

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

The Territory Ahead, cont'd.

- 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

Yet, in the modern period our technological abilities have outrun our moral sensibilities.

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

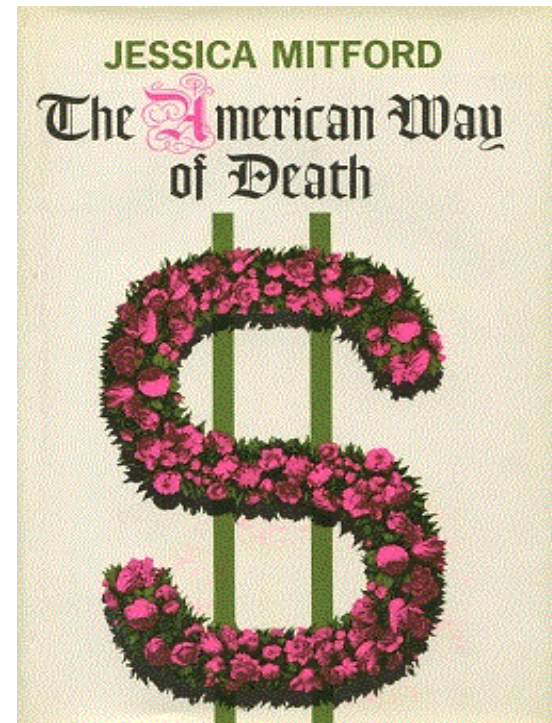
Consequences of Denial

- 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 (anti-aging market=\$70+ billion worldwide)
- Social practices that don't tolerate grief
- Politicization of private decisions

Funeral Practices that Mask Death

Death has become sentimentalized, highly commercialized, and, above all, excessively expensive.

1963



Politicization of Private Decisions



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...

Having Death Reflect 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



The Precarious Nature of Dying Well

“Call no man happy until his death,
Always we must await his final day,
Reserving judgment until he’s laid away.”

--Ovid, 1th Century B.C.E.

as quoted in Montaigne’s *Essays*

Dying as Natural

- A natural and expected event, not a preventable biological mistake

--Jack McCue, "The Naturalness of Dying"
JAMA 1995;273:1039-43

- 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

--Hans Jonas, "The Burdens and Blessings of Mortality," *Hastings Center Report* 1992;22:34-40.

--LR Churchill, "Accepting and Embracing our Mortality," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 66(3) Summer, 2023; 451-460.

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 the Dying as Spiritual Work

- 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



Problems and Mysteries

Marcel said in life we are faced with both *problems* to be solved and *mysteries* to be pondered.

- Dying can be both a problem, and a mystery.
- Dying as a problem: too many ineffective or unwanted interventions
- Dying as a mystery: allowing it to be an opening to the sacred, or deeper meaning

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?

Questions for Discussion

- 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 wise to have several death scenarios in mind? (or maybe no specific death scenario?)