Session 1

The End of Life and the Quest for Human Meaning

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The Territory Ahead

- Session 1: Major Themes Introduced: The difficult quest for a good death
- Session 2: Probing the American Sensibility: what we fear & what we yearn for
- Session 3: Advance Directives: realistic expectations and magical thinking
Session 4: Physician Assistance: an ethical review of policies & practices

Session 5: Finitude, Virtues and the Question of a Duty to Die

Session 6: Responses, Nagging Issues, and other Leftovers
The Problematics of Modern Death

“If you don’t know how to die, don’t worry. Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don’t bother your head about it.”

--Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, 1595
Motifs to Keep in Mind

“All philosophy is training for death”
--Socrates

“Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.”
--Psalm 90

Teaching people to die is teaching them to live...
--Montaigne

“Any definition of health that is not silly must include death.”
--Wendell Berry
Dominant U.S. culture: (still) death-denying?

- “Death is UnAmerican”
  --Arnold Toynbee

- Death as an option...an accident, or the result of preventable illness; Aging as problem for science

- “The medicalization of dying”
  --Phillipe Aries, The Hour of Our Death

- Avoid terms like “died” or “death” in condolence letters
  --Amy Vanderbilt, The Complete Book of Etiquette
Euphemisms for Death

- To be in Abraham’s bosom
- To make the big jump
- To pop off the hooks
- To do one’s bit
- To buy the farm
- To go home in a box
- To check out
- To cash in one’s chips
- To go up the creek, or up the salt river
- To croak
- To count one’s debts
- To pay the debt of nature
- To answer the final summons
- To flunk out
- To slip off
- To strike out
- To be trumped

-- from Neaman and Silver’s Kind Words: A Thesaurus of Euphemisms
Consequences

- Funeral practices that mask death
- Theological doctrines that deny death, or portray it as “the enemy of God”
- Medical practices that abandon the dying
- Research & technologies that seek to arrest aging (and postpone dying)
- Social practices that don’t tolerate grief
- Politicization of private decisions
Death has become sentimentalized, highly commercialized, and, above all, excessively expensive.

1963
OUT OF THE WAY!
STAND BACK, PLEASE!
I'M AN ELECTED OFFICIAL...!

*NEWS ITEM*
TREND OF POLITICIANS OVERRULING MEDICAL DECISIONS ON END-OF-LIFE AND ABORTION SITUATIONS CONTINUES UNCHECKED.
Denial leads to Polarization

- **Vitalism**
  - life at all costs & in all forms
  - sacredness of biological life
  - death is the greatest evil
  - health professionals as saviors (plucking us from death)

- **Nihilism**
  - dispense with life when burdensome or costly
  - sacredness of individual choice
  - suffering, or loss of meaning, is the greatest evil
  - health professionals as saviors (assisting us into death)
Current Trends

- Expansion of Hospice Care
- Death Doulas, Death Cafes, Death Over Dinner, Living Funerals
- Death Cleaning – “Will anyone I know be happier if I save this?”
- Green burials – biodegradable shrouds...

A healthy trend, or more avoidance? Is death what we fear or a meaningless dying? Or both?
Dimensions of a “Good Death”

What surveys consistently show:

- Avoiding “social death” (abandonment)
- Minimizing pain and suffering
- When *biological* and *biographical* death occur simultaneously
- Dying in a way that reflects and affirms the values of one’s life...
“O Lord, grant each his own, his death indeed,
The dying which out of that same life evolves
In which he once had meaning, love and need.”
--Rainer Maria Rilke
“Call no man happy until his death,
Always we must await his final day,
Reserving judgment until he’s laid away.”

--Ovid, 1\textsuperscript{st} Century B.C.E.
as quoted in Montaigne’s \textit{Essays}
Dying as Natural

- A natural and expected event, not a preventable biological mistake
- Emphasis on “Will to Live”
- Does seeing death as natural give it meaning, or more meaning?
Dying as Spiritual

- An opportunity for affirming finitude. . . a blessing, opening possibilities for spiritual meaning

Features of Spiritual Experience

- Being in presence of, in touch with, what’s real--eternal, rather than transient--sacred
- Sense of goodness, beauty, wholeness;
- And belonging to that encompassing wholeness
- Response of awe, wonder, reverence

--Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences*, 1964
Human Spirituality

- Spiritual experiences may or may not take a traditional religious form...

- Humans are polymorphously spiritual... there are a wide range of human experiences or activities that serve as conduits to spiritual awareness, or sense of the sacred

- Dying is fertile ground for spirituality, independent of any beliefs about an afterlife.
Caring for people at the end of life is spiritual work, not because of religious beliefs (or lack of it) of patients or caregivers, but because dying is a fundamental process for making or affirming deep meaning, for transcendence, or touching what is sacred. . .
Gabriel Marcel, 1879-1973

- *The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1&2*
Dying as Natural Event (Things that obscure or prevent this fit Marcel’s notion of a problem)

Dying as Spiritual Possibility (Human experiences of this kind fit Marcel’s notion of mystery)
A typology of the range of values re: dying vis-à-vis medical interventions

- Fearful Minimalists
- Hopeful Vitalists
- Anxious Agnostics
A Thought Experiment----

IMAGINE YOUR OWN DEATH

- How old are you? (specific date?)
- Where are you?
- What is the cause of your death?
- What are your last words?
Some Take Home Questions

- How likely is it that I will get my imagined death?
- What can I do to increase the likelihood of the death I have imagined?
- Would it be good to have several death scenarios in mind? (or maybe no specific death scenario?)