ancient and natural ways to learn. To complement the literature, I plan to weave stories generously throughout the text. Some, like the snippets I have already shared, come from my own experience. Some come from the experiences of people I have spoken with or from stories I have heard.



Listening to stories and telling them helped our ancestors to live humanly—to be human. But somewhere along the way our ability to tell (and to listen to) stories was lost.

—ERNEST KURTZ AND KATHERINE KETCHAM
The spirituality of imperfection, 1992



Reflection, for the purpose of this text, is the process of exploring one’s own experience in conversation with the literature, research, story, and experience of others (for a discussion of theological reflection, see Killen & De Beer, 1999). It should be a give-and-take dialog. Reflection can confirm, challenge, clarify, or expand understanding. It is intended to lead to new truth or meaning. I will share my reflections and at various times invite you to explore your own.

Sharing is central to cultivating the kind of mutual respect and understanding that can lead to building a community of learners. If you do the “object exercise” I suggest in Chapter 1, you will have an experience of the kind of sharing I am talking about here. When people tell about a meaningful object connected with an experience with death, they enhance the understanding of others. I have never ceased to be impressed by the richness of experience that learners bring with them. When sharing occurs, I get the sense that rather than merely hearing about others, we actually have an opportunity to experience a little bit of their lives. What we learn is not usually restricted to a few tidbits of data in a narrow range of “icebreaker” topics. With this, comes respect for, and understanding of, the people with whom we journey.

KEY FEATURES

I hope that *Death, Dying, and Bereavement in a Changing World* will serve as an introductory text to be used by a general population of undergraduate and graduate students, in addition to students of psychology, sociology, human services, social work, medicine, nursing, chaplaincy, and ministry. I believe it provides a venue in which students can do both a personal and academic exploration of the subject. In addition to a “student-friendly,” conversational tone, each chapter presents a chapter preview, special feature “boxes” (e.g., with vignettes, stories, or anecdotes), visual data display (tables and charts), photos, chapter summaries, key terms, suggested activities, and suggested reading. Toward this end, the approach I have taken includes:

- *Holistic/integrated approach*: We explore a variety of dimensions, each to be respected for itself, yet treated within a framework that attempts to uncover the relationships that exist between them.
- *Multilevel fabric*: The entire piece of work attempts to delve into the drama from a variety of vantage points. For example, you will find individual experiences of people not unlike yourself, as well as stories about people who seem quite different from your identity; explorations of life and death in distinct communities, subgroups, and special populations; and broader social issues that are played out at the societal level.
- *Story*: It is my contention that stories help bring concepts to life. These chapters weave the accounts of the personal stories of real people into the text.
- *Symbol and myth*: Symbols, myth, and archetypes are interlaced into the text, at appropriate points, in order to arouse the imagination and bring you into contact with a world of enduring themes.
- *Mind-body-spirit*: This book gives respectful coverage of the mind-body-spirit connection, including the influence of such dimensions as hope and faith on health and recovery.
- *Reflections*: The chapters include original research on bereavement and reflections drawn from firsthand hospice experience.

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GRATITUDES

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Alan R. Kemp
Pierce College

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan R. Kemp is Professor and Coordinator of the sociology department at Pierce College, Ft. Steilacoom, Washington, where he teaches a course on death, dying, and bereavement. He holds master's degrees in social work and divinity. He earned his doctorate at the then amalgamated colleges of St. Stephen's and St. Andrew's in Edmonton, Alberta, and Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Kemp has many years of experience in teaching, ministry, and professional counseling. He is a licensed mental-health professional. He was also among the last American advisors serving on "Swift Boats" (PCFs) in Vietnam. Kemp lives with his wife, Claudia, and a menagerie of "critters" at their cabin in rural western Washington state.