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Chapters 1 through 3
The Last Dance:
Encountering Death & Dying
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by
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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. Dead end. Dead center. Dead heat. Dead drunk. Deadwood. Deadbeat. Dead reckoning. Dead on. Dead against. Dead stop. Deadlock. Deadpan. Dead ahead.

Take a look at 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 dire consequences when you miss a "deadline." In contrast, however, "dead reckoning" gives us direction to a place where we are going.

Perhaps 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 in our lives, a place where we all end up?

Of all human experiences, none is more overwhelming in its implications than death. Yet, death often remains a shadowy figure whose presence is only vaguely acknowledged. We tend to relegate death to the periphery of our lives, as if it can be kept out of sight, out of mind.[1] Death may be like a mysterious stranger at a costume ball, whose mask conceals the face beneath. Perhaps the disguise is more terrifying than the reality, yet how can we know unless we risk uncovering the face hidden behind the mask? Learning about death and dying helps us lift the mask and encounter death in ways that are meaningful for our own lives. As

Mexican poet and social philosopher Octavio Paz says, "A civilization that denies death ends by denying life."[2]

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. Where death is concerned, the adage "What you don't know won't hurt you" is false.

Expressions of Attitudes Toward Death

Direct, firsthand experience with death is rare for most people, yet death still has a significant place in our social and cultural worlds. Attitudes held by individuals in a given society are 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, the visual arts, and even in the jokes and other forms of humor people employ in response to matters involving death. As you read about some of the ways attitudes toward death are expressed, notice how these varied expressions reveal thoughts and feelings about death, both individually and culturally.

Mass Media

Modern communication technology makes us all instantaneous survivors as news of disaster, terrorism, war, and political assassination is flashed around the world. Stunned viewers watch in disbelief as the terrible event unfolds. When situations involve a perceived threat, people turn to the mass media as sources of information. Because the vicarious experiences filtered through the mass media significantly influence our attitudes, it is worth asking, What do these secondhand sources tell us about death and dying?

In the News

When you are reading the daily newspaper or an online news source, what kinds of encounters with death vie for your attention? Scanning the day's news, 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. Here you see a story describing how a family perished when trapped inside their burning home; in another, a family's vacation comes 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, as well as via feature-length *obituaries*.[3] Prefaced by headlines and set in the larger type used for feature stories, obituaries send a message about the newsworthiness that editors attribute to the deaths of famous people. In fact, news organizations maintain files of pending obituaries for individuals whose deaths will be newsworthy, and these obituaries are updated periodically so that they are ready for publication or broadcast when the occasion demands.

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

Herbert Johnson, Library of Congress

alphabetically in a column of vital statistics "as uniform as a row of tiny grave plots."[4] The death of a neighbor or colleague is not likely to be reported with the emphasis afforded the famous. Ordinary deaths—the kind most of us will experience—are usually ignored or mentioned only in routine fashion. The spectacular obscures the ordinary. Obituaries for "ordinary Joes" may be experiencing a revival among some newspapers, however, as "egalitarian obits" try to "nail down quickly what it is we're losing when a particular person dies."[5]

Whether routine or extraordinary, our encounters with death in the news media influence the way we think about and respond to death. News 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.[6] As cofounder of the Black Panther Party, Newton had a public career spanning two decades, yet most reports focused on the violent nature of Newton's demise while ignoring other aspects of his life and, indeed, the tragic nature of his death. The implicit message seemed to be "He who lives by the sword dies by the sword."

A very different perception was communicated in reports of the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* shortly after launch and of the reentry failure

of the shuttle *Columbia*. These events were portrayed as tragedies affecting the whole country, evoking a sense of shared grief. As in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, television was likened to a national hearth around which Americans symbolically gathered to collectively work through their shock and grief.

Whether television is best characterized as a national hearth or as simply another household appliance, 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 cover in stories that involve death and survivors' grief. The distinction between *public* event and *private* loss sometimes blurs.

When a Canadian newspaper published a photograph of a distraught mother as she learned of her daughter's fatal injuries in an accident, many readers expressed outrage, characterizing the photograph as "a blatant example of morbid ludicrousness" and "the highest order of poor taste and insensitivity."[7] The mother, interestingly enough, did not share these feelings. Seeing the published photo, she said, helped her comprehend what had happened. People who are bereaved by sudden, unexpected death typically want to obtain details to help them reconstruct the events surrounding the death, as an aid in coping with the reality of their loss. So, was the newspaper right to publish the photo? Or were outraged readers correctly defending the rights of a grief-stricken mother, who appeared to have been victimized by an intrusive press? Or, yet again, did such volatile emotion result from the readers' own uncomfortable feelings about death? As this example suggests, people sometimes ascribe emotions to the grief-stricken that are not actually present.

Even so, media coverage of horrific deaths sometimes leads to "revictimization" or "second trauma" after the initial trauma of the event itself. Reporters may capture the experience of a tragedy at the expense of victims. The journalistic stance, "If it bleeds, it leads," can set priorities. (To be fair, this stance is a journalistic response to the human tendency toward voyeurism—our desire to have a close-up view of what's going on in other people's lives, a trait apparently shared with our primate cousins.[8] Characterizing tragic events as "defining moments" plays to a human yearning to escape rather humdrum lives and feel that we are living in extraordinary times.)

In recent years, the Internet not only increases the speed at which the news is reported, it also allows one to follow along with online updates from international news agencies and comments from blogs giving further details and opinion.[9]

An important question is whether the media help us explore the meaning of death or merely seek to grab our attention with sensationalistic news flashes. Robert Fulton and Greg Owen comment that the media often "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] News of a bus crash or mine disaster is interposed between reports about the stock market or factory layoffs. The grief experienced by survivors or the disruption of their lives is generally given little attention.

Deaths from car accidents, cancer, and heart disease don't seem to inter-est us as much as deaths from plane crashes, roller-coaster mishaps, or moun-tain lion attacks; only bizarre or dramatic exits grab our attention. Although the odds of dying from a heart attack are about one in five, we seem more fas-cinated by death from bee stings (1 in 56,780), lightning (1 in 79,746), or fireworks (1 in 340,733).[11] Think about your own experiences regarding deaths reported in the media. How accurately do such reports resemble the losses we experience in our own lives?

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."[12] Such depictions re-flect what Gerbner and his colleagues have called 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." The suggestion that we live in a "mean world" is reinforced "as news media seek to attract and hold audiences [with] stories that depict worsening trends and threats."[13] There is general agreement among media analysts that, in recent years, a "dis-course of fear" has been increasingly evident in the mass media.[14]

Entertaining Death

With an average of 2.5 television sets in American households, television's influence on our lives is well established.[15] Far from being ignored, death is a central theme of much television programming. 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 broad-cast), nature programs (death in the animal kingdom), children's cartoons (caricatures of death), soap operas (which seem always to have some charac-ter dying), sports (with descriptions such as "the ball is dead" and "the other team is killing them"), and religious programs (with theological and anec-dotal mention of death). Yet these diverse images seldom add to our under-standing of death itself. Few programs deal with such real-life topics as how people cope with a loved one's death or confront their own dying. This rela-tive lack of stories that include themes dealing with death, dying, and be-reavement in positive ways has been characterized by Frederic Tate as "an impoverishment of death symbolism" in the entertainment media.[16]

Turning to programming directed toward children, recall Saturday morn-ing 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 shot-gun 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. (You may also recall similar scenes set in an imagined future in the *Terminator* films.)

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!"

When told of his grandfather's death, one modern 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.[17]

Thrillers featuring extreme violence are 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" films like *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which included point-of-view shots from the killer's perspective. In traditional horror films, the audience usually views the action through the eyes of the victim and thus identifies 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 apparently universal appeal of depictions of violence in movies and other media suggests that residual tendencies from our evolutionary background may attract human beings to "exhibitions of brutality and terror."[18]

Unrealistic portrayals of violent death fail to show the real harm to victims, their pain, or appropriate punishment for perpetrators. As a result, they may cause viewers to be less sensitive to both real violence and its victims, increase unwarranted fears of becoming a victim, and contribute to aggressive behavior.[19]

To be fair, films and television programs do at times focus more responsibly and realistically on important topics involving dying, death, and bereavement, as in the film *WIT,* which tells the story of a college professor who discovers she has advanced ovarian cancer and only a short time to live, or *World Trade Center* and *United 93*, which dealt with the catastrophe of September 11, 2001. Another example was the television series *On Our Own Terms,* hosted by Bill Moyers, which examined end-of-life care. Featuring experts in palliative medicine and hospice care, the series opened a window into the experiences of terminally ill patients and emphasized the importance of talking about issues related to dying and death. Moyers said, "I realized that each day

of filming was one day closer to my own death," and "Looking at dying taught me about living."

Lessons about living with loss were also central to the story line of *The Son's Room [La Stanza del Figlio],* a film written and directed by Italian film-maker Nanni Moretti, which tells the story of a family's grief after the teenage son dies in a diving accident. In an affecting and accurate manner, the film depicts the varied emotions that can be present in coping with a senseless tragedy, with family members retreating into their own private corners of grief before eventually arriving at a shared recognition that life goes on despite loss. Moretti told an interviewer: "These characters cannot forget what happened, they don't want to forget what happened, but, in the end, something starts to change. Their lives will not be the same. But maybe they have found the means within themselves to turn grief into something else."[20] As one critic observed, the film stands as a reminder that, while loss is inevitable, it need not be ruinous.[21] Movies often engage our psychological faculties in profound and unique ways.[22] In thinking about the films 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 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 and may be used to keep death at arm's length by masking its reality. Hannelore Wass, a pioneering death educator, notes that euphemisms substituting for plain-spoken "D" words even turn up in the language of death and dying experts as terminal care becomes "palliative care" and dying patients are described as "life-threatened."[23] Death may be described as "a negative patient-care outcome" and an airline crash as an "involuntary conversion of a 727."[24] Careful listeners will notice that euphemisms, metaphors, and slang comprise a large part of "death talk" (see Table 1-1).

Euphemisms devalue and depersonalize death when plain talk about death is subverted by a lexicon of substitutions—for example, when individuals killed in battle are described in terms of "body counts" or civilian deaths are termed "collateral damage." Used in this way, euphemisms mask accurate descriptions of the horror of death in war.

The use of euphemism and metaphor does not always imply an impulse to deny the reality of death or avoid talking about it, however. These linguistic devices also can be employed to communicate subtler or deeper meanings than those associated with plainer speech. For example, terms like "passing"

T A B L E *1-1* *Death Talk: Metaphors, Euphemisms, and Slang*

Passed on	Gathered home
Croaked	Taking the dirt nap
Kicked the bucket	On the other side
Gone to heaven	God took him/her
Gone home	Asleep in Christ
Expired	Departed
Breathed the last	Transcended
Succumbed	Bought the farm
Left us	With the angels
Went to his/her eternal reward	Feeling no pain
Lost	Offed himself/herself
Met his/her Maker	His/her time was up
Wasted	Cashed in
Checked out	Crossed over Jordan
Eternal rest	Perished
Laid to rest	Ate it
Pushing up daisies	Was done in
Called home	Translated into glory
Was a goner	Returned to dust
Came to an end	Subject just fataled
Bit the dust	In the arms of the Father
Annihilated	Gave it up
Liquidated	It was curtains
Terminated	A long sleep
Gave up the ghost	On the heavenly shores
Didn't make it	Out of his/her misery
Rubbed out	Ended it all
Snuffed	Angels carried him/her away
Six feet under	Resting in peace
Passing	Changed form
Found everlasting peace	Dropped the body
Went to a new life	Returned to the source
In the great beyond	That was all she wrote
No longer with us	Passed away

or "passing on" may convey an understanding of death as a spiritual transition, especially among members of some religious and ethnic traditions.

Sympathy cards represent a way for people to express condolences to the bereaved without directly mentioning death.[25] 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 are used to 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. You may find it 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 the death, but it tends to distance 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.[26] 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 can also tell us something about the intensity and immediacy of a person's close encounter with death in the form of "danger of death" narratives—stories about close calls with death. In such stories, a tense shift 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 some years earlier 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.[27]

Word choices may 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.

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 a speaker's attitude toward the death. Consider, for instance, the difference between "passed away" and "passed on." Subtle distinctions may reflect different attitudes, sometimes involving cultural frameworks. Paying attention to the metaphors, euphemisms, 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.

Music

Themes of loss and death are heard in all musical styles (see Table 1-2).[28] For example, the lyrics of Elvis Presley's early hit, "Heartbreak Hotel," reportedly were inspired by a suicide note that contained the phrase, "I walk the lonely street." In fact, it has been suggested that death imagery in rock music helped break the taboo against public mention of death. Support for this thesis is found in surveys of Top 40 songs.[29] The branch of heavy metal music

T A B L E   *1-2*   *Death Themes in Contemporary Popular Music*

Performer	Song	Theme
Tori Amos	Little Earthquakes	Multiple losses
Beatles	Eleanor Rigby	Aging and loss
Boyz II Men	Say Goodbye to Yesterday	Loss and grief
Garth Brooks	One Night a Day	Coping with grief
Jackson Browne	For a Dancer	Eulogy
Johnny Cash	The Man Comes Around	Death and Judgment Day
Eric Clapton	Tears in Heaven	Death of young son
Elvis Costello	Waiting for the End of the World	Threat of death
Joe Diffie	Almost Home	Anticipating father's death
Dion	Abraham, Martin, and John	Political assassination
Doors	The End	Murder
Bob Dylan	Knockin' on Heaven's Door	Last words / Death scene
Grateful Dead	Black Peter	Social support in dying
Jimi Hendrix	Mother Earth	Inevitability of death
Indigo Girls	Pushing the Needle Too Far	Drug-related death
Elton John	Candle in the Wind	Death of Marilyn Monroe
The Judds	Guardian Angels	Ancestors
Patty Loveless	How Can I Help You to Say Goodbye?	A mother's dying
Madonna	Promise to Try	Mother's death
Metallica	Fight Fire with Fire	Nuclear catastrophe
Mike and the Mechanics	The Living Years	Father's death
Morrissey	Angel, Angel, Down We Go	Suicide intervention
Holly Near	The Letter	Friend dying of AIDS
Sinead O'Connor	I Am Stretched on Your Grave	Mourning behavior
Oingo Boingo	No One Lives Forever	Facing death stoically
Pink Floyd	Dogs of War	War-related deaths
The Police	Murder by Numbers	Political killings
Elvis Presley	In the Ghetto	Violent death and grief
Queen	Another One Bites the Dust	Violent death
Lou Reed	Sword of Damocles	Coping with terminal illness
Henry Rollins	Drive-by Shooting	Satire on death by random violence
Carly Simon	Life Is Eternal	Desire for immortality
Snoop Doggy Dogg	Murder Was the Case	Urban homicide and justice system
Bruce Springsteen	Streets of Philadelphia	Dying of AIDS
James Taylor	Fire and Rain	Death of a friend
Stevie Wonder	My Love Is with You	Violent death of a child
Warren Zevon	My Ride's Here	Arrival of hearse and death

known as death metal is defined partly by its lyrics conveying striking images of homicide, catastrophic destruction, and suicide, performed by bands with names like Morbid Angel, Napalm Death, Carcass, and Entombed. Themes involving dying and death are also commonplace in rap and hip-hop, with examples like Coolio's description of a "Gangsta's Paradise" and Puff Daddy's grief over a close friend's death in "I'll be Missing You."

The tragedy of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks led musicians to respond with songs like Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" and Neil Young's "Let's Roll," inspired by the words of a passenger on Flight 93, which crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside, as well as Bruce Springsteen's "My City of Ruins," a song composed earlier about the artist's hometown but which poignantly related to the smoldering Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Imagery of ash, rubble, and nightmare was common in religious hymns written after September 11, and many of these hymns began with the word "when," which grounded the text in a moment in time.[30]

Murder, mayhem, and misery have long been staples of American music. In folk music, for example, ballads describe premonitions of death, deathbed scenes, last wishes of the dying, the sorrow and grief of mourners, and expectations about the afterlife. Themes of suicide and murder are also common, especially when they combine tales of love and death. Consider the themes in such songs as "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" (war), "Long Black Veil" (mourning), "Casey Jones" (accidental death), and "John Henry" (occupational hazards). Some songs glorify outlaws and other "bad guys," as in "The Ballad of Jesse James," a musical genre also found in Mexican popular culture in the form of "narcocorridos," narrative songs or *corridos* that describe the lives and careers of smugglers and drug lords.[31]

In American blues music, we find themes involving loss and longing, trials and tribulations, separations and death. In "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," Blind Lemon Jefferson expresses the desire to be remembered after death. In "I Feel Like Going Home," Muddy Waters tells us that death sometimes brings relief. Other examples include Bessie Smith's "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" (economic reversal), T-Bone Walker's "Call It Stormy Monday" (lost love), John Mayall's "The Death of J. B. Lenoir" (death of a friend in a car accident), and Otis Spann's "The Blues Never Die" (consolation in loss). As Edward Hirsch notes, the blues express "a deep stoic grief and despair, a dark mood of lamentation, but also a wry and ribald humor."[32]

Sometimes characterized as the flip side of the blues, gospel music expresses many images of loss and grief. Examples include "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" (death of family members), "Oh, Mary Don't You Weep" (mourning), "Known Only to Him" (facing one's own death), "When the Saints Go Marching In" (afterlife), "If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again" (parent's death), and "Precious Memories" (adjustment to loss and sustaining bonds with the deceased).

Turning to classical music, death themes are heard in both religious and secular compositions. Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 3 (Kaddish) is

based on the Jewish prayer for the dead. The Requiem Mass (Mass for the Dead) has attracted composers like Mozart, Berlioz, and Verdi, among others. One section of the Requiem Mass, the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"), is a musical symbol for death in works by many composers. In Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830), this theme is heard, first following an ominous tolling of bells and then, as the music reaches its climax, in counterpoint to the frenzied dancing of witches at a *sabbat.* Berlioz's *Symphonie* tells the story of a young musician who, spurned by his beloved, attempts suicide with an overdose of opium. In a narcotic coma, he experiences fantastic dreams that include a nightmarish march to the gallows. The *Dies Irae* is also heard in Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre* (1874) and Liszt's *Totentanz* (1849), two of the best-known musical renditions of the Dance of Death (discussed in its historical context in Chapter 3). Opera, which combines drama with music, commonly includes themes of murder and suicide.

The *dirge* is a musical form associated with funeral processions and burials. Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Strauss, Brahms, Mahler, and Stravinsky all wrote dirges. The jazz funeral of New Orleans is a famous example of a popular interpretation of the dirge. Related to dirges are *elegies*—musical settings for poems commemorating a person's death—and *laments.*

Laments are an expression of stylized or ritualized leave-taking found in many cultural settings, one example being Scottish clan funerals, where bagpipes are played. Vocally, the typical lament is an expression of mourning called "keening," an emotional expression of loss and longing that is reminiscent of crying. For the ancient Greeks, lamentation was intended to both "praise the deceased and provide emotional release for the bereaved."[33] Laments may help the bereaved identify their altered social status and seek sympathetic understanding from the community.[34] Italian philosopher Ernesto De Martino traced how the practice of lamentation—in word, gesture, and music—moderates the tendency toward collapse or breakdown that threatens persons in moments of extreme crisis, such as the aftermath of the death of a close relative.[35] In this way, laments promote the cultural reintegration of the mourner while simultaneously reestablishing bonds of alliance between the living and the dead.[36] In a well-known Greek lament, a mother says that she will take her pain to the goldsmith and have it made into an amulet so that she can wear it forever.[37]

In traditional Hawaiian culture, chants known as *mele kanikau* were the traditional lament for commemorating a person's death.[38] Some *kanikau* were carefully composed; others were chanted spontaneously during the funeral procession. Imagery of the natural world is called upon to portray the writer's experience of loss.[39] Memories of shared experiences amid natural surroundings are mentioned: "My companion in the chill of Manoa" or "My companion in the forest of Makiki." Such chants fondly recall the things that bind together the deceased and his or her survivors. The message of the Hawaiian lament was not "I am bereft without you" but, rather, "These are the things I cherish about you."

In reflecting on how music functions to provide solace in experiences of loss, a recent article stated:

> For the human heart and mind, music is a gift that brings hope and comfort through even the darkest times. As we cope with the losses that beset us throughout life, certain songs and musical works bring to mind poignant memories that refresh our grief. Whether Mozart's *Requiem* or a Top 40 tune, music has the capacity to cue the recall of happy moments shared with loved ones whose death has left us bereft. At other times, a lyric or melody sets us thinking about our own mortality.[40]

As you listen to various styles of music, notice the references to dying and death and ask yourself, What messages are being conveyed? What attitudes are being expressed? Whatever your musical taste, you will find a wealth of information about individual and cultural attitudes toward death.

Literature

From the epic poetry of Homer's *Iliad* and the classic drama of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Shakespeare's *King Lear,* through modern classics like Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych," James Agee's *Death in the Family,* William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* and Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying,* death is treated as a significant human experience. Recall for a moment a favorite novel or short story. Was death an element of the plot? How did the author portray dying or death in the story?

In literature, the meaning of death is often explored as it relates to society as well as the individual. Novels about war, for example, depict how individuals and societies search for meaning in shattering experiences of trauma and loss. In *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a novel set in the time of the First World War, Erich Maria Remarque described the pointlessness of modern warfare by telling the story of a youthful combatant who quickly moves from innocence to disillusionment. The technological horror of the Second World

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
        who used to
        ride a watersmooth-silver
                                    stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
                                                    Jesus
he was a handsome man
                        and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death
        e.e. cummings

War, particularly devastation caused by the atomic bomb, shaped the focus of John Hersey's *Hiroshima.* The surreal aspects of the Vietnam War received attention in books like Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciacato,* and accounts of the recent war in Iraq formed the content of *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It.*

In literature of the Holocaust, a revealing genre for students of death and dying, devastating experiences of horror and mass death are dealt with in victims' diaries, as well as in novels and psychological studies.[41] Examples include Chaim Kaplan's *Warsaw Diary,* Charlotte Delbo's *None of Us Will Return,* Elie Wiesel's *Night,* and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl.* Writings like these lead readers to contemplate human nature and spirit.

Modern literature often explores the meaning of death in situations that are seemingly incomprehensible. The fictional hero tries to come to terms with sudden and violent death in situations that allow no time or place for survivors to express their grief or mourn their dead.[42] Such literary themes may focus on a "landscape of violence."[43] In "vigilante" stories, such as detective novels and some westerns, the hero sets out to avenge evil but is often corrupted by a self-justifying morality that only perpetuates violence.[44] Finding meaning in death is problematic, as violence reduces persons to the status of *things.*

Uncertainty about death is also found in the *elegy.* Jahan Ramazani says, "The poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and skepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before."[45] Modern elegies include Wilfred Owen's poems of moral objection to the pain wrought by industrialized warfare; Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish* after the death of his mother; Seamus Heaney's memorials to the suffering caused by political violence in Ireland; and the "parental elegies" in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. Ramazani observes that poetry is an important "cultural space for mourning the dead," as writers search for "credible responses to loss in the modern world."

Edward Hirsch says, "Implicit in poetry is the notion that we are deepened by heartbreaks, that we are not so much diminished as enlarged by grief, by our refusal to vanish—to let others vanish—without leaving a verbal record."[46] William Lamers points out that grief is a common theme in poetry and that poems can give us insight into the universality of loss in ways that can be consoling and therapeutic.[47] Ted Bowman observes that the language of bereavement and grief is enhanced by literary resources that help people give voice to their own stories of loss.[48] For caregivers, abstract clinical descriptions become more humanized by exploring the impact of frightening diseases and unsettling circumstances through stories and poems. Cadets at the United States Military Academy (West Point) are taught about the historical role of poetry in shaping culture, attitudes, and values, with the aim of "dispelling the illusion that prepackaged answers are always there for the taking in a world flush with ambiguities."[49] Among the insights communicated

in the work of Emily Dickinson, one of America's foremost poets, is the recognition that it is impossible to affirm life without an examination of death.[50]

Visual Arts

Edvard Munch's *The Dance of Life,* which appears on the cover of this text, represents the artist's summing up of human fate: "Love and death, beginnings and endings, are fused in a roundel that joins private lives and lusts to the larger, inexorable cycle of ongoing generations."[51]

In the visual arts, death themes are revealed through symbols, signs, and images.[52] Cultural attitudes and beliefs influence the way in which such themes are expressed. On ancient Egyptian sarcophagi, scenes inscribed in relief attest to that culture's beliefs about death and the afterlife. Graphically portrayed on these limestone coffins is the expectation that, after death, a person will be judged according to his or her deeds during earthly life. Some themes in death-related art transcend cultural boundaries, such as those that draw upon natural processes of life, growth, decay, and death.

In some art, we find a whimsical attitude toward death, as in the engravings of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, which contain skeletal figures from all walks of life engaged in daily routines, or in American sculptor Richard Shaw's *Walking Skeleton,* with the skeleton composed of twigs, bottles, playing cards, and similar found objects.

During the Middle Ages, there arose in Western Europe one of the most arresting expressions of dying and death ever to emerge in the graphic arts: the *Dance of Death.* Growing out of widespread fears about the spread of plague, the images associated with the Dance of Death display a concern with mortality and fears of sudden, unexpected death. A similar concern is evident in the work of artists more recently, as in Fritz Eichenberg's woodcuts depicting the fears of our era: annihilation caused by war, environmental catastrophe, and diseases such as AIDS.[53]

Francisco José de Goya's *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta* exemplifies an artistic genre that depicts deathbed scenes and persons *in extremis.* Completed for the doctor who aided in Goya's recovery from a life-threatening illness, this painting shows the doctor holding medicine to Goya's lips while the figure of Death is depicted next to people who are thought to be Goya's priest and his housekeeper. Suicide is another theme dealt with by artists of virtually all eras and cultures. A well-known example is Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Suicide of Lucretia,* which portrays Lucretia with a tear in her eye, moments after she has stabbed herself with a dagger.

Art gives us a window into the customs and beliefs of other ages and places. For example, Charles Willson Peale's *Rachel Weeping* (1772 and 1776) depicts a deathbed scene from the American colonial period in which the artist's wife is shown mourning their dead child. The child's jaw is wrapped with a fabric strap to keep it closed. Her arms are bound with cord to keep them at her sides. Medicines, all of which have proved ineffective, sit on a bedside table. As the mother gazes heavenward, she holds a handkerchief to

Käthe Kollwitz, Library of Congress

Of the modern artists who have expressed death themes in art, few have done so more frequently or more powerfully than German artist Käthe Kollwitz — as in this 1925 woodcut, Proletariat — Child's Coffin.

wipe away the tears streaming down her face, her grief in marked contrast to the dead child's peaceful countenance.

Art is often a vehicle for expressing the powerful impact of personal loss. When Pan Am flight 103 was brought down by a terrorist bomb, Suse Lowenstein's son was among those killed. As a sculptor, she found a way to express her grief, and the grief of other women bereaved by the crash, by making a series of female nude figures that compose an exhibit titled *Dark Elegy*. In earth tones, the larger-than-life figures are shown in the throes of grief. About creating the work, Lowenstein said:

> One by one, they come into my studio, step onto a posing platform, close their eyes, and go back to December 21, 1988, to that horrible moment when they learned that their loved one had died. . . . This is the moment I freeze in time. This is the pose that I shape into sculpture.[54]

Some figures look mute. Others are obviously screaming. Some look as though they were eviscerated. The artist expressed the hope that *Dark Elegy* will be "a reminder that life is fragile and that we can lose that which is most precious to us so easily and have to live with that loss for the remainder of our lives."

Within the context of nineteenth-century mourning customs, ordinary Americans incorporated both classical and Christian symbols of death to memorialize public figures as well as family members.[55] Embroidered memorials to the dead were hung in the parlor, the most important room of the house, and elaborate quilts were sewn into designs that celebrated the life of the deceased. Such mourning art provided not only a way to perpetuate memories of a loved one but also a focus for physically coping with grief, an opportunity to actively grieve by doing something.

Similar motives led more recently to the making of a massive quilt to commemorate persons who died from AIDS: The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.[56]

> The quilt symbolized individuals sharing their grief by sharing their continuing bonds with friends and lovers, and in doing so the survivors became a community of mourners.[57]

In folk art, quilts represent family and community. As the largest ongoing community arts project in America, the AIDS Quilt affirms the value of creative expression as a means of coping with loss. Maxine Junge points out:

> Creativity in the face of death offers a spectrum of life-enhancing possibilities. These possibilities can ward off a meaningless conclusion to a life, give meaning and hope to a life lived and to a future in which the dead, through memory, still exist.[58]

Like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., designed by architect Maya Lin, is an example of contemporary mourning art that works to counter the anonymity of lives lost. It has been described as the "iconographic reversal of the Tomb of the Unknowns," with its "vast polished surface" serving as "the tombstone of the known."[59]
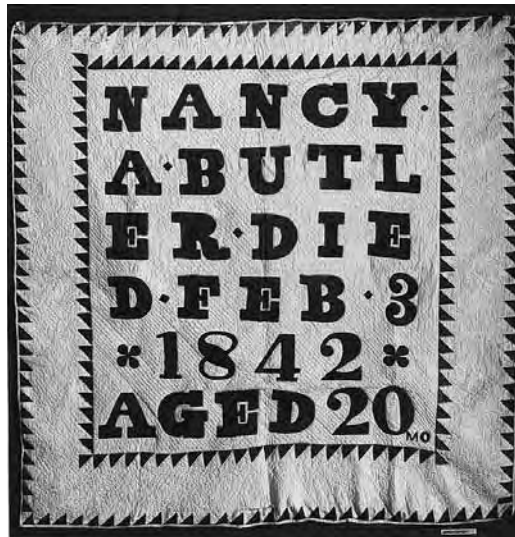
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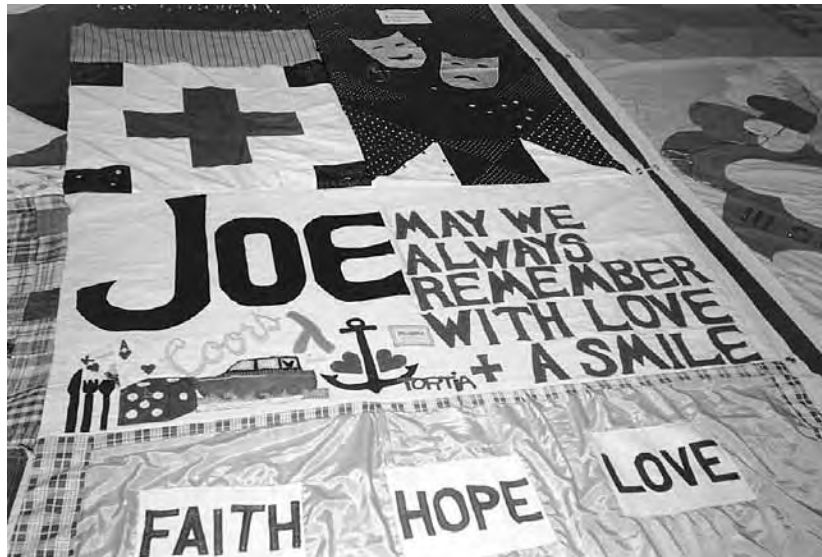
© Albert Lee Strickland

The making of a memorial quilt was among the elaborate personal and social mechanisms for dealing with grief widely practiced during the nineteenth century, as in this example memorializing a granddaughter who died in infancy. This traditional mourning custom was revived recently to commemorate and remember persons who died from AIDS; in the example shown here, words and symbols express beloved qualities of Joe's life. For survivors, the creation of such memorials provides not only a focus for physically working through grief, but also a means of perpetuating the memory of the loved one.

On the wall, names of the dead are listed chronologically by the date of their death, not alphabetically, presenting a chronicle that vividly depicts the scale of losses.

The urge to memorialize the dead and offer comfort to the bereaved through artistic means is also demonstrated by a variety of "homemade condolences" sent to relatives of military men and women killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.[60] For example, Operation Gold Star Flag, formed by a group of military wives, revived a tradition of flag-making that began during the First World War, when families with relatives in the military displayed in their windows small flags—white fields with red borders and, in the middle, a blue star, which was changed to gold if the serviceman was killed. Other groups, with names like Marine Comfort Quilts and Operation Homemade Quilts, fashioned quilts with center squares personalized in memory of each casualty.

A woman who had been given one of the Marine Comfort Quilts described how, when she finds herself missing her brother who was killed in Iraq, she wraps herself in the quilt and cries until the wee hours of the morning: "It's called a 'comfort quilt,'" she said, "and that's exactly what it is; it has so much love from so many different people who never even met my brother." Another woman, a mother whose son was killed by "friendly fire" (by his own comrades), said: "Your friends and family are there, but when you receive good deeds from people you don't even know, it makes you feel like you're not alone."[61]

Such sentiments reinforce the importance of the arts in a comprehensive understanding of how people cope with loss. In this regard, a statement published by the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement is pertinent:

> The arts and humanities with their images, symbols, and sounds express themes of life, death, and transcendence. They are the language of the soul and can enable people to express and appreciate the universality as well as the particularity of each person's experience.[62]

In the visual arts, these themes and this language are evident in a broad range of works, from those formed out of the particulars of an individual's unique loss, as in the woodcuts shaped by Käthe Kollwitz and the sculptures of Suse Lowenstein, which depict the grief of a parent following the death of a child,[63] to those that function on a larger scale as *sites of memory* for losses that are both personal and communal, such as those commemorated by the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. Whatever the scale, as Sandra Bertman points out, one of the main functions of art is to engage our awareness and "bring us closer to what language cannot reach."[64]

Humor

Serious and somber matters can be easier to deal with when there is comedic relief. Humor defuses some of our anxiety about death. It helps put fearful possibilities into more manageable perspective. Death-related humor comes in many different forms, from funny epitaphs to so-called black or
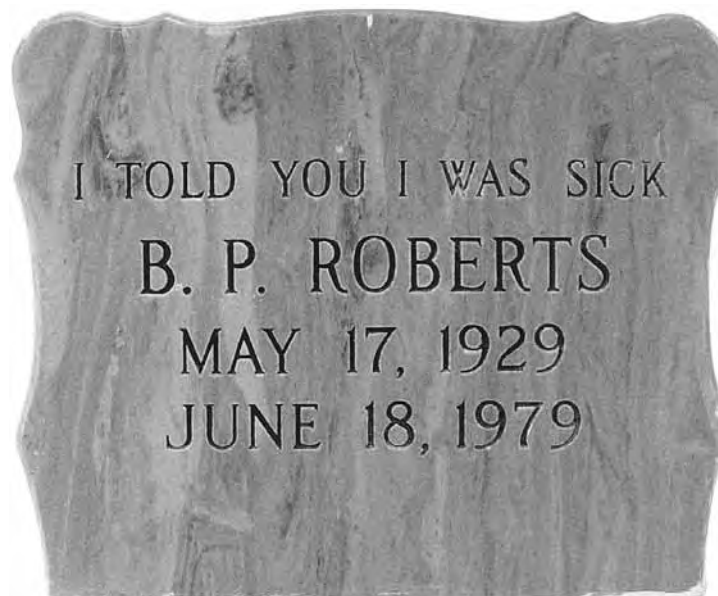
In place of the conventional sentiment usually engraved on tombstones, a touch of whimsy adorns this memorial to B. P. Roberts at a cemetery in Key West, Florida.

gallows humor.[65] On an interstate highway, motorists appear to be taken aback by a gleaming white hearse with the cryptic license plates, "Not Yett."

Mary Hall observes that "what is humorous to each of us depends on our particular cultural set, our own experience, and our personal inclination."[66] Humor often functions as a kind of comment on incongruity or inconsistency relative to social norms or perspectives, as when a young girl wrote a letter to God asking, "Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones You have now?"[67]

Humor functions in several ways relative to death: First, it raises our consciousness about a taboo subject and gives us a way to talk about it. Second, it presents an opportunity to rise above sadness, providing a release from pain and promoting a sense of control over a traumatic situation, even if we cannot change it. Third, humor is a great leveler; it treats everyone alike and sends the message that there are no exemptions from the human predicament. Thus, it binds us together and encourages a sense of intimacy, which helps us face what is unknown or distressing. Humor can be a "social glue" that helps us empathize with others. After a death has occurred, humor can comfort survivors as they recall the funny as well as painful events of a loved one's life. A sense of humor can moderate the intensity of negative life events.

When things are bad, humor doesn't necessarily change the situation for the better, but it can serve a protective psychological function and help people maintain their equilibrium. In situations involving interactions be-

tween patients and health care providers, humor is "one of the great tools of reassurance on the hospital ward."[68] For people who are seriously ill, humor offers a way to cope with the effects of a shattering diagnosis. It provides another perspective on a painful situation, as in the jest "Halitosis is better than no breath at all."

Individuals who encounter death on their jobs, as emergency services personnel do, use humor to distance themselves from horror as well as to rebond as a team rather than feeling isolated in their individual grief after traumatic incidents. A firm that provides instructional materials for emergency medical technicians includes in its catalog a musical recording titled "You Respond to Everyone But Me." In another example, a group of doctors at a medical center avoided using the word "death" when a patient died because of concern that it might alarm other patients. One day, as a medical team was examining a patient, an intern came to the door with information about the death of a patient. Knowing that the word "death" was taboo and finding no ready substitute, she announced, "Guess who's not going to shop at Wal-Mart any more?" This phrase quickly became the standard way for staff members to convey the news of a patient's death among themselves. In the health care setting, humor serves to communicate important messages, promote social relations, diminish discomfort and manage "delicate" situations; it has been called the "oil of society."[69]

The things we find funny about death can reveal a great deal about our attitudes. A joke that is shared gleefully by one group of people may be shocking to others; there are constraints on the kinds of humor that a particular person or group finds acceptable. Nevertheless, humor can help us cope with

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The Undertakers

Old Pops had been stone cold dead for two days. He was rigid, gruesome and had turned slightly green and now he lay on a slab at the undertakers, about to be embalmed by two lovable old morticians.

"At least he lived to a ripe age," said one.

"Yep," said the other. "Well, let's get to 'er."

Suddenly, Old Pops bolted upright and without opening his eyes, began to utter this story:

"In 1743, Captain Rice set sail from England with an unreliable and mutinous crew. After three days at sea, the mast of the mainsail splintered, and then broke completely in half. The ship tossed about at sea for two days; the men mutinied, and the ship tossed about for another two days. At the end of the third day, a ship appeared on the horizon and rescued them and good Captain Rice failed to mention to the admiral the incident of mutiny, and his crew became faithful and hardworking and devoted themselves to their captain."

Old Pops laid back down on the marble.

"Well," said one mortician, "there goes the old saying, 'dead men tell no tales'!"

Steve Martin, *Cruel Shoes*

adversity and painful situations. Individuals held as prisoners of war during the Vietnam War considered humor so important to coping that they would "risk torture to tell a joke through the walls to another prisoner who needed to be cheered up."[70] In short, humor is an important aid in confronting our fears and gaining a sense of mastery over the unknown. Finding humorous aspects to death, casting it in an unconventional light, relieves some of the anxiety that accompanies awareness of our mortality.

Studying Death and Dying

Take a death and dying course or read a book like this and someone will probably ask, "Why would you want to take a class about death?" or "Why are you reading about death?" Despite public interest in death-related issues, individuals exhibit varying degrees of avoidance and acceptance when it comes to discussing death openly. Our relationship with death seems to be in a period of transition.

Ambivalent attitudes toward death are evident when one educator applauds the study of death as the "last of the old taboos to fall," while another contends that death is "not a fit subject for the curriculum." In response to this state of affairs, Patrick Dean observes that, if death education is criticized by some as a "bastard child of the curriculum, hidden in the closet," then those who value death education can be grateful to such critics because they are creating opportunities for highlighting the importance of death education as preparation for living.[71] In fact, Dean says, death education could appropriately be renamed "life and loss education," because "only through awareness of our lifelong losses and appreciation of our mortality are we free to be in the present, to live fully."

The Rise of Death Education

Informal death education occurs in the context of "teachable moments" that arise out of events in daily life. Such an event may be the death of a gerbil in an elementary school classroom, or it may be an event experienced widely, such as the accidents involving the space shuttles *Challenger* and *Columbia*, the September 2001 terrorist attacks, an Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, or the sudden death of a famous person, as in the deaths of John F. Kennedy Jr. and Princess Diana.

The first formal course in death education at an American university was initiated by Robert Fulton at the University of Minnesota in the spring of 1963.[72] The first conference on death education was held at Hamline University in Minnesota in 1970. From these beginnings, death education has embraced a wide range of issues and topics, from nuts-and-bolts issues such as selecting mortuary services or probating an estate to philosophical and ethical matters such as the definition of death and speculation about what happens after death.

Because death education addresses both objective facts and subjective concerns, it receives broad academic support, with courses offered in a vari-

ety of disciplines.[73] In most courses, mastery of facts is enhanced by personal narratives that describe the myriad ways human beings encounter and cope with death.[74] The arts and humanities serve to balance scientific and technical perspectives. Images, symbols, and sounds express themes of life, death, and transcendence that allow for other ways of knowing and learning.

In the broad picture, death education includes training for physicians, nurses, allied health personnel, funeral directors, and other professionals whose duties involve contact with dying and bereaved individuals.[75] This includes police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). As witnesses to human tragedy in the line of duty, they are called upon to comfort victims and survivors. The stoic image of the police officer, EMT, or firefighter who "keeps it all in," instead of expressing natural emotions, is challenged by the recognition that such a strategy may be physically and psychologically harmful.

All of these avenues of death education benefit from opportunities for collegial interaction and communication offered by organizations such as the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC).[76]

Pioneers in Death Studies

The modern scientific approach to the study of death is usually traced to a symposium organized by Herman Feifel at a 1956 meeting in Chicago of the American Psychological Association.[77] This symposium resulted in a book, *The Meaning of Death* (1959), edited by Feifel and published by McGraw-Hill. This landmark book brought together experts from different disciplines whose essays encompassed theoretical approaches, cultural studies, and clinical insights. Death was shown to be an important topic for public and scholarly consideration. Given the prevailing resistance at that time to discussing death, this was no easy feat. Of early efforts in death studies, Feifel says:

> The realization soon began to sink in that what I was up against were not idiosyncratic personal quirks, the usual administrative vicissitudes, pique, or nonacceptance of an inadequate research design. Rather, it was personal position, bolstered by cultural structuring, that death is a dark symbol not to be stirred—not even touched—an obscenity to be avoided.[78]

Feifel recalled that he was emphatically told that "the one thing you never do is to discuss death with a patient."

The same message was communicated to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, whose book *On Death and Dying* (1969) helped create demand for a better way to care for dying patients. Hospice pioneer Cicely Saunders addressed similar issues in her work, *Care of the Dying* (1959). Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss applied the tools of sociological analysis to conduct studies focusing on the way awareness of dying affected patients, hospital staff, and family members and on how the "timing" of death occurred in hospital settings. These studies, published as *Awareness of Dying* (1965) and *Time for Dying* (1968), showed that caregivers were reluctant to discuss death and avoided telling patients they were dying. Jeanne Quint Benoliel, who collaborated

with Glaser and Strauss, published *The Nurse and the Dying Patient* (1967), calling for systematic death education for nurses.

Another influential work during this era was an essay by Geoffrey Gorer titled "The Pornography of Death" (1955; reprinted 1963).[79] It compared contemporary attitudes toward death with Victorian attitudes toward sex. The 1950s have been characterized by some commentators as a turning point or threshhold of a new era in which death and dying were "rediscovered." Lindsay Prior suggests that it may be more accurate to say that there was a new "object of interest" in which the question became "What does death mean to you?"[80]

The 1960s were a fruitful period for death studies. John Hinton's *Dying* (1967) shed light on contemporary practices and suggested how care of the dying could be improved. In "Death in American Society" (1963), sociologist Talcott Parsons looked at the impact of technological advances in health and medicine on dying. Philosopher Jacques Choron traced the history of ideas and attitudes about death and investigated the fear of death and its meaning for human beings in *Death and Western Thought* (1963) and *Death and Modern Man* (1964). Robert Fulton gathered a group of scholars and practitioners to address both theoretical and practical issues in his compilation, *Death and Identity* (1965). During the same era, literary works such as C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) brought attention to issues involving bereavement and mourning.

The progress of death studies during the 1960s continued into the 1970s with works like Avery D. Weisman's *On Dying and Denying: A Psychiatric Study of Terminality* (1972), which astutely combined research skills and clinical experience with dying patients, and Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973), which drew upon a broad range of psychological and theological insights in order to better understand the "terror" of death in human life. The early 1970s also witnessed the blossoming of the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of death studies, *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* which had begun its life as a newsletter in 1966 with an article in the first issue by Avery Weisman on the "Birth of the Death-People."[81] This was a decade of collaboration and connection, as individuals recognized a mutual interest manifested in organizations like Ars Moriendi (a forerunner of the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement).[82]

In the decades since these pioneering contributions, *Omega* has been joined by other scholarly journals, including *Death Studies, Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss, Illness, Crisis, and Loss,* and *Mortality* (an international journal published in the U.K.). Books written for a general readership, such as *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Year of Magical Thinking,* have become bestsellers, and information about death and dying is now widely available on the Internet. The publication of several encyclopedic works covering death studies (including at least one on the Internet[83]) is another sign of the maturing of the field.[84] Clearly, the seeds planted a few decades ago by pioneers have ripened into a thriving interest in dying, death, and bereavement that is evident in both the academic setting and the larger public arena.[85]

Yet it is also true that this discipline is still a work in progress, an endeavor that welcomes ideas and visions of new contributors. In looking toward the future, Hannelore Wass observes that the study of death and dying has the potential to help individuals and societies "leap from a parochial to a global view," transcending self-interest in favor of concern for others.[86] The ultimate rationale for death studies, Wass says, "is about love, care, and compassion . . . about helping and healing."

Living with Awareness of Death

People living in the present "cosmopolitan era" have been described as *hibakusha,* a Japanese word meaning "explosion-affected." Used originally to describe survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the term connotes pervasive anxiety about the threat of annihilation. In this regard, the threats of war, nuclear catastrophe, environmental destruction, violence, and terrorism have been joined by the specter of emerging pandemics, such as AIDS.

The forces of globalization expose us to information about deaths far distant from the comfort of our homes. On a daily basis, the mass media contain scores of death-related stories, so many that an assignment to clip out all such articles from a newspaper can be frustrating. As the story on one side of the paper is cut, another relevant piece on the reverse side is obliterated. Confronted with so much death, do we find ourselves overwhelmed? Or does it stimulate our curiosity to learn more about and better understand the place of death in our lives?

The study of dying, death, and bereavement compels us to look at our own stories, as well as the stories of our neighbors, both locally and globally, with the aim of comprehending the diverse social and cultural influences not only on our understanding of death, but also on our personal mortality. The decision to embark on such a study is usually made out of a variety of personal or professional reasons. Some come to this study with no prior direct experience with death; others with what feels like too much.

Contemplating Mortality

Why is there death? Looking at the big picture, we see that death promotes variety through the evolution of species. The normal human life span is long enough for us to reproduce ourselves and ensure that the lineage of our species continues. Yet it is brief enough to allow for new genetic combinations that provide a means of adaptation to changing conditions in the environment. From the perspective of species survival, death makes sense. But this explanation offers little comfort when death touches our own lives.

At the heart of the story in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the idea that death is both curse and blessing. All that is beautiful and beloved eventually dies, but "not all tears are evil." Mortality is ultimately viewed as a gift.[87] In an article titled "Human Existence as a Waltz of Eros and Thanatos," the authors suggest that

the proper antidote for death is love, but until the ubiquitous and powerful role of death is accepted, until we learn to "dance with death," love will continue to be treated as something appropriate only for romance and Sunday School.[88]

To remedy this misapprehension and expand our understanding of the relationship between love and death, we need to step out of our fast-paced lives and take time to learn how to "waltz with death" by contemplating the basic questions of human existence.

Dimensions of Thanatology

In Greek mythology, *Thanatos* was the personification of death, the twin brother of *Hypnos* (sleep). Over time, the ancient Greeks came to use *thanatos* as a generic word for "death." Our word "thanatology," defined as the study of death, is a linguistic heir of the Greek term. Although this definition of thanatology is documented in English usage by the mid-1800s, the word *thanatos* became associated in the early twentieth century with Freudian psychoanalytic theory as a term describing the source of unconscious destructive urges, or the death instinct, in contrast to the constructive activities of *eros,* or life instinct. Freud postulated that all the variations of human behavior and activity were produced by interaction between eros and thanatos.

As pioneering Italian thanatologist Francesco Campione points out, death is not only a topic for reflection, study, and research; it is also an "existential problem," which touches every aspect of human existence and every field of knowledge.[89] Robert Kastenbaum says that, although the term thanatology is usually defined as the "study of death," it is perhaps better defined as "the study of life with death left in."[90]

Thus, as a field of study, thanatology encompasses a variety of disciplines and areas of concern (see Table 1-3). Other dimensions and examples can be added to this listing. For instance, "religious thanatology" has concerns similar to those of philosophical thanatology, but, specifically, as they occur in the context of devotion to a set of beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality (usually involving a deity); issues such as what happens to a person's "soul" or "spirit" after death and the nature of the "afterlife" are important within this domain of thanatology. We might also add the designation "practical thanatology" to account for a focus that gives rise to multiple concerns relating to the question "How, then, does one live with recognition of the fact of mortality (that is, one's own death and the deaths of others)?"

Acquiring a "core" knowledge of thanatology involves becoming familiar with all of these dimensions and their aspects. Together, they comprise what might be called "Thanatology" with a capital T.

Recently reviewing the scope and mission of death studies, Robert Kastenbaum suggested that "thanatologists still face the challenge of integrating all of death into our views of life."[91] He notes that mainstream thanatology has devoted its efforts to improving the care of people faced with life-threatening illness or bereavement, and it may be time to broaden the focus to include "large-scale death" and "death that occurs through complex and multi-domain processes." This perspective would include not only the "hor-

TABLE *1-3*   *Dimensions of Thanatology*

Focus	Major Areas of Concern	Example Issues
Philosophical and ethical	The meaning of death in human life; questions of values and ethics	"Good" vs. "bad" death; concept of death; suicide and euthanasia.
Psychological	Mental and emotional effects of death on individuals	Grief; coping with terminal illness; death anxiety.
Sociological	How groups organize themselves to deal with social needs and problems related to dying and death	Response to disaster; disposal of the dead; socialization of children.
Anthropological	Role of culture and environment across time and space regarding how individuals and societies relate to death and dying	Funeral rites; ancestor worship; memorialization.
Clinical	Management of dying and death in medical settings; diagnosis and prognosis; relationships among patients, doctors, nurses, other caregivers	Treatment options; hospice and palliative care; pain and symptom control.
Political	Governmental actions and policies related to dying and death	Capital punishment; organ transfer rules; conduct of war.
Educational	Death education; increasing public awareness of death-related issues and concerns	Curricula for instruction in schools; community programs.

rendous deaths" that human beings inflict on each other in war and other forms of violence, but also human-caused activities that threaten or result in the extinction of other species.

Death Anxiety and Fear of Death

Our relationship with death has, as Herman Feifel observed, "a shaping power on thinking and behavior at all points in the life span."[92] The way in which we anticipate death, Feifel says, governs our "now" in an influential manner. This applies not only to people who are terminally ill, combatants in war, or people who fit other categories we tend to associate with an increased risk of death, such as those who are very old or suicidal. On the contrary, it is true for everyone and "for all seasons."

Death challenges the idea that human life has meaning and purpose.[93] The manner in which individuals respond to this challenge is "intertwined with the death ethos of the cultures in which they are embedded."[94] The distinctive stance toward death in a particular culture affects the behavior of its members as they go about their daily lives, influencing, for example, their willingness to engage in risky behaviors or their likelihood of taking out an

Drawing by Pat Byrnes,
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P. BYRNES.

"Carl! No!"

insurance policy, as well as their attitudes toward such issues as organ dona-
tion, the death penalty, euthanasia, or the possibility of an afterlife. In a vari-
ety of ways, our culture helps us "deny, manipulate, distort, or camouflage
death so that it is a less difficult threat with which to cope."[95] Consider, for
example, the effect of a public health discourse that suggests death and mis-
fortune can be avoided if people behave properly—eat the right things, exer-
cise, stop smoking, and so on.[96]

Avery Weisman pointed out that *realization* is critical in our efforts to un-
derstand death: "Most people concede that death is inevitable, a fact of na-
ture. But they are not prepared to realize. We postpone, put aside, disavow,
and deny its relevance to us."[97] Individuals and societies must, in fact, both
accept and deny death. We must accept death if we wish to maintain a grasp
on reality. Yet we must deny it if we are to go about our daily lives with a sense
of commitment to a future that is inevitably limited by our mortality. Accord-
ing to Talcott Parsons, the characteristic attitude toward death in modern so-
cieties is less a matter of outright denial than it is "bringing to bear every
possible resource to prolong active and healthful life" and accepting death
only when "it is felt to be inevitable."[98]

The largest area of empirical research in thanatology is concerned with
the measurement of attitudes toward death, and, more particularly, *death anx-
iety*.[99] In posing the question "What do we fear when we fear death?" Robert
Neimeyer and his colleagues suggest that the term *death anxiety* may be un-
derstood as "a shorthand designation for a cluster of death attitudes charac-
terized by fear, threat, unease, discomfort, and similar negative emotional
reactions, as well as anxiety in the psychodynamic sense as a kind of diffuse
fear that has no clear object."[100]

Generally speaking, the findings from this research indicate that death
anxiety tends to be higher among females than among males, higher among
blacks than among whites, and higher among youth and middle-aged adults
than among older people. People who describe themselves as "religious" tend
to report less death anxiety than those who do not characterize themselves
this way. Individuals who report a greater degree of self-actualization and
sense of internal control also report less death anxiety than their counter-

parts. This summary gives a very broad-brush understanding of the overall picture of death anxiety research.

Despite the accumulated data from numerous studies, there are significant questions, which Robert Neimeyer summarizes as follows:[101] First, what definition of death is implied by the various testing instruments? Second, what are the strengths and limitations of the various instruments that have been used in death anxiety research? Third, based on answers to the first two questions, what are the implications for future research? And, finally, reviewing the data gathered up to now, what do we really know?

Research into death anxiety has been characterized as "thanatology's own assembly line."[102] Part of the appeal of death anxiety research, Robert Kastenbaum says, lies in the fact that it "allows the researcher (and the readers, if they so choose) to enjoy the illusion that death has really been studied." How data from such research can be applied to practical issues is uncertain. If, for example, it were possible to reliably state that doctors with high death anxiety relate poorly to dying patients, then that finding might be applied constructively in health care settings. However, we are mostly unable to adequately gauge the effect of death anxiety on real-world issues. What shall we make of studies showing that women have higher death anxiety scores than men? Does this gender difference mean that women are *too anxious* about death, or that men are *not anxious enough*? Reviewing the research in this area, Herman Feifel said:

> Fear of death is not a unitary or monolithic variable. . . . In the face of personal death, the human mind ostensibly operates simultaneously on various levels of reality, or finite provinces of meaning, each of which can be somewhat autonomous. We, therefore, need to be circumspect in accepting at face value the degree of fear of death affirmed at the conscious level.[103]

Ernest Becker's insights regarding terror management theory help answer the question "How do people cope with an awareness of death?" In an interview days before his death, Becker addressed "four strands of emphasis" in terror management theory:[104]

1. The world is a terrifying place.
2. The basic motivation for human behavior is the need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.
3. Because the terror of death is so overwhelming, we conspire to keep it unconscious.
4. Our heroic projects that are aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world. . . . We are able to focus on almost any perceived threat, whether of people, political or economic ideology, race, religion, and blow it up psychologically into a life and death struggle against ultimate evil. . . . This is the dynamic of spiralizing violence that characterizes so much of human history.

Because death is always a possibility, fear of death is built into human life.[105] Studies show that "fear of death functions as a motivating force

whether people are currently focused on this particular issue or not; it is the implicit knowledge of death rather than current focal awareness that is the motivating factor."[106] In a commencement address at Stanford University, Steve Jobs of Apple Computer pointed out the irony of this when he said, "Death is very likely the single best invention of life." He called it "life's change agent."[107] In this view, death is necessary to give existential meaning to life.[108]

Factors Affecting Familiarity with Death

The past hundred years have seen dramatic change in the size, shape, and distribution of the American population—that is, its *demographics*. These changes—the most notable of which involve increased life expectancy and lower mortality rates—affect our expectations about death. In the past, a typical household would include parents, uncles, aunts, and aged grandparents, as well as children of varying ages. Such extended families, with several generations living together under the same roof, are rare today. One consequence is that most of us have fewer opportunities to experience our relatives' deaths firsthand. Moreover, our greater geographic mobility makes it less likely that we will be present when relatives die.

Consider how experiences with dying and death have changed over the last hundred years or so.[109] During the nineteenth century, individuals typically died at home, often surrounded by an extended family that spanned several generations. As death drew near, relatives and friends gathered to maintain a vigil at the bedside. Afterward, they washed and prepared the body for burial. A home-built coffin was placed in the parlor of the house, where friends and relatives participated in a wake and shared in mourning the deceased. Death was a domestic experience.

In close-knit communities, a death bell tolled the age of the deceased, giving notification of the death so that others in the community could join in the rites and ceremonies marking the deceased's passing (see Figure 1-1). Children were included in activities surrounding the dead, staying with adults and sometimes sleeping in the same room as the corpse. Later, in a family plot at the homeplace or a nearby churchyard cemetery, the coffin was lowered into the grave, and those closest to the deceased shoveled dirt over the coffin to fill in the grave. Throughout this process, from caring for the dying person through burial, death remained within the realm of the family.

If you were a person of the nineteenth century suddenly transported to the present, you would likely experience culture shock as you walked into the "slumber room" of a typical mortuary. There, in place of a simple, wooden coffin, you view an elaborate casket. The corpse shows the mortician's skill in cosmetic restoration. At the funeral, you watch as relatives and friends eulogize the deceased. Ah, that's familiar, you say—but where is the dear departed? Off to the side a bit, the casket remains closed, death tastefully concealed. At the graveside, as the service concludes, you are amazed to see mourners leaving while the casket lies yet unburied; the cemetery crew will

✿ You can feel the silence pass over the community as all activity is stopped and the number of rings is counted. One, two, three—it must be the Myer's baby that has the fever. No, it's still tolling—four, five, six. There is another pause at twenty—could that be Molly Shields? Her baby is due at any time now—no, it's still tolling. Will it never stop? Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, another pause—who? It couldn't be Ben; he was here just yesterday; said he was feeling fit as a fiddle—no, it's starting again. Seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two. Silence. You listen, but there is no sound—only silence. Isaac Tipton. He has been ailing for two weeks now. It must be Isaac.

Figure *1-1* *Tolling the Bell*

complete the actual burial. As a nineteenth-century observer at a modern funeral, you may be most impressed by the fact that the deceased's family and friends are spectators rather than participants. The tasks of preparing the dead for burial and managing the rites of passage are carried out by hired professionals.

Our familiarity with death has also been powerfully influenced by sophisticated medical technologies, which have affected both the *place* where death most often occurs and the *manner* in which most people die. In contrast to earlier generations, who generally had major roles in care of their dying and dead, we usually rely on professionals—from the cardiologist to the coroner to the cremator—to act as our go-betweens. The net result is that, for most of us, death is unfamiliar.

Life Expectancy and Mortality Rates

Since 1900, average life expectancy in the United States has increased from forty-seven to seventy-eight years (see Figure 1-2).[110] These figures reflect what demographers call "cohort life expectancy," meaning the *average* number of years a specified group of infants would live if they were to experience throughout their lives the age-specific death rates prevailing in their birth year.[111] Thus, for 2004, the life expectancy at birth for the U.S. population as a whole was 77.9 years. When this overall U.S. cohort is broken out into the four race-sex groups, however, we find that white females continued to have the highest life expectancy (80.4 years), followed by black females (76.5 years), white males (75.7 years), and black males (69.8 years).[112] In addition to differences between birth cohorts, it should be recognized that such figures represent statistical life expectancies. The actual life span lived out by any particular individual may well be significantly shorter or longer than the average for his or her cohort.

Today, we tend to assume that a newborn child will live into his or her seventh or eighth decade, perhaps longer. This was not the case in 1900. Whereas over 99 percent of infants born in the United States now survive the first year of life, less than 88 percent survived beyond their first year in 1900.[113] Perhaps even more illustrative of such change is the observation that over half of the deaths in 1900 occurred among children age fourteen
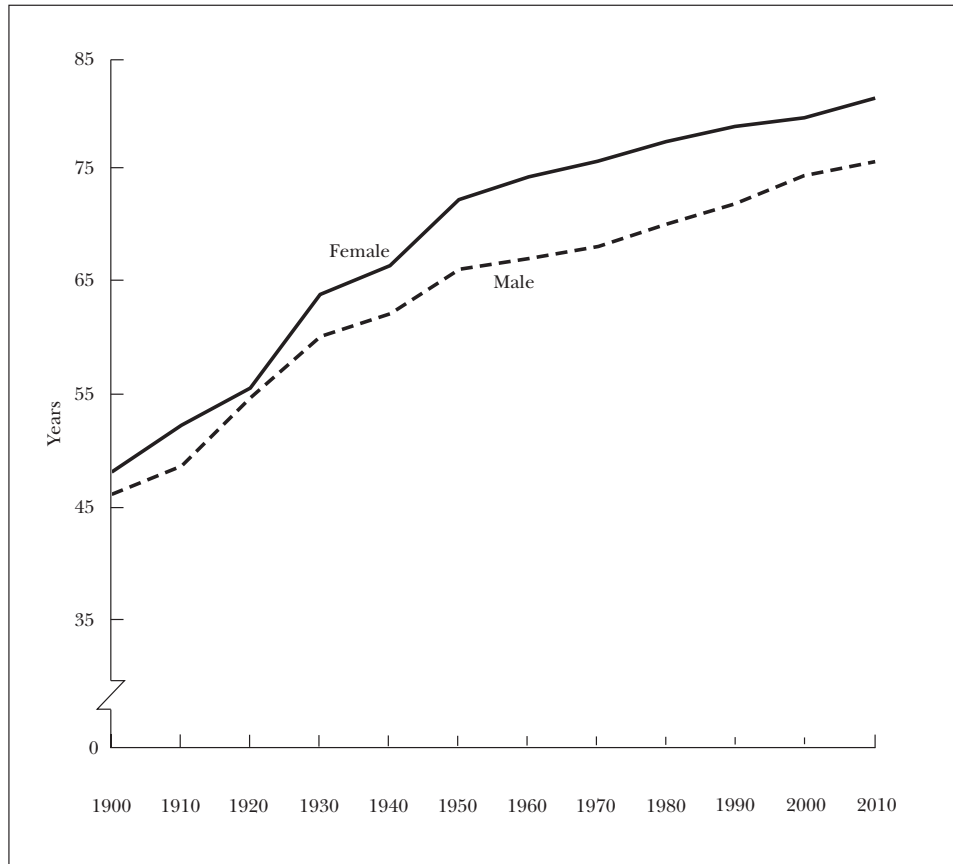
Figure *1*-2 *Expectation of Life at Birth, 1900–2000, and Projections 2010*
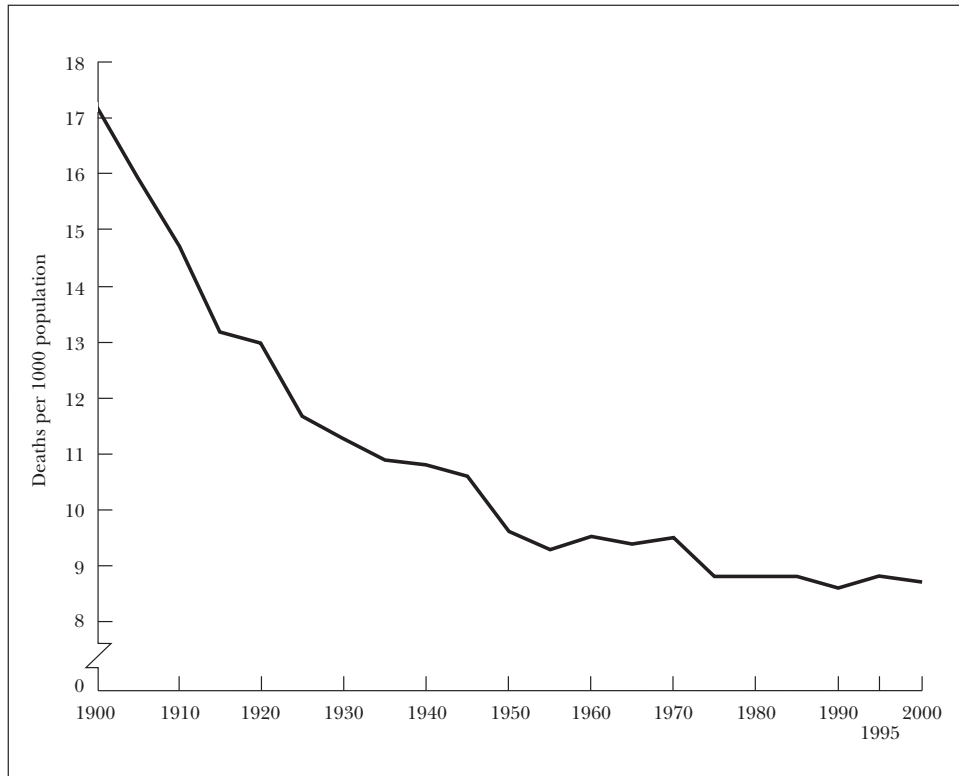*Sources:* U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 55; and *Statistical Abstract of the
United States: 2006,* p. 76.

and younger; now, less than 2 percent of deaths occur among this age
group.[114] This fact influences how we think (or don't think) about death.

Another way to appreciate the changing impact of death is to examine
death rates (which are typically stated as the number of individuals dying per
1000 population in a given year). In 1900, the death rate in America was
about 17 per 1000; today, it is about 8.2 per 1000 (see Figure 1-3).[115]

Imagine yourself in an environment where death at an early age is com-
mon. Consider how different experiences of dying and death were at a time
when the comparatively high percentage of infant deaths tended to be thought
of as a matter of "fate" that could not be changed. Both young and old were
familiar with death as a natural part of the human condition. Mothers died in
childbirth; babies were stillborn; one or both parents might die before their
children had grown to adolescence. Surviving siblings often had a postmortem

Figure *1-3 Death Rates, 1900–2000*
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 59; and *Statistical Abstract of
the United States: 2006,* p. 79.

photograph of a dead brother or sister displayed, a memorial to the deceased
and testament to the integrity of the family.[116] Living with such a common-
place awareness of mortality, our ancestors could not realistically avoid the fact
of death as a more or less familiar event in their lives. Ultimately, of course,
none of us is exempt. Despite the increases in life expectancy and lowered
death rates, the statistical odds of dying still finally add up to 100 percent.

Causes of Death

Changes in life expectancy and mortality rates are due largely to changes
in the most common causes of death. In the early 1900s, the leading causes
of death were related to acute infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid
fever, diphtheria, streptococcal septicemia, syphilis, or pneumonia. Most such
diseases came on suddenly, and death soon followed. Today, most deaths re-
sult from a chronic illness, such as heart disease or cancer, and tend to follow a
slow, progressive course that lasts weeks, months, or even years (see Table 1-4).

T A B L E *1-4* *Ten Leading Causes of Death: United States*

Cause of Death	Deaths	% of Total Deaths
All causes	2,448,288	100.0
Heart disease	685,089	28.0
Cancer	556,902	22.7
Stroke	157,689	6.4
Lung disease	126,382	5.2
Accidents	109,227	4.5
Diabetes	74,219	3.0
Influenza and pneumonia	65,163	2.7
Alzheimer's disease	63,457	2.6
Kidney disease	42,453	1.7
Septicemia (infection)	34,069	1.4

Source: D. L. Hoyert and others, "Deaths: Final Data for 2003," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 54, no. 13 (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics, 2006), p. 5.

Statistics show that the ten leading causes of death account for about 75 percent of all deaths in the United States, with the top two causes, heart disease and cancer, accounting for just over half of all deaths.[117]

This historical shift in patterns of disease and causes of death—a shift that demographers call an *epidemiologic transition*—is characterized by a redistribution of deaths from the young to the old.[118] (Epidemiology is the study of the patterns of health and disease.) With a reduced risk of dying at a young age from infectious diseases, more people survive into older ages, where they tend to die from degenerative diseases. This results in a growing proportion of aged people in the population. In 1900, people sixty-five and older made up 4 percent of the population in the United States; now they comprise slightly over 13 percent.[119] In 1900 people sixty-five and older accounted for about 17 percent of deaths; today, about 74 percent of the 2.4 million deaths each year in the United States occur among people in this age group.[120] In short, people are living longer and dying at older ages. One result is that we tend to associate death with the elderly when, in fact, it is not confined to any particular segment of the life span.

Geographic Mobility and Intergenerational Contact

Nearly one-seventh of the American population is on the move each year as people pull up stakes and say goodbye to friends, neighbors, and relatives.[121] Historically, such relationships were closely tied to place and kinship; today, they depend more on one's present role or function than on a lifetime of shared experiences. Children, once grown, rarely live in the same house with parents or, even more rarely, with their brothers and sisters in an extended family setting. Few high school or college friendships continue through marriage and the childrearing years into retirement. Because of social and

geographic mobility, people are less likely to be present at the deaths of relatives or friends, resulting in the loss of shared death rituals.

Of course, some families maintain close relations, even when they don't share the same dwelling or live in the same town. Patterns of mobility also vary among individuals and groups. Some ethnic and cultural groups continue to place a high value on maintaining strong family ties despite general trends in society. In some instances, reduced contact with kin may be partly compensated for by increased contact with friends and neighbors.[122]

Generally speaking, in modern societies, there is less intermingling of the generations, a normal part of daily life in earlier times. Consider the experience of two small children on a Halloween trek, going door to door. After knocking on several well-lighted doors in a seniors-only mobile-home park and receiving no response, their cries of "Trick or treat!" were answered by a woman who said, "You'll not get any Halloween treats in this place. Only old people live here, and they leave their lights on for security and safety, not to welcome children on Halloween!"

Life-Extending Technologies

Seriously ill or injured individuals are likely to find themselves surrounded by an astonishing array of machinery designed to monitor life until the last electrical impulse fades. Sophisticated machines monitor biological functions such as brain wave activity, heart rate, body temperature, respiration, blood pressure, pulse, and blood chemistry. Signaling changes in body function by light, sound, and computer printout, such devices can make a crucial difference in situations of life or death.

But advanced medical technology that seems to one person a godsend, extending life, may seem to another a curse that only prolongs dying. Dignity can be devalued amid technology focused solely on the biological organism. What are the trade-offs in applying medical technologies to the end stage of life? The conventional definition of death as "the cessation of life, the total and permanent cessation of all vital functions" may be superseded by a medicolegal definition, which acknowledges the fact that life can be sustained artificially. The modern definition of death is not always as straightforward as the simple statement "When you're dead, you're dead."

Thus, medical technology is yet another factor in lessening our familiarity with dying and death. The nature of modern medicine tends to distance family and friends from the patient who is dying. The commonplace attitude that "what can be done, should be done" increases the odds that technological fixes will be tried, even when success or cure is unlikely. When death does come, it may seem unexpected. Technological medicine sometimes seems to promote a view of death as an event that can be deferred indefinitely rather than as a normal, natural part of life.

All of these demographic and social variables can be understood as sociocultural forces that influence the way we learn about death through childhood and beyond.

Five generations of the Machado family form an extended family network rarely seen today. Firsthand experiences of death in such a family come through the closeness of multigenerational living.

Examining Assumptions

Death is unavoidably part of our lives. Not thinking or talking about death doesn't remove us from its power. Such ostrichlike behavior only limits our choices for coping with dying and death. As death educator Robert Kavanaugh said, "The unexamined death is not worth dying."[123]

Historian David Stannard tells us that in societies in which each person is unique, important, and irreplaceable, death is not ignored but is marked by a

I often wonder what it would be like to be born and raised and live one's whole life in the same zip code. I wonder what it would be like to be able to dial all of one's family and friends without an area code. What it would be like not to always be missing one person or the other, one place or the other. What it would be like to return to a family home in which one grew up and still had things stored in the attic.

My family is in area code 405 and my best friend's in 415 and I'm living in 212. The in-laws are in 203. And there are other friends in 213 and 202, in 412 and 214.

Beverly Stephen, "A Mobile Generation in Search of Roots"

"community-wide outpouring of grief for what is a genuine social loss."[124] Conversely, in societies where people feel that "little damage is done to the social fabric by the loss of an individual," death tends not to be acknowledged outside of that person's immediate circle.

Among communities where traditional beliefs, values, and practices are maintained, death is part of the natural rhythm of life. The act of dying, the most private act any person can experience, is a community event.[125] A person's death initiates an outpouring of social support for the bereaved family and for the wider community.[126] Our values and preferences play an unavoidable part in the quest to examine assumptions and think clearly about death.

Death in a Cosmopolitan Society

At the California Science Center in Los Angeles, a public exhibition of over 200 cadavers attracted more than 650,000 visitors (doubling the previous record set by an exhibit of *Titanic* artifacts).[127] Titled "Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies," previous exhibitions in Europe and Asia had spawned protests over displaying bodies that had been "plastinated" (a process that involves replacing body fluids with clear, pliable plastic, making it possible to position not only a whole cadaver, but also skeletal bones and internal systems such as blood vessels, into dynamic poses), thereby offering viewers an "insider's view of the effects of disease and ailments, such as lung disease, hardened arteries, tumors, and ulcers." German physician Gunther von Hagens, inventor of the plastination process, calls the result "anatomic artwork."

Some said the exhibit's popularity was due to the fact that "morbidity has always been a spectator sport," alluding to the exhibit's macabre aspects. Others praised it as an educational opportunity for both children and adults to appreciate firsthand the wonder of the human body, as well as its deterioration from the ravages of disease. What do these contrasting reactions tell us about attitudes toward death? Is the specter of death, positive or negative, in the eyes of the beholder? What do you imagine your own response might be?

The quest for meaningful answers to questions involving human mortality requires us to contemplate what it means to live in a society that scholars

Grandmother, When Your Child Died

Grandmother, when your child died
hot beside you
in your narrow bed,
his labored breathing kept
you restless
and woke you when
it sighed,
and stopped.

You held him through the bitter dawn
and in the morning
dressed him, combed his hair,
your tears welled, but you didn't weep
until at last he lay
among the wild iris in the sod,
his soul gone inexplicably to God. Amen.

But grandmother, when my child died
sweet Jesus, he died hard.
A motor beside
his sterile cot
groaned, and hissed, and whirred
while he sang his pain—
low notes and high notes
in slow measures
slipping through the drug-cloud.
My tears, redundant,
dropped slow
like glucose or blood
from a bottle.
And when he died
my eyes were dry
and gods wearing white coats
turned away.

Joan Neet George

describe as "postmodern" and "cosmopolitan." This perspective encourages us to value diversity and pluralism by examining "taken-for-granted" beliefs and considering ideas and practices from other historical periods and cultures. It involves reappraisal of assumptions about culture, identity, history, and language. We are "surrounded by images and artifacts from all periods and of all geographical and cultural locations," which makes us "aware of the entire experience of the human race in ways that were not available to previous generations."[128]

According to Ulrich Beck, a German scholar and keen observer of the "cosmopolitan society," the human condition in the present century cannot be understood nationally or locally, but only globally.[129] British sociologist Anthony Giddens says:

> In a globalizing world, where information and images are routinely transmitted across the globe, we are all regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently, from ourselves.[130]

He adds that cosmopolitans welcome and embrace this cultural complexity. Global concerns are becoming part of local experiences for an increasing number of people.[131]

Your classmates may arrive at different conclusions as they seek appropriate responses to death. Some may prefer an option for swift and low-cost body disposal instead of the traditional funeral. Others might choose a conventional funeral because they feel it provides a necessary framework for meeting the social and psychological needs of survivors (see Figure 1-4). Or consider the likelihood of differing values and attitudes concerning such issues as medical care at the end of life and decisions about whether to withhold or withdraw life-sustaining treatment. Is it feasible to allow space for
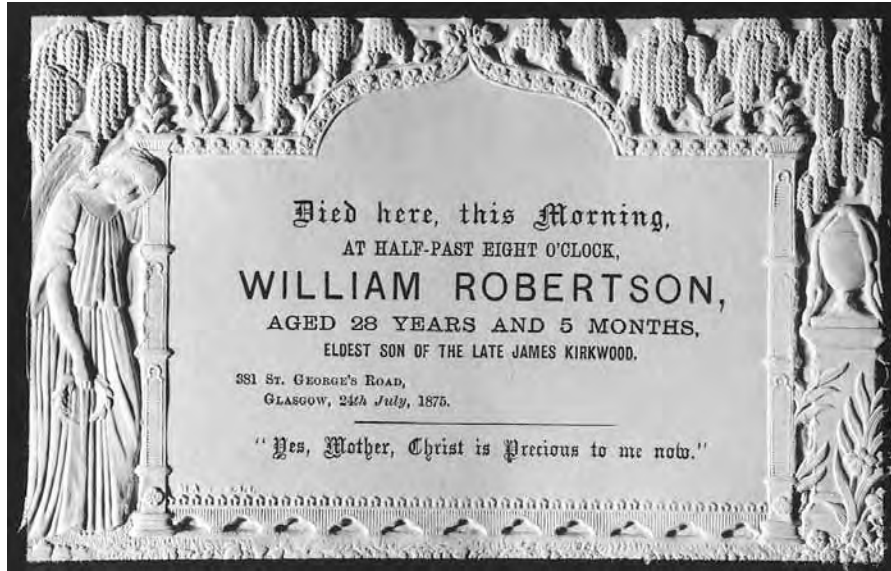
Figure 1-4   *Embossed Linen Death Notification, 1875*
This card exemplifies the formality of nineteenth-century mourning customs. The etiquette books of the period often devoted considerable space to the procedural details associated with the wearing of mourning clothes, the issuance of funeral invitations, and other behaviors appropriate to the survivors of a death.

only one point of view? Or do we need room for diversity of opinion and practice?

Medical technology, demographic changes, shifting disease patterns, urbanization, and professionalization, among other factors, all influence how we die, grieve, and care for our dead. Regarding grief, for example, Glennys Howarth points out that, until relatively recently, "We have clung to models that have reflected the dominant discourse of society," but in today's world, "We cannot simply construct a 'new model' of grief, because society is increasingly diverse and fragmented."[132]

Marina Sozzi, an Italian thanatologist, observes that the wish to die a "natural" death, seen as an event that concludes a genetically determined life cycle, has become a modern myth. By delegating our relationship with death to professionals—doctors, nurses, undertakers, and so on—we try to avoid thinking about mortality and "dream about someone who, equipped with the necessary skills," will guarantee us a "sweet" death with no real loss of self. "Our culture," she says," has lost the capacity of making the experience of death fecund; thus, death becomes an impersonal deadline of the body, a fatality inscribed inside it, pure biology."[133]

The latest chapter of the modern story of dying is perhaps best termed "managed death." Even when a prognosis of death has been accepted by medical staff and families, and when further treatments intended to cure have

Lifelines—tubes and wires monitoring heartbeat, breathing, and blood pressure— increase this premature baby's chances of survival in the intensive care unit of Philadelphia's Children's Hospital. The special-care nursery often becomes an arena for many of the most difficult ethical decisions in medicine.

been put aside, there may nevertheless be a strong desire to manage the situation so that it comes out "right." One expression of this involves the aim of ending treatment just at the proper moment so that the person is enabled to die a quiet or peaceful death. Another involves the attempt to control the timing of death even more completely through physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia. In light of such efforts, Daniel Callahan says it seems that death is becoming "just one more choice-and-efficiency issue, to be domesticated along with traffic jams and other excesses of modern life."[134]

Exploring Your Own Losses and Attitudes

Social scientists use the term *cultural lag* to describe the phenomenon of societies "falling behind" in dealing with new challenges resulting from rapid

technological and social change. It may be that we are in a period of cultural lag with respect to dying and death.

Individual preferences and cultural perspectives both play important roles. Andrew Ziner says:

> Like nearly every other aspect of our lives, our understandings and feelings about dying and death are derived from our involvement in the myriad of groups, organizations, and institutions that represent our communities and, ultimately, constitute our society. As these religious, economic, legal, and familial structures change over time, we also change. This is because, as social beings, all of the meanings we attach to personal and cultural concerns—including dying and death—are inexorably tied to our social worlds. For example, how do you feel when you hear the word *death*? If you were born a century earlier, would you feel the same way? Is the difference due to individual or social factors?[135]

A perspective informed by values of connectedness and community, one that acknowledges and celebrates difference and diversity, can help us discover personally meaningful and socially appropriate choices for the times in which we live and die, giving us a "pluralistic way of understanding and being in the world."[136] Although death's finality appears harsh, for the ancient Greeks it was death that makes life significant. Mortality "compels humans to make some sense of their existence, here and now, each day to discover what it means 'to live well.'"[137]

Our attitudes toward death develop out of a lifetime of experiences with significant losses, beginning in childhood and continuing into old age. Exploring the meaning of these losses, and their influence on our attitudes and practices, is part of a comprehensive study of death and dying. It can be helpful to construct a "loss-ography," an account of the losses we have experienced, allowing time for investigation and reflection about the circumstances in which they occurred and the ways in which we, and significant others in our environment, responded to those losses.

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A father and son make an offering at the grave of their Chinese ancestors during village cremation ceremonies held in 1994 in Peliatan, Bali. In this way, religious and cultural traditions are passed along to successive generations through socializing processes that are important to the ongoing life of the community.

C H A P T E R **2**

Learning About Death:
The Influence of Sociocultural Forces

*I*magine yourself as a child. Someone says, "Everybody's going to ziss one of these days. It happens to all of us. You, too, will ziss." Or, one day as you're playing, you are told, "Don't touch that, it's zissed!" Being an observant child, you notice that, when a person zisses, other people cry and appear to be sad. Over time, as you put together all your experiences of "zissing," you begin to develop some personal feelings and thoughts about what it means to ziss.

The understanding of death evolves like this. As a child grows older, incorporating various experiences of death, his or her concepts and emotional responses to death begin to resemble those of the adults in the culture. Just as a child's understanding of "money" changes over time—at first it is a matter of little or no concern; later it seems to come into the child's experience almost magically; and finally, it engages the child's attention and participation in many different ways—so, too, does the child develop new understandings about the meaning of death. Like other aspects of human development, the understanding of death evolves as experiences stimulate reevaluation of previously held knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

47

A Mature Concept of Death

Through observing and interacting with children at different ages, psychologists have described how children gain a mature understanding of death. In reviewing more than 100 such studies, Mark Speece and Sandor Brent conclude, "It is now generally accepted that the concept of death is not a single, unidimensional concept but is, rather, made up of several relatively distinct subconcepts."[1] A formal statement of the empirical, or observable, facts about death includes four components:[2]

1. *Universality.* All living things must eventually die. Death is all-inclusive, inevitable, and unavoidable (although unpredictable in its exact timing; that is, death may occur at any moment to any living thing).
2. *Irreversibility.* Death is irrevocable and final. Organisms that die cannot be made alive again. (This is separate from a belief in a spiritual afterlife.)
3. *Nonfunctionality.* Death involves the cessation of all physiological functioning. All life-defining bodily functions and capabilities cease at death.
4. *Causality.* There are biological reasons for the occurrence of death. This component includes a recognition of both internal (e.g., disease) and external (e.g., physical trauma) causes of death.

A fifth component, *personal mortality,* may be added to this list. Although it is a subcomponent of universality, it makes explicit the understanding not only that all living things die eventually, but also that each living thing will die ("I will die").

In addition, individuals with a mature understanding of death typically hold *nonempirical* ideas about it as well.[3] Such nonempirical ideas—that is, ideas not subject to scientific proof—deal mainly with the notion that human beings survive in some form beyond the death of the physical body. What happens to an individual's "personality" after he or she dies? Does the self or soul continue to exist after the death of the physical body? If so, what is the nature of this "afterlife"? Developing personally meaningful answers to such questions, which involve what Speece and Brent term "noncorporeal continuity," is, for many individuals, part of the process of acquiring a mature understanding of death.

A child's understanding of death evolves from infancy and toddlerhood, with the most dramatic changes normally occurring from about ages four to nine. Research suggests that most children understand that death is a changed state by about three or four years of age, that they grasp most components of a mature concept of death by about five to seven years of age (although the recognition of personal mortality as a subcomponent of universality may not emerge until somewhat later), and that they are likely to possess an understanding of all the components by about nine years of age. The component of causality—an understanding of biological causes of death—is acquired as part of this continuum. A major shift occurs between the ages of five and eight in how children think about biological phenomena and, specifically, how the human body functions to maintain life, which leads to the recognition that death involves the breakdown of bodily functioning.[4]

Children who experience the death of someone close may look to adults for models of appropriate behavior. Amid the regalia of high military and political office that characterized the funeral of President John F. Kennedy, young John F. Kennedy Jr. salutes the flag-draped coffin containing his father's body as it is transported from St. Matthew's Cathedral to Arlington National Cemetery. The day also marked John-John's third birthday.

The ever-expanding understanding of death during childhood is further refined during adolescence and young adulthood, as individuals consider the social and emotional impact of death on close relationships and contemplate the value of religious or philosophical answers to the meaning of death. Thus, a mature understanding of death goes beyond a biological focus to an appreciation for the life lost, the characteristics that make the loss of life a tragedy.[5]

What a person "knows" about death may change from time to time. We may hold conflicting or contradictory notions about death, especially our own. When facing a distressing situation, an understanding of the facts may give way to a more childlike attitude, such as the notion that we can bargain where death is concerned. A patient told that he or she has only six months to live may imagine that by some "magical" act, some bargain with God or the universe, the death sentence can be postponed. Thus, although the main evolution toward a mature understanding of death occurs during childhood, how a person understands death fluctuates among different ways of knowing throughout life.

Development of the Understanding of Death

The evolving understanding of death is a process of continuous adjustments and refinements. This process is often quite rapid; a child's understanding of death can change dramatically in a very brief time. By observing children's behavior, developmental psychologists devise models to describe the characteristic concerns and interests of children at various ages. These models are like maps that describe the main features of the territory of childhood at different stages of development. The models are useful for describing the characteristics of a typical child at, say, age two or age seven. They give a general picture of each stage of development.

Models of human development are abstractions, representations, interpretations of the actual territory. But the map should not be mistaken for the territory. Such maps are helpful in guiding one's way, locating certain landmarks, and sharing knowledge with others, but the particular features of the landscape possess qualities that aren't fully described by a map. Children vary in their individual rates of development—not only physically, but also emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Thus, with respect to a child's understanding of death, emphasizing developmental *sequence* is more reliable than correlating stages of understanding to *age*.

A child's understanding of death usually fits with his or her model of the world at each stage of development. Thus, an adult could give a young child a lengthy, detailed explanation of the concept of death as adults understand it, yet the child will grasp its components only as he or she is developmentally ready to understand. Experience plays an important role. A child who has had firsthand encounters with death may arrive at a more mature understanding of death than is typical of other children of the same age. Children's

interactions are not "preparations for life" but, rather, both "life itself and preparations for future life."[6]

Children are active thinkers and learners. In recent decades, studies have shown infants and young children behaving in ways that imply an understanding of physical and perceptual phenomena at ages younger than previously thought possible.[7] They are seen as more competent, not as "pre" this or "pre" that as was once thought.[8] Very young children appear to make theory-like assumptions about the world, and they use basic reasoning systems to make causal explanations about physical, biological, and psychological events.[9]

In tracking the development of the understanding of death in children, it is useful to have a framework within which to place the distinctive attitudes and behaviors that pertain to various phases of childhood. The formal study of children's understanding of death can be traced to the pioneering work of Paul Schilder and David Wechsler (1934).[10] However, studies conducted in the early 1940s by Sylvia Anthony in England and Maria Nagy in Hungary have received greater attention. According to Anthony, children under the age of two have no understanding of "dead," by five they have a limited concept, and by nine they can give general explanations for death; in addition, young children engage in magical thinking (that is, the notion that, for example, angry thoughts or feelings can cause someone's death).[11] Nagy found three developmental stages in children's understanding of death between the ages of three and ten. In the first stage (ages three to five), children understood death as somehow being less alive; the dead "lived on" under changed circumstances and could return to normal life. In the second stage (ages five to nine), children understood death as final, but as avoidable and lacking inevitability (all die) and personal reference (I die). In the third stage (ages nine and older), children recognized death as the result of a biological process that is final, inevitable, universal, and personal.[12]

Although research generally has indicated that most children have acquired a mature concept of death around the age of nine, newer studies show that children begin to conceptualize death as a biological event around age five or six, at the same time they construct a "biological model" of how the human body functions.[13] By preschool age, a potent animate/inanimate distinction serves "as the center of a vast cluster of conceptual distinctions," including a naïve theory of biology.[14] Less attention has been given to the way children's *emotional* responses develop alongside these benchmarks in cognitive sophistication. It is also important to stress the role of culture. It is said that the single most important thing one can do to influence the development of an infant is to "decide where on earth—in what human community—that infant is going to grow up."[15]

In the discussion that follows, children's development is placed within the framework of two major theories or models of human development—namely, those devised by Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget.

The model of human development devised by Erikson focuses on the *stages of psychosocial development,* or psychosocial milestones, that occur successively
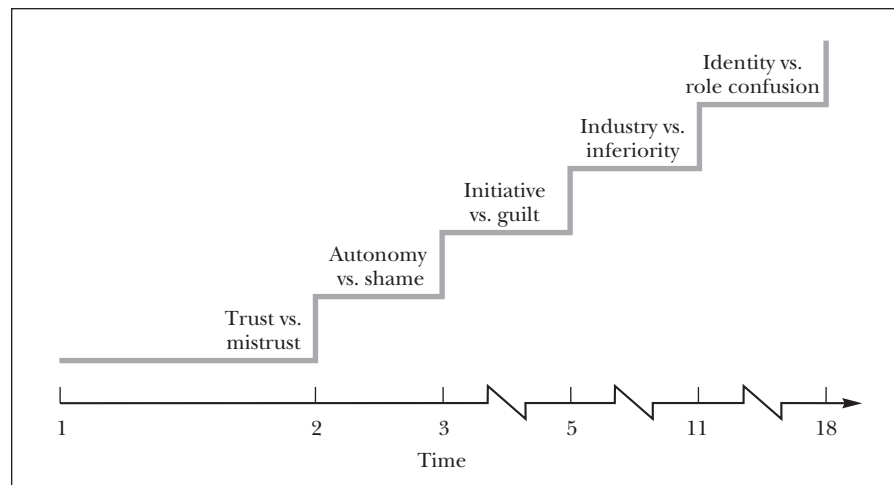
Figure *2-1* *Five Stages of Preadult Psychosocial Development Proposed by Erikson*
Source: Based on Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1964), pp. 247–274.

throughout a person's life (see Figure 2-1).[16] In this model, psychosocial development depends significantly on the environment and is linked to the individual's *relationships* with others. Each stage of development involves a turning point, or crisis, that requires a response from the individual.

Piaget's focus was on the *cognitive transformations* that occur during childhood (see Table 2-1).[17] Accordingly, Piaget distinguished four different periods of cognitive, or intellectual, development based on the characteristic ways in which individuals organize their experience of the world: *sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational,* and *formal operational.* Although children move through these stages in the same sequence, each child's rate of development is unique.

Infancy and Toddlerhood

According to Erikson's model, infancy is characterized by developing a sense of *trust* toward the environment. If the infant's needs are not met, the result may be distrust. Thus, other people in the environment—typically, parents—play an important part in the infant's development as he or she acquires a sense of self and trust in others as reliable and nurturant. The death of a caregiver during infancy can disrupt the building of a foundation of trusting others. Similarly, a close death in the infant's environment, which puts other family members under stress, can adversely affect the infant's developing sense of predictability about the world.

During toddlerhood (roughly one to three years of age), the child grapples with issues of *autonomy* versus shame and doubt. As the toddler explores the environment and develops greater independence, there are clashes be-

T A B L E *2-1*   *Piaget's Model of Cognitive Development*

Age (approximate)	Developmental Period	Characteristics
Birth–2 years	Sensorimotor	Focused on senses and motor abilities; learns object exists even when not observable (object permanence) and begins to remember and imagine ideas and experiences (mental representation).
2–7 years	Preoperational	Development of symbolic thinking and language to understand the world. (2–4 years) *Preconceptual subperiod:* sense of magical omnipotence; self as center of world; egocentric thought; all natural objects have feelings and intention (will). (4–6 years) *Prelogical subperiod:* beginning problem solving; seeing is believing; trial and error; understanding of other points of view; more socialized speech; gradual decentering of self and discovery of correct relationships.
7–12 years	Concrete operational	Applies logical abilities to understanding concrete ideas; organizes and classifies information; manipulates ideas and experiences symbolically; able to think backward and forward; notion of reversibility; can think logically about things experienced.
12+ years	Formal operational	Reasons logically about abstract ideas and experiences; can think hypothetically about things never experienced; deductive and inductive reasoning; complexity of knowledge; many answers to questions; interest in ethics, politics, social sciences.

tween what the child wants to do and what others want the child to do. Exercising independence is a hallmark of this stage. Toilet training typically occurs during this time. In both physical and psychosocial development, this is a period of "letting go" and "holding on." The death of a significant other, especially a parent, affects the child's task of pursuing independence and may cause a regression to earlier behaviors, such as clinging, crying, and being more demanding.

Turning to Piaget's model, we find that the first two years of life are characterized as the *sensorimotor* period, as a child develops and strengthens his or her sensory and motor, or physical, abilities. A parent who leaves the room has simply vanished; there is no thought, "My parent is in the other room." As the child accumulates experiences of the flow of events in the environment, he or she gradually begins to perceive patterns that become generalized into what Piaget terms "schemes," which tie together the common features of actions

occurring at different times. During this period of development, Piaget says, "a Copernican revolution takes place," with the result that "at the end of this sensory-motor evolution, there are permanent objects, constituting a universe within which the child's own body exists also." [18]

Early Childhood

In Erikson's model, the preschool and kindergarten years (roughly three to five or six years of age) involve issues of *initiative* versus guilt. The child increasingly seeks his or her own purpose and direction, yet is concerned about how parents (and other significant adults) perceive these tentative efforts to express initiative and individuality. The egocentric orientation of the infant gives way to the socially integrated self of the older child. During this transitional period, situations arise that induce feelings of guilt. For instance, a child who has fantasies of doing away with a parent—expressed perhaps by the frustrated scream "I wish you were dead!"—may feel guilty about having such thoughts. Most children become fascinated with the idea of "gone" or "all gone." For the young child, being dead is a diminished form of life. A four-year-old girl told Robert Kastenbaum, "They have only dead people to talk to, and dead people don't listen, and they don't play, and they miss all the TV shows they liked."[19]

This period marks the beginning of the child's moral sense, the ability to function within socially sanctioned modes of behavior. Reflecting emerging communication skills, the child's concept of death expands quite rapidly during the preschool and kindergarten years.

The body becomes important to children's self-image as they race around on tricycles, learn to cut small pieces of paper precisely, and generally gain greater control over their bodies. During this period, bodily mutilation is one of the death-related fears that may manifest. This preoccupation with the body can be illustrated: A five-year-old witnessed the death of his younger brother, who was killed when the wheel of a truck rolled over his head. The parents, who were considering having a wake in their home, asked the surviving son how he might feel if his younger brother's body was brought into the house for a wake. His question was "Does he look hurt?" Concern about bodily disfigurement is characteristic of this stage of psychosocial development (see Figure 2-2).

In Piaget's model, early childhood is characterized as the *preoperational* period. A child's cognitive development centers on learning to use language and symbols to represent objects. Vocabulary develops at an astounding rate. During this period, the child's primary task is to appraise his or her situation in the world.

How does Piaget's model apply to children's concepts of death? A study conducted by Gerald Koocher supplies a partial answer. Children were asked four questions about death.[20] (You might want to answer each of these questions for yourself.) The first question was "What makes things die?" Children in the preoperational stage used fantasy reasoning, magical thinking, and realistic causes of death (sometimes expressed in egocentric terms). Here are sample responses:
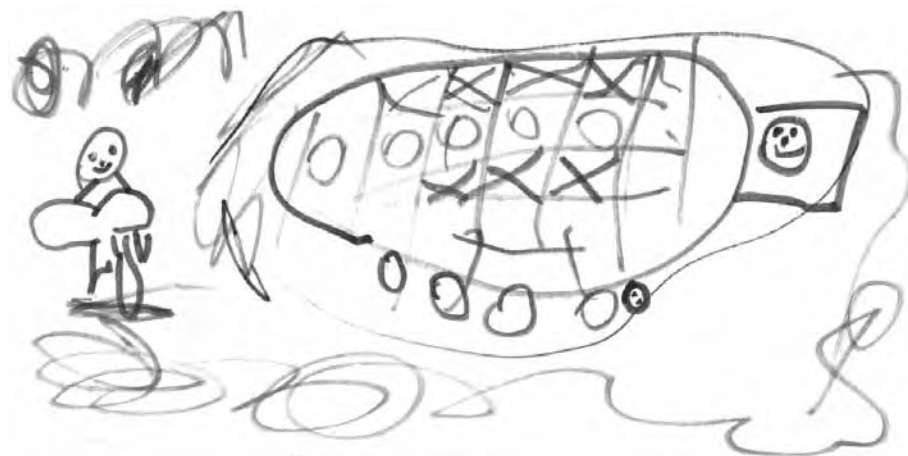
Figure 2-2 *Accident Drawing by a Five-Year-Old*
In this drawing by a five-year-old who witnessed his younger brother's acci-
dental death, the surviving child is depicted as riding a "big wheel" on the
left side of the truck that ran over his brother. The four wheels of the truck
are shown, and the younger brother's head is drawn next to the wheel far-
thest to the right. This drawing is similar to one drawn by the child on the
night of the fatal accident, when he told his parents, "I can't sleep because
I can't get the pictures out of my head." The act of externalizing these dis-
turbing images by making a drawing had therapeutic value for this child in
coming to terms with the traumatic experience of his sibling's death.

- Nancy: "When they eat bad things, like if you went with a stranger and they
  gave you a candy bar with poison on it. [*The researcher asks, "Anything else?"*]
  Yes, you can die if you swallow a dirty bug."
- Carol: "They eat poison and stuff, pills. You'd better wait until your Mom
  gives them to you. [*Anything else?*] Drinking poison water and stuff like
  going swimming alone."
- David: "A bird might get real sick and die if you catch it. [*Anything else?*] They
  could eat the wrong foods like aluminum foil. That's all I can think of."

The understanding of death during the early childhood years is also illus-
trated in a study done by Helen Swain.[21] Most children in this study expressed
the notion that death is reversible, attributing the return of life to the good
effects of ambulances, hospitals, or doctors, whose help is often summoned
magically, as if a dead person could ring up the hospital and say, "Will you
send me an ambulance over here? I'm dead and I need you to fix me up."
About two-thirds of the children said that death is unlikely or avoidable or is
brought about only by unusual events such as an accident or a catastrophe.
About one-third expressed disbelief that death could happen to them or to
their families. Nearly half were uncertain about whether they would ever die
or else thought they would die only in the remote future.

The Dead Mouse

We had been out of town and the neighbors had been caring for our various pets. When we returned, we found that our cat had, as cats will, caught and killed a mouse and had laid it out ceremoniously in front of his bowl in the garage. I discovered that that had happened when I heard loud screams from the garage. "Pudley's killed a mouse. There's a dead mouse in the garage!" Loud screams, for the whole neighborhood to hear. I went downstairs. It was the first time that I had a chance to observe how my children dealt with death. I said, "Oh, there is?" "Right here," they said. "Look!" They began to tell me how they had determined it was dead. It was not moving. They had poked at it several times and it didn't move. Matthew, who was five years old, added that it didn't look like it was ever going to move again. That was his judgment that the mouse was dead.

I said to him, "Well, what are we going to do?" I could feel myself being slightly repulsed; my fingers went to my nose. It was obvious to me that the mouse was dead—it had started to decay. Matt said very matter-of-factly, "Well, we'll have to bury it." Heather, seven, climbed on a chair and announced, "Not me. I'm not going to touch it. Don't bring it around here. Aughhh, dead mouse!" At that time, she was intent on being what she thought was feminine, and part of the stereotype involved not getting herself dirty.

So Matt volunteered for the job. "I'm going to need a shovel," he said. I stood back and watched, interested to see what would happen. I noticed that he didn't touch the mouse. From somewhere he already had gotten the idea that it wasn't appropriate to touch dead things. He carefully lifted it with the shovel and took it into the backyard to dig a hole. Heather peered around and watched at a safe distance.

After the mouse was buried, Matt came back and said, "I'm going to need some wood, a hammer, and a nail." I thought, "Oh great! He's going to perform some kind of little ceremony and place a symbol of some kind on the grave." Matt went to the woodpile and carefully selected a piece of wood maybe two inches long and another piece a bit wider, perhaps three inches wide and about four or five inches long. I thought, "Tombstone?" He got the nail and put the pieces of wood together in the shape of a cross.

I thought, "Oh. A cross, religious symbol, burial, funeral—all the things I knew about what happens with a dead body." Matt picked up a marking pen and wrote on the front of the cross: "DEAD MOUSE, KEEP OUT!" And he pounded it into the ground in front of where the mouse was buried. I thought, "What's going on in this kid's mind?"

I asked him, "Does that mean that when I die there should be a sign saying, "Dead Mommie. Keep out"? He put his hand on his hip and looked at me with that disgust that five-year-olds can muster for somebody who is *so* dumb, and said, "Of course not. You're going to be buried in one of those places where they have bodies. This is a backyard. Kids could ride their bikes over it. Who would know that there is a mouse buried back here?" I was flabbergasted.

A few weeks later there was a long discussion about what the mouse would look like at that time. My first thoughts were "Don't do that! You can't dig it up. It's not nice. It's not good. The mouse has to rest his spirit." Then I realized that all those things were coming from that place in me that didn't want to see what a month-old dead mouse looked like.

> So I kept quiet. They dug and dug, and I could feel the sweat dripping off me. They dug a huge hole, but could find no remnants of the mouse. I was a bit relieved. But that brought up all kinds of questions about what happened to the mouse. I made this elaborate picture of a compost pile, really a lengthy explanation. Finally I realized that they didn't understand at all and that what I was saying was of no interest to them.
>
> I said, "Well, it's like if you buried an orange." Something safe, I thought, something I can deal with that can be dug up day by day by day to see how it goes back into the earth.
>
> They buried an orange and dug it up and dug it up and dug it up. And it wasn't an orange anymore.
>
> I came away from that experience thinking, "Where did they learn all that? Matt's behavior, particularly. . . . Where did he get that from?"

Middle Childhood or School-Age Period

In Erikson's model, the years from about six to eleven correspond to the stage of *industry* versus inferiority. This is a period when the child is busy in school, interacting with peers in a variety of ways. As a child's efforts begin to gain recognition and bring satisfaction, he or she may be anxious about those areas in which there is a sense of inadequacy or failing to measure up. The death of a parent at this stage is likely to deprive a child of an important source of recognition. During these years of development, as children learn new tasks, they are also comparing themselves with their peers. When one nine-year-old moved to a different school shortly after her mother's death, she didn't want her new acquaintances to know about her mother's death. When questioned about this, she replied, "Having a dead mother makes me too different from other kids."

In Piaget's framework, this period is denoted by the term *concrete operations.* The child begins to use logic to solve problems and to think logically about things without having to have their relationships demonstrated directly. The ability to do arithmetic, for instance, requires the recognition that numbers are symbols for quantities. Children at this stage are able to manipulate concepts in a logical fashion, although they typically do not engage in abstract thinking. In other words, the ability to think logically is applied to objects, but not yet to hypotheses, which require the ability to carry out "operations on operations." Thus, the characteristic mode of thought in this developmental period emphasizes concreteness and the logic of *things.*

During this period, children name both intentional and unintentional means by which a person may die, and they are familiar with a wide range of causes of death. Here are some responses from the children in Koocher's study when asked about causes of death:

- Todd: "Knife, arrow, guns, and lots of stuff. You want me to tell you all of them? [*As many as you want.*] Hatchets and animals, and fires and explosions, too."

- Kenny: "Cancer, heart attacks, poison, guns, bullets, or if someone drops a boulder on you."
- Deborah: "Accidents, cars, guns, or a knife. Old age, sickness, taking dope, or drowning."

Adolescence

In Erikson's model, adolescence is marked by the milestone of establishing an individual *identity.* A bridge is established between the past—the years of childhood and dependency—and the future—the years of adulthood and independence. Adolescence is a period of integration as well as separation. The central question is "Who am I as an emotional, thinking, physical, and sexual being?"

Remember what it's like being a teenager? Becoming more your own person? Striving to express your own ideas and beliefs? Sorting out the tangle of all that's happening to you? Deciding what you want for your life? Adolescence can be confusing and challenging. For adolescents, the achievement of goals and dreams seems nearly within their grasp; death threatens that achievement. Surviving a close death may result in a more rapid "growing up."

In Piaget's model, adolescence is characterized by the use of *formal operations.* The fourth and final phase in Piaget's theory, this period begins at about the age of eleven or twelve and extends into adulthood, although a person's fundamental way of seeing the world is thought to be fairly well established by about the age of fifteen. With the arrival of formal operational thinking, the individual is able to "think about thinking"—that is, to formulate concepts that are abstract or symbolic. Relations of correspondence or implication between complex sets of statements can be perceived, analogies recognized, and assumptions or deductions made. It becomes possible to predict outcomes without having to try them in the real world. In a chess game, for example, formal operations of thought allow players to consider a number of complicated strategies and to predict the likely result of each move, without having to touch a single piece on the board.

In Koocher's study, most of the children who used formal operations of thought were twelve or older, although some were as young as nine or ten. The children interviewed by Koocher reflected a mature understanding of death in their responses to the question "What makes things die?"

- Ed: "You mean death in a physical sense? [*Yes.*] Destruction of a vital organ or life force within us."
- George: "They get old and their body gets all worn out, and their organs don't work as well as they used to."
- Paula: "When the heart stops, blood stops circulating. You stop breathing, and that's it. [*Anything else?*] Well, there's lots of ways it can get started, but that's what really happens."

Although adolescents typically demonstrate a mature understanding of death, this does not necessarily mean that there are no differences in the ways

> I was astonished to hear a highly intelligent boy of ten remark after the sudden death of his father: "I know father's dead, but what I can't understand is why he doesn't come home to supper."
>
> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

adolescents and adults understand and cope with death. For example, an adolescent's understanding of the universality of death may be influenced by a sense of invulnerability ("It can't happen to me"). The concept of personal death may not be easily accepted. In forging a sense of individual identity, the adolescent is confronted by the need to "reconcile that identity with ultimate disintegration and not being."[22]

Although "adolescence" generally is defined as ages eleven or twelve through eighteen or twenty, some psychologists propose a developmental category, "emerging adulthood," for the period from the late teens through the twenties, especially ages eighteen to twenty-five. Because a prolonged period of independent role exploration occurs during these years, this is a time of life when many possibilities and directions in work, love, and worldview can be imagined. People in this age group no longer view themselves as adolescents, but they also may not see themselves entirely as adults. "Emerging adults can pursue novel and intense experiences more freely than adolescents because they are less likely to be monitored by parents and can pursue them more freely than adults because they are less constrained by roles."[23] The prevalence of certain types of risk behavior—including unprotected sex, substance abuse, risky driving, and binge drinking—appears to peak during the years of emerging adulthood. Like adolescents in this regard, emerging adults may think they are "beyond death."

The Evolution of a Mature Concept of Death

Through successive periods of development, individuals progress toward a mature understanding of death and exhibit characteristic responses to loss. We looked at children's responses to the question "What makes things die?" Their answers to other questions posed by Koocher also corresponded to varied developmental stages. Asked "How do you make dead things come back to life?" children who thought of death as reversible gave answers like "You can help them; give them hot food and keep them healthy so it won't happen again." Another child said, "No one ever taught me about that, but maybe you could give them some kind of medicine and take them to the hospital to get better." Children in later developmental stages recognized death as permanent: "If it was a tree, you could water it. If it's a person, you could rush them to the emergency room, but it would do no good if they were dead already." Another child said, "Maybe some day we'll be able to do it, but not now. Scientists are working on that problem."

Asked "When will you die?" younger children gave answers ranging from "When I'm seven" (from a six-year-old) to "Three hundred years." In contrast, older children expected to live a statistically correct life span, or a bit more; the usual age at which death was expected was about eighty.

In answer to the researcher's question "What will happen when you die?" one nine-and-a-half-year-old said, "They'll help me come back alive." The researcher asked, "Who?" "My father, my mother, and my grandfather," the child responded. "They'll keep me in bed and feed me and keep me away from rat poison and stuff." According to some models, a child of nine would understand that none of those measures would work. Thus, this example illustrates the point that age-and-stage correlations provide, at best, a rule of thumb concerning how children develop.

In answer to the same question, an eight-and-a-half-year-old replied, "You go to heaven and all that will be left of you will be a skeleton. My friend has some fossils. A fossil is just a skeleton." Notice how this child used comparison to help interpret what happens when death occurs. An eleven-year-old said, "I'll feel dizzy and tired and pass out, and then they'll bury me and I'll rot away. You just disintegrate and only your bones will be left."

A twelve-year-old said, "I'll have a nice funeral and be buried and leave all my money to my son." One ten-year-old said, "If I tell you, you'll laugh." The researcher assured the child, "No, I won't. I want to know what you really think." Thus encouraged, the child continued, "I think I'm going to be reincarnated as a plant or animal, whatever they need at that particular time." The ability to imagine what things might be like in the future is seen in this child's response.

Sociocultural Influences on Our Understanding of Death

Acquiring a mature understanding of death is part of the developmental process known as *socialization*. This process involves learning and internalizing the norms, rules, and values of society. Through socialization, younger members of a society acquire knowledge, behavior, and ideals from older generations. Socialization does not stop with childhood's end, but continues throughout life as people develop new social roles and values. Nor is it a one-way process whereby individuals simply learn to fit into society. Society's norms and values are modified as its members redefine their social roles and obligations.

Society can be defined as "a group of people who share a common culture, a common territory, and a common identity; and who feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct entity which involves interacting in socially structured relationships."[24] The social systems and institutions of a society give it a distinctive flavor and set it apart from other societies. This sense of distinctiveness is captured in the term *culture,* which is a kind of shorthand for referring to the lifeways—that is, the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—of a given group of people. We often refer to societies in ways that highlight this

T A B L E 2-2   *Nonmaterial Aspects of Culture*

Knowledge: Conclusions based on empirical evidence.
Beliefs: Conclusions for which there is not sufficient empirical evidence for them to be
     seen as necessarily true.
Values: Abstract ideas about what is good and desirable.
Norms: Social rules and guidelines that prescribe appropriate behavior in particular
     situations.
Signs and symbols: Representations that stand for something else; this category includes
     language and gestures.

Source: Adapted from Norman Goodman, *Introduction to Sociology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 31–34.

cultural distinctiveness—for example, Japanese culture, Western European culture, and so on.

Culture can be defined as "all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted."[25] This definition encompasses both material and nonmaterial components. Material culture consists of "things"— that is, manufactured objects (for example, buildings and consumer goods) or physical manifestations of the life of a people. Nonmaterial aspects of culture lie in the realm of ideas, beliefs, values, and customs (see Table 2-2).

Culture is dynamic; that is, it changes as the members of a society reevaluate inherited beliefs, values, and customs in light of ongoing experiences. In this sense, culture operates as a framing device that channels, rather than determines, attitudes and behaviors.

Agents of Socialization

Socialization involves a variety of influences, beginning with the family and extending to the mass media and the global "transcultural" environment. Children today are exposed to a broader range of influences on their socialization than at any other time in history. As Hannelore Wass says, "Children adopt many values and beliefs from significant adults in their world [including] parents, teachers, public figures, sports heroes, and famous entertainers."[26]

Although the main phases of socialization occur during the years of childhood, the process continues lifelong. *Resocialization,* a term that refers to the "uprooting and restructuring of basic attitudes, values, or identities," occurs when adults take on new roles that require replacing their existing values and modes of behavior.[27] This occurs, for example, with religious conversion, starting a new job, getting married, having children, or surviving the death of a mate. Widowhood involves changes in many areas of life, as new roles and activities are taken on. Rapid social change also leads to resocialization, as when women began entering the workforce in large numbers.

People tend to acquire their learning about dying and death on an ad hoc basis—that is, in a disorganized and impromptu fashion. Formal education about death is offered through courses, seminars, and the like, but these

avenues of socialization are not part of most people's experience. The term *tactical socialization* refers to strategies that hospice caregivers, for example, use to informally teach people about death and dying.[28] It involves an active effort to change other people's perceptions and behaviors about some aspect of their social world.

The way we learn about death tends to be less a result of systematic instruction than of happenstance. It is not always possible to pinpoint the genesis of ideas that an individual acquires about death. Consider the following incident, involving two siblings, ages eight and ten. When asked to draw a picture of a funeral (see Figure 2-3), they got out their colored pencils and immersed themselves in the task. After a while, Heather (ten) said to Matt (eight), "Hey, you've got smiles on those faces! This is supposed to be a funeral. What are they doing with smiles on their faces?" In her model of appropriate death-related behavior, people don't smile at funerals; to her younger brother, smiles were perfectly acceptable. One can only guess the influences that provoke such strong statements about what kind of behavior is appropriate at funerals. It is in interactions like this that attitudes about death are incorporated into a child's understanding of death.

Family

The family is the foundational social institution in all societies, although the definition of "family" varies from place to place and time to time. In the routines of daily life, the beliefs and values of parents are transmitted to their children. The family is the first source of death education in our lives, and its influence continues throughout our lives.[29]

Think back to your own childhood. What messages did you receive about death that remain to this day in the back of your mind? Possibly some messages were conveyed directly: "This is what death is" or "This is how we behave in relation to death." Perhaps some messages were indirect: "Let's not talk about it. . . ." How would the rest of that sentence go? Let's not talk about it . . . because it's not something that people talk about? When, as a child, one woman encountered a dead animal on the highway, she was told, "You shouldn't look at it." Her mother admonished, "Put your head down; children shouldn't see that." This is a parental message about appropriate behavior toward death.

Other parental messages about death are communicated unconsciously. Consider the notion of replaceability. A child's pet dies, and the parent says, "It's okay, dear, we'll get another one." Children differ in their emotional response to the death of a family pet; some grieve intensely when a beloved pet dies. Quickly replacing it may not allow time for acknowledging the loss. What lesson about death is taught? Imagine a situation in which a mother's grief over her mate's death is interrupted by her child's remark, "Don't worry, Mommy, we'll get you another one."

The lessons about death that are learned in the family are conveyed by actions as well as words. A woman now in her thirties tells the following story: "I remember a time when my mother ran over a cat. I wasn't with her in the car, but I recall my mother coming home and just totally falling apart. She

ran into the bedroom and cried for hours. Since that time, I've been extremely conscientious about not killing anything. If there's an insect on me or in my house, I'll pick it up and carry it outside." Parental attitudes, and the attitudes of other family members, shape the values and behaviors not only of the child but also of the adult that the child will become, and they influence how that adult conveys attitudes toward death to his or her own children.

School and Peers

Schools teach more than "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic." The social world of a child is dramatically broadened during the school years. "The scraps of lore which children learn from each other are at once more real, more immediately serviceable, and more vastly entertaining to them than anything which they learn from grown-ups."[30] Even before school years, children enter the social world of their peer group as they play with other children of the same age and general social status. Recall how, in chasing games, a touch with the tip of a finger can have a noxious effect, as if the chaser were evil, magic, or diseased, and the touch was contagious.[31] Hobbies and sports also connect children to a community and a set of social norms. With the broadening of a child's social network, there is an increase in learning about death.

Mass Media and Children's Literature

Television, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, videos, records, CDs, and the Internet—these media have a powerful socializing influence. Media messages communicate cultural attitudes toward death to children, even when the message is not purposely directed to them, as with news reports of disasters. When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a classic study found that children tended to select from the details presented by the media those aspects that were consistent with their developmental concerns.[32] Younger children worried about the appearance of the president's body and the effects of the death on his family; older children expressed concerns about the impact of Kennedy's death on the political system.

Many classic children's stories and fairy tales depict death, near deaths, or the threat of death.[33] There are "tales of children abandoned in woods; of daughters poisoned by their mothers' hands; of sons forced to betray their siblings; of men and women struck down by wolves, or imprisoned in windowless towers."[34] Death has often had a place in children's literature, and this is especially true of the earliest versions of familiar stories that parents and other adults share with children. Elizabeth Lamers says, "American children taught to read with textbooks such as *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers* found that death was presented as tragic, but inevitable, and many of the death-related stories conveyed a moral lesson."[35] In the nineteenth century, the violence in children's stories was usually graphic and gory so that it would make the desired moral impression.[36]

The manner in which death is presented in children's stories communicates cultural values. Consider, for example, the contrasts between different versions of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood.[37] In the traditional version of

Figure 2-3 *Children's Drawings of a Funeral*
Instructed to draw a picture of a funeral, a sister (age ten) and brother
(eight) did so. The ten-year-old, whose drawing is at the left, emphasizes the
emotional responses of the survivors. We see the picture as if we are looking
in (and down) upon their grief. The figures in the first two pews have tears
streaming down their faces and one woman shouts "No!" At ten, this child
reflects on the sorrowful and unwelcome nature of death. When questioned
about the empty pews, she said they were for anyone who came late.
    The eight-year-old's drawing (above) is viewed from a similar perspective
(looking in and down at the scene). Here we see the survivors grouped
around a flag-draped and flower-bedecked coffin. The figures are portrayed
with smiles on their faces. The focus in this drawing is on the symbols of
death (for example, the casket) and the ceremony rather than emotions.
During the drawing session, the older sister commented that her brother's
picture was "too happy" for a funeral scene.

Little Red Riding-Hood

. . . "Dear me, Grandmamma, what great arms you have!"
   The wolf replied:
   "They are so much better to hug you with, my child."
   "Why, Grandmamma, what great legs you have got!"
   "That is to run the better, my child!"
   "But, Grandmamma, what great ears you've got!"
   "That is to hear the better, my child."
   "But, Grandmamma, what great eyes you've got!"
   "They are so much better to see you with, my child."
   Then the little girl, who was now very much frightened, said:
   "Oh, Grandmamma, what great teeth you have got!"
   "THEY ARE THE BETTER TO EAT YOU UP!"
   With these words the wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding-Hood and ate her
up in a moment.

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the story, the wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood, but she is saved by a woodsman who kills the wolf and slits its stomach, allowing Little Red Riding Hood to emerge unharmed. In more recent versions, Little Red Riding Hood's screams alert the woodsman, who chases the wolf and then returns to announce that she will be bothered no more (the killing of the wolf occurs offstage and is not mentioned).[38]

The Chinese tale of *Lon Po Po* (Granny Wolf) comes from an oral tradition thought to be over a thousand years old. In this version of the story, three young children are left by themselves while their mother goes away to visit their grandmother. The wolf, disguised as Po Po (Grandmother), persuades the children to open the locked door of their house. When they do, he quickly blows out the light. By making perceptive inquiries, however, the oldest child cleverly discovers the wolf's true identity and, with her younger siblings, escapes to the top of a ginkgo tree. Through trickery, the children convince the wolf to step into a basket so that they can haul him up to enjoy the ginkgo nuts. Joining together, the children start hauling up the basket. But, just as it nearly reaches the top of the tree, they let the basket drop to the ground. The story says, "Not only did the wolf bump his head, but he broke his heart to pieces."[39] Climbing down to the branches just above the wolf, the children discover that he is "truly dead." Unlike the Western version, which has a solitary child facing the threat of the wolf by herself and ultimately being saved by someone else, the Chinese folk tale emphasizes the value of being part of a group effort to do away with the wolf.

Some children's stories are written with the specific aim of answering their questions about dying and death. In many such books, especially those for young children, death is often presented as part of the natural cycle. These stories express the idea that, like the transition from one season to the

The Shroud

A mother once had a little seven-year-old boy with such a sweet, beautiful face that no one could look at him without loving him, and she loved him more than anything in the world. Suddenly, the child fell sick, and God took him. The mother was inconsolable and wept day and night. Soon after he was buried, the child began to appear in places where he had sat playing in his lifetime. When his mother wept, he too wept, and when morning came he vanished. Then when the mother could not stop crying, he appeared one night wrapped in the little white shroud he had been buried in and wearing a wreath of flowers on his head. He sat down at her feet and said: "Oh, mother, if you don't stop crying I won't be able to sleep in my coffin, for my shroud is wet with all the tears that fall on it." When she heard that, the mother was horrified, and from then on she shed no tears. The next night the child came again. He held a candle in his hand and said: "You see, my shroud is almost dry. Now I can rest in my grave." After that, the mother gave her grief into God's keeping and bore it silently and patiently. The child never came again, but slept in his little bed under the ground.

Grimm's Tales for Young and Old

next, each ending in life is followed by renewal. (A list of children's books about death is included in Chapter 10.)

Lullabies also contain themes of death and violence.[40] In every human culture and in every historical period, adults have sung to children. It is said that, with the first lullaby a mother sings to her child, death education begins.[41] Consider the message in this well-known lullaby:

Rockabye baby, in the treetops.
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.
Down will come baby, cradle and all.

Some lullabies are "mourning songs," which describe the death or funeral of a child; others are "threat" songs that warn of violence if a child does not go to sleep or perform some other action in the expected manner.

Of two hundred nursery rhymes examined in one study, about half described the wonder and beauty of life, whereas the other half dealt with the ways in which humans and animals die or are mistreated.[42] Death-related themes in these rhymes include accounts of murder, choking to death, torment and cruelty, maiming, misery and sorrow, as well as stories of lost or abandoned children and depictions of poverty and want.

Religion

As a key element of human culture, religion and, more broadly, spirituality have the potential to shape individual lives and personalities.[43] Contemplating one's place in the universe is a crucial aspect of human development. Religion is a basis for morality and human relationships, helping people live

in harmony with the gods and giving meaning to life.[44] A significant theme in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, a pioneering American sociologist of religion, is the insight that religious institutions do more than connect people with God, they connect people to one another.[45]

For children as well as adults, religion can offer pathways toward understanding and coping with dying and death. It provides an interpretative framework within which to find some constructive or positive meaning in an otherwise negative or tragic event by placing the event in a larger context. In difficult times, religion enhances coping resources by fostering self-esteem and a sense of control through, for example, trust and faith in God.[46]

The death awareness movement has gained much from its connection with religion and spirituality. Lucy Bregman says,

> Spiritual beliefs and practices provide an interpretation of the dying process, aid in the developmental task of transcendence, and afford comfort to dying individuals and their family members.[47]

For dying patients and their families, religion may offer solace, suggest some meaning in dying, and provide rituals that help ease the pangs of grief. Vernon Reynolds and Ralph Tanner note that religion is concerned with "ministering to the dying person, preparing him or her for the world to come, generally being involved with his physical needs and psychological feelings at this time, and likewise helping those who are especially close."[48]

It is useful to distinguish between two related concepts: *religiosity* and *spirituality*. Although a partial definition of spirituality is "to be concerned with religious values," it is understood more broadly as a search for ultimate meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be directly related to a particular religious tradition. "It entails connection to self-chosen and/or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being."[49] It emphasizes "a personal search for connection with a larger sacredness" and "a bonding with others that cannot be severed, not even by death."[50]

The consolations of a religious or spiritual orientation are likely to depend on the manner in which that person makes such an orientation part of his or her life. For instance, someone who attends religious services mainly because they create opportunities for social interaction is likely to have a different experience than someone who participates because he or she finds deep personal meaning in religious creeds and beliefs. In this sense, religiosity embraces several dimensions, including[51]

1. Experiential religiosity (emotional ties to a religion)
2. Ritualistic religiosity (participation in religious ceremonies)
3. Ideological religiosity (religious commitment)
4. Consequential religiosity (degree to which religion is integrated into the person's daily life)
5. Intellectual religiosity (knowledge about the religion's traditions, beliefs, and practices)

TABLE 2-3   *Four Functions of Religion in Societies*

1. Religion provides a shared set of beliefs, values, and norms around which people can form a common identity. Thus, religion is a unifier, "the social glue that binds a group together by giving it a common set of values."
2. Religion provides answers to the "big questions" about human existence and purpose. It addresses issues of life and death, outlines the kind of life people are expected to lead, and explains what happens to them after they die.
3. Religion often provides a foundation for the norms and laws of a society. Laws acquire a moral as well as legal force when they are embedded in religious values.
4. Religion is a source of emotional and psychological support to people, especially at times of crisis.

Source: Adapted from Norman Goodman, *Introduction to Sociology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 205–206.

Any or all of these dimensions can have an impact on how a person faces death and copes with loss. For example, a young Filipino American man whose father had died talked about the comfort he felt in connection with a funeral mass held in the church where his family worshiped. Commenting on the language and other symbols present in the service, he said, "You know, I've never thought much about what those prayers are about, but the soothing rhythms of the chants and the pungent smell of the incense caused me to feel that my dad is somehow still being cared for, that he's really okay." This young man's experience includes aspects of experiential, ritualistic, and consequential religiosity.

Even in so-called secular societies, religion plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward death (see Table 2-3). In the United States, more than 90 percent of the population is affiliated with a religious tradition.[52] Such traditions are part of a child's socialization. Many concepts central to religious traditions "are not as opaque to young children as often thought."[53] A survey of teenagers in the U.S. indicates that 95 percent believe in God and about one-quarter consider religious faith more important to them than it is to their parents.[54]

Teachable Moments

In the course of their daily lives, opportunities abound for children to learn about dying and death.[55] Consider, for example, a mother who discovers her eleven-year-old son sitting at her new computer writing his will. Taken aback, she pauses for a moment as thoughts race through her head: Why is he writing a will? How did an eleven-year-old become interested in giving away his favorite treasures? Does he believe he is going to die soon? What should I do? What can I say? Gathering her courage, she cautiously adjusts her tone to suggest a neutral stance and asks, "What has made you think about writing a will?"

Turning to her, the joy of accomplishment lighting up his face, the boy says, "I was looking at the menu on your computer and found *Willmaker*. The program came up and all I have to do is fill in the blanks. It's easy, see? Then I can print out my very own will."

I recall with utter clarity the first great shock of my life. A scream came from the cottage next door. I rushed into the room, as familiar as my own home. The Larkin kids, Conor, Liam and Brigid, all hovered about the alcove in which a mattress of bog fir bedded old Kilty. They stood in gape-mouthed awe.

I stole up next to Conor. "Grandfar is dead," he said.

Their ma, Finola, who was eight months pregnant, knelt with her head pressed against the old man's heart. It was my very first sight of a dead person. He was a waxy, bony specimen lying there with his open mouth showing no teeth at all and his glazed eyes staring up at me and me staring back until I felt my own ready to pop out of their sockets.

Oh, it was a terrible moment of revelation for me. All of us kids thought old Kilty had the magic of the fairies and would live forever, a tale fortified by the fact that he was the oldest survivor of the great famine, to say nothing of being a hero of the Fenian Rising of '67 who had been jailed and fearfully tortured for his efforts.

I was eleven years old at that moment. Kilty had been daft as long as I could recall, always huddled near the fire mumbling incoherently. He was an ancient old dear, ancient beyond age, but nobody ever gave serious consideration to the fact he might die.

Leon Uris, *Trinity*

Thus we encounter the concept of a "teachable moment," a phrase used by educators to describe opportunities for learning that arise out of ordinary experiences. Because of their immediacy, such naturally occurring events are ideal for learning. The learner's questions, enthusiasm, and motivation guide the educational process. If we assume that learning always flows in a single direction, from adult to child, we miss the quintessential quality of education as an interactive process. In the example of the young boy filling in the blanks of a computerized will-making program, the mother appears to occupy most clearly the role of the learner. She learns something about her son's exploration of the new computer and, more important, she learns the crucial lesson of gathering information before reacting.

Suppose this mother, acting out of initial shock at her son's apparent interest in death, had hastily responded, "Stop that! Children shouldn't be thinking about wills or about dying!" A lesson about death would surely be taught, but it wouldn't promote a healthy understanding. It is useful to ask: *What* is being taught? Does the "teaching" result from a conscious design? Or is it unintentionally conveying unhealthy messages about death?

Let's return to our story of the mother and son. Having elicited information without acting on her initial anxiety, the mother can use this conversation as an opportunity to discuss death with her son. She might call attention to the entry for "Designated Guardian for Minor Children," informing her son about the steps she has taken to ensure his well-being ("Did I tell you that Aunt Martha and Uncle John are listed in my will as your guardians?") as well as to respond to his concerns ("No, I do not intend to die for a long time").

They might spend a few minutes talking about other aspects of death and how people prepare for it. An atmosphere of openness is promoted as information is exchanged between adult and child. Much learning can take place in a brief conversation.

Teachable moments are often defined in the context of unplanned or unexpected occurrences, but it is useful to recognize that parents, educators, and other adults can intentionally create situations that encourage such opportunities for learning about death.[56] There is no rule that we must wait until such events happen spontaneously. Indeed, in the example given earlier, the mother used her son's experience with the computer program as a way of introducing their subsequent discussion about death. Similarly, in films produced for children, death is frequently part of the plot, and this can lead to a natural discussion about how grief, for example, is portrayed among the various characters.[57] The key to making the most of such opportunities is adequate preparation by trusted adults in the child's environment.

Teachable moments take place not only between adults and children, but also between adults. While on an airplane trip, an executive for a large corporation engaged one of this book's authors in conversation. Upon learning the subject of this textbook, his tone changed a bit as he said, "Could I ask your opinion on a personal matter?" The question involved a family dispute about whether the man's five-year-old son should attend his grandfather's burial

Cpl. Edward Belfer, U.S. Army Photo

Children experience the impact of war on their lives in a variety of ways. For the German child seen here, war brought a stark encounter with death. This child was one of many German citizens who, at the end of World War II, were ordered by the provisional military government of the U.S. Third Army to view the exhumed bodies of Russians, Poles, and Czechs killed while imprisoned in the concentration camp at Flossenberg. For Amanda Wille (facing page), the impact of war was felt in terms of the anticipated loss of her father, a Navy computer technician, as he prepared to board the USS John F. Kennedy *for service during the Persian Gulf War. Understanding only that her father was going away, the three-year-old seemed anxious and bewildered until she found a piece of string on the Norfolk, Virginia, dock. After her father broke the string and tied one piece around his wrist and the other around hers, Amanda cried and hugged him goodbye.*

ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. He was concerned that the military ceremony—with uniforms, soldiers, and a twenty-one-gun salute—would frighten his son. After he shared additional information about his family and child, suggestions were offered about ways that parental support could be provided to the child during the funeral rites. Hearing these suggestions made it possible for the man to reconsider his earlier decision to exclude the child. With specific recommendations in hand, he decided that the child should be present at his grandfather's funeral. You do not have to be the author of a textbook to offer information that is helpful to people who are

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coping with death-related issues. In reading this book, you will gain information that can be appropriately offered.

Experiences with Death

When children are included in activities surrounding the death of a close family member or friend, they usually acquire an understanding of death that is associated with children at a later stage of development. One six-year-old who witnessed the accidental death of her sibling expressed a clear understanding that death is final, that people die, and that she herself could die.

She was concerned about how she could protect herself and her friends from the dangerous circumstances that had led to her brother's death. Her attitude was displayed in admonitions to schoolmates that they should try to prevent accidents.

Encounters with violent death can powerfully alter a child's understanding of death.[58] Drawings made by Cambodian children in refugee camps depict death as the predominant theme.[59] Having seen the deaths of parents and others from starvation, children responded to that traumatic experience in their drawings. One such picture shows a woman in the midst of six smaller bodies with the caption "Mother's Dead Children." James Garbarino says, "Few issues challenge our moral, intellectual, and political resources as does the topic of children and community violence—war, violent crime on the streets, and other forms of armed conflict."[60]

A diary written by a young girl in war-torn Sarajevo highlights the effects of violence on children. Zlata Filipovic's diary displays an evolution from the ordinary concerns of teenage life to a shattering preoccupation with destruction and death as warfare disrupts normal life. In one entry, Zlata writes: "War has crossed out the day and replaced it with horror, and now horrors are unfolding instead of days."[61] Many children and teenagers growing up in America's cities experience warlike disruptions due to drug-related violence and gang warfare, a situation that writer, actor, and musician Ice-T characterizes as "the killing fields" of America.[62]

Children who experience firsthand the reality of death through war or violence, or in connection with other forms of catastrophic death, often exhibit a fatalistic attitude that contrasts with the attitude of children whose experiences of death occur in benign circumstances. When questioned about the "ways people die," children in violent or death-saturated environments tend to answer quite differently from children whose lives are comparatively sheltered from such experiences (see Figures 2-4 and 2-5).

When children in an urban school in Germany were asked about the ways people die, violent deaths were described as being caused by "weapons" and "sharp knives." Conspicuously absent was any use of the word *gun*.[63] In Germany, handguns, being illegal, are not available to the general populace. The children's responses corresponded to their environment.

Take a moment to consider your own circumstances. Do you live in a rural, urban, or small-town environment? What region of the country do you live in? The North, East, South, or West? Was your school environment ethnically and religiously diverse, or was it not? Your response to death is likely to be influenced by such factors. Life experiences are powerful in shaping a person's attitudes and beliefs about death. When such experiences occur in early childhood, a person may become fully aware of their impact only in adulthood.

Chance encounters, or fortuitous happenings, may be beneficial or detrimental, depending on the nature and interplay of personal and social forces.[64] Children (and adults) who have a positive sense of self-esteem and are comfortable with themselves, who see themselves as active, vital, and interesting, and who have caring relationships with others tend to be less fearful about dying and death. Consider the responses to death that you have ob-
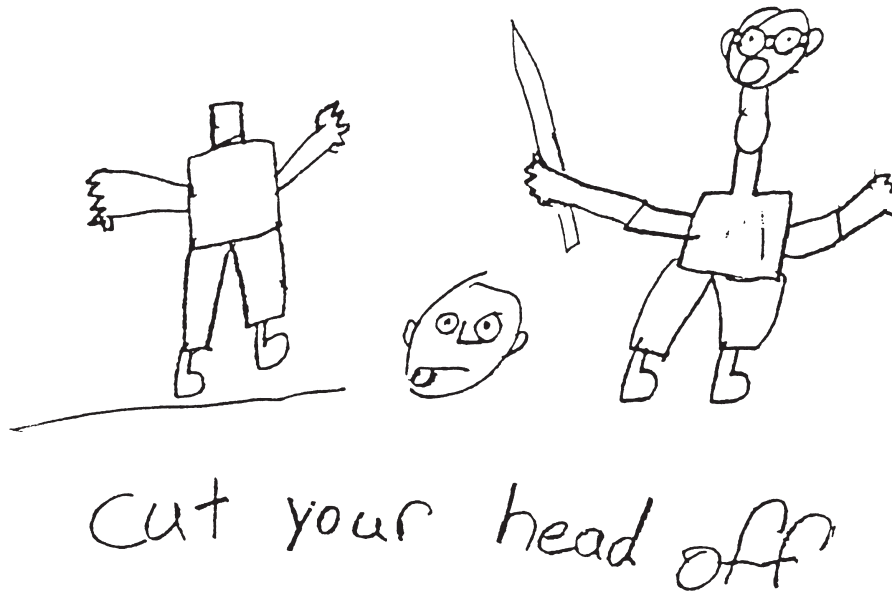
cut your head off

Figure 2-4   *Ways People Die: Children's Images*
Above: A seven-year-old African American boy in a large Midwestern city
draws a picture of murder by decapitation. (In separate incidents, two
young girls in his city had recently been killed in this manner.)
Below: In contrast, the drawing created by a seven-year-old Caucasian boy
attending Catholic school in a small California town portrays the child's
concept that people die when "God calls you home." Notice the child's
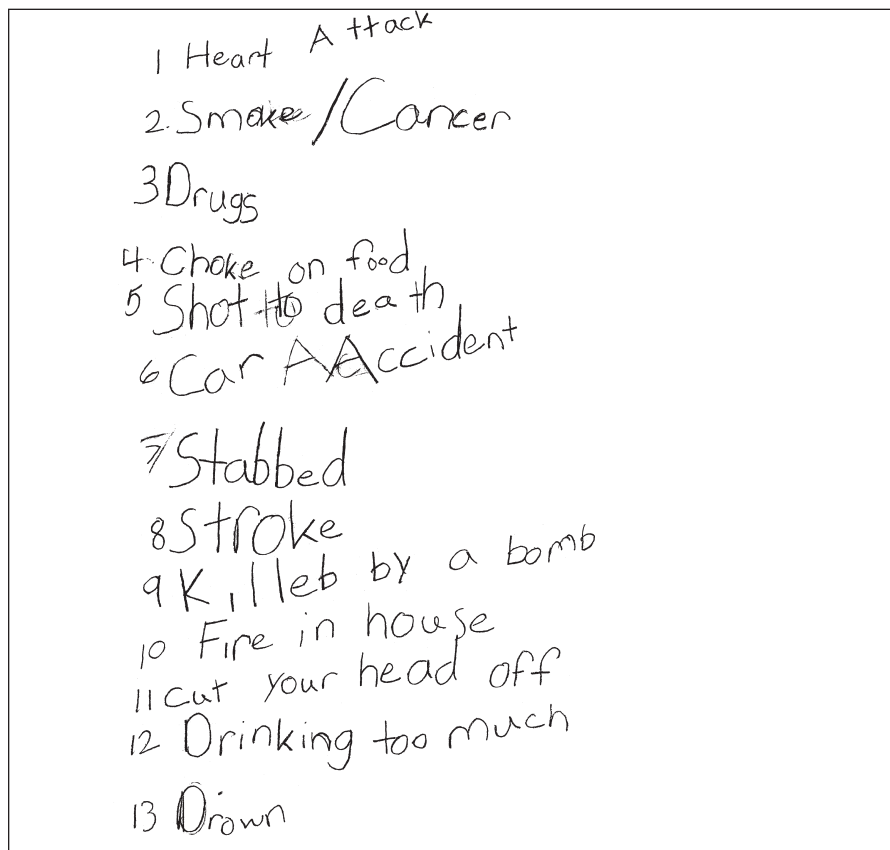depiction of the voice of God and heavenly "pearly gates."
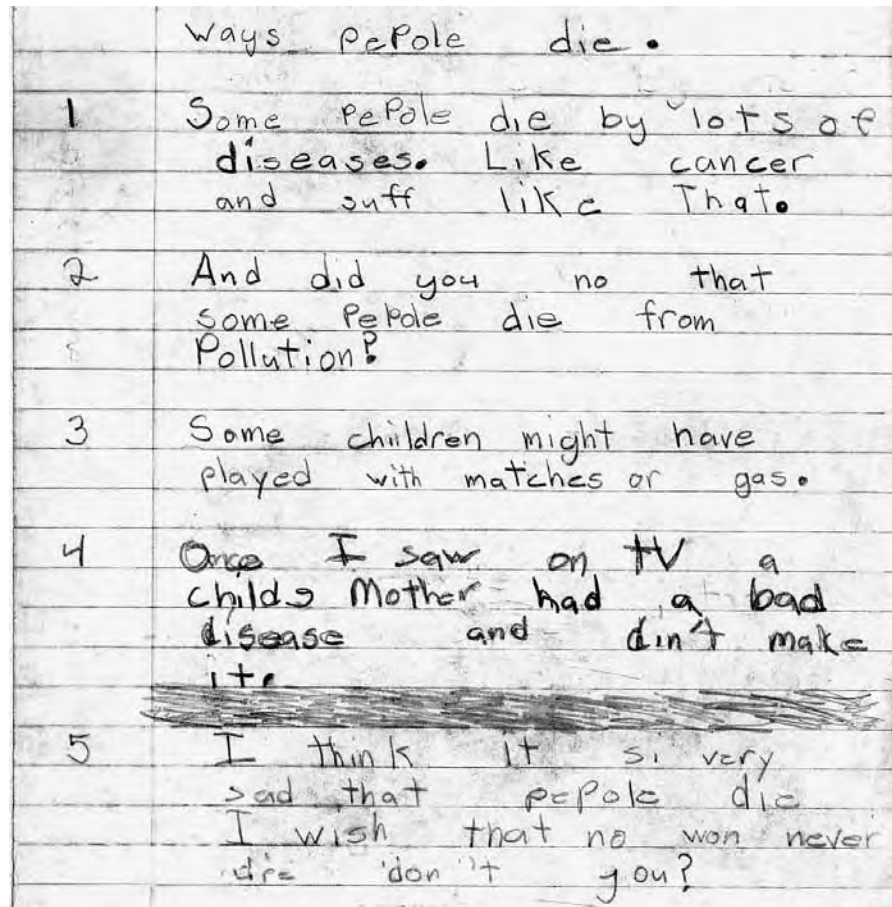
Figure 2-5 *Ways People Die: Children's Explanations*
Environment, including both time and place, influences a child's under-
standing of death. The impact of environment on children's views of death
can be evoked by asking them to make a list or draw a picture in response
to the question "What are the ways people die?" The list shown above was
written in 1978 by a seven-year-old Caucasian girl living in a small coastal
California town. It stands in sharp contrast to the thirteen-item response
(*facing page)* written in 1995 by a seven-year-old African American boy living
in a major Midwestern city. Although both lists were created by children of
the same age, the second list reflects both the passage of time (seventeen
years) and the circumstances of life in an inner-city metropolitan environ-
ment. Whereas the first child's list focuses on diseases and accidents, the
second child's explanation shows familiarity with a broad range of causes
of death, few of which relate to "natural" events. His illustration of item
number 11, "cut your head off," is shown in Figure 2-4.

1 Heart Attack
2. Smoke/Cancer
3 Drugs
4. Choke on food
5 Shot to death
6 Car Accident
7 Stabbed
8 Stroke
9 Killeb by a bomb
10 Fire in house
11 Cut your head off
12 Drinking too much
13 Drown

served. A ten-year-old's agonized phrase, "It's sickening, don't talk about it!" can survive into adulthood.

Theoretical Perspectives on Society and Culture

Sociology provides useful tools for understanding how social and cultural factors affect people's attitudes and behaviors relative to death. The three theoretical perspectives discussed here represent different vantage points from which to observe how societies work. The first takes a broad view of social structures and institutions. It emphasizes the interrelationships among major elements of society, including the family, the economy, and the political system. The second focuses on social relations and interactions among members of a society. This theory calls attention to the way people shape and are shaped by the social world in which they live, as well as the ways in which social meaning is created and shared. The third explanation provides a model of how people become members of a society through the interplay of personality, behavior, and environment.
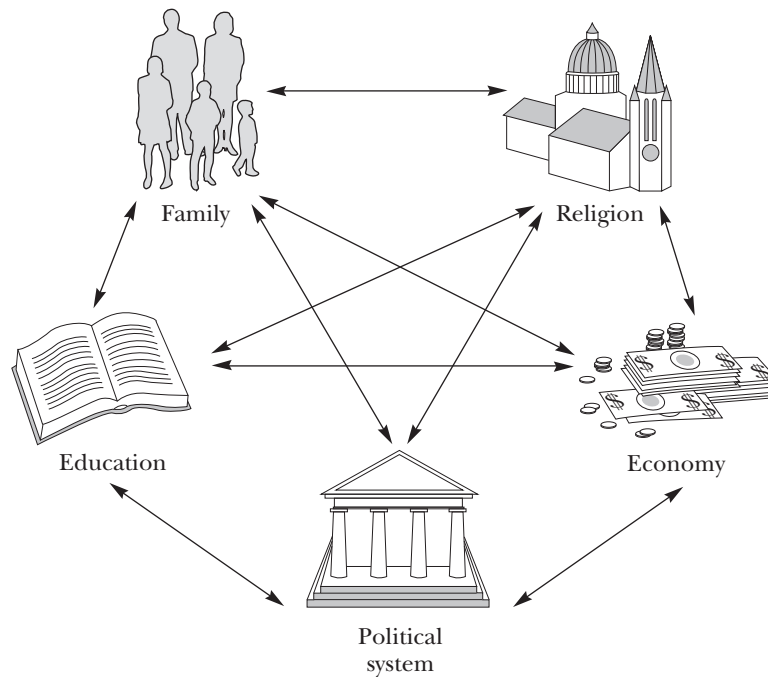
Figure 2-6 *Structural-Functionalist Approach*

The Structural-Functionalist Approach

Much as in studying the human body, where we look at the structure and function of various organs and their interrelationships, we can view society as an organic whole, with constituent parts working together to maintain each other and the whole society. The patterns of interaction among the members of a society are part of that society's *social structure.*

Sociologists usually delineate five major social institutions: (1) the economy, (2) the educational system, (3) the family, (4) the political system, and (5) religion. These institutions are related in such a way that a change in one leads to changes in others (see Figure 2-6). For example, in northeastern Brazil, a region where many people live in extreme poverty, political authorities do not bother to keep accurate statistics about infant mortality among the poor.[65] Looked at from the perspective of social structure, this example illustrates how economics has an impact on the political system, with consequences that, in turn, affect the social reality of poor Brazilian families.

The structural-functionalist view of society helps us appreciate the institutionalized bases of attitudes and behaviors toward death. In North America, cultural expectations about death reflect a social reality consistent with a technology-oriented and bureaucratic society. An appropriate death is one that occurs naturally and is correctly timed—that is, occurs in old age.[66] The bureaucratic aspect of death in modern societies is designed to prevent dis-

> Recently my seven-year-old son hopped in my lap and we watched the evening news together. The concluding line of a report on environmental pollution was a quote from U.N. scientists predicting that in twenty years the world would be uninhabitable. As the TV switched to a Madison Avenue jingle designed to encourage us to purchase a non-greasy hair tonic, my son turned to me with a terribly small voice and asked: "Dad, how old will I be when we all die?"
>
> Robert D. Barr, *The Social Studies Professional*

ruptions and preserve the equilibrium of social life.[67] In this structural framework, death tends to be moved to the periphery of social life.[68]

Symbolic Interactionism

The theoretical approach known as *symbolic interactionism* "seeks to explain human action and behavior as the result of the meanings which human beings attach to action and things."[69] Symbolic interactionism emphasizes "the freedom of individuals to construct their own reality as well as to potentially reconstruct that which has been inherited."[70] According to this theory, people are viewed as actively responsive to the social structures and processes in their lives. This theory highlights the fact that socialization is a two-way process; it is not simply "putting in" information at one end and "getting out" a finished product at the other.

After observing terminally ill children and their families in a leukemia ward, Myra Bluebond-Langner commented that our perspective is limited when we define children in terms of "what they will become" while viewing adults as the active "agents" of their socialization.[71] This insight applies not only to the socialization of children, but also to interactions between adults. In a study of dying Native Canadian patients and their grieving families in urban hospital settings, researchers found that Euro-Canadian caregivers and Native Canadian patients bring to their encounters differing interpretations of appropriate care.[72] Engaging one another in interactions to resolve the conflict between these differing views created beneficial changes in attitudes and behaviors of both caregivers and patients. As new "meanings" emerged, the hospital "culture" changed.

Social scientists refer to this process as the *social construction of reality:*

> Each society constructs its own version of the world, its "truths." In some societies the guiding forces of the world are seen as supernatural; in others they are the impersonal forces of nature. Some individuals structure their lives around their belief in a personal deity. . . . For others no such supreme being exists. Different versions of reality are not limited to weighty issues like religion. They also come into play in everyday events in people's lives.[73]

The social constructionist orientation, says Kenneth Gergen, focuses on "the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live.[74] According to this

George Willard became possessed of a madness to lift the sheet from the body of his mother and look at her face. The thought that had come into his mind gripped him terribly. He became convinced that not his mother but someone else lay in the bed before him. The conviction was so real that it was almost unbearable. The body under the sheets was long and in death looked young and graceful. To the boy, held by some strange fancy, it was unspeakably lovely. The feeling that the body before him was alive, that in another moment a lovely woman would spring out of the bed and confront him, became so overpowering that he could not bear the suspense. Again and again he put out his hand. Once he touched and half lifted the white sheet that covered her, but his courage failed and he, like Doctor Reefy, turned and went out of the room. In the hallway outside the door he stopped and trembled so that he had to put a hand against the wall to support himself. "That's not my mother. That's not my mother in there," he whispered to himself and again his body shook with fright and uncertainty. When Aunt Elizabeth Swift, who had come to watch over the body, came out of an adjoining room he put his hand into hers and began to sob, shaking his head from side to side, half blind with grief. "My mother is dead," he said. . . .

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*

theory, mind, thought, self, and reality are products of history, culture, and language. Individuals cannot stand above or outside society.[75] The "meaning" that death has for an individual can be seen as resulting from socially inherited ideas and assumptions formed over the lifetime of the society in which that person lives.[76] Thus, grief is expressed in ways that reflect the influence of cultural norms that prescribe certain emotions as appropriate for a given social situation.[77]

The question whether there are "universals" in grief—that is, whether people everywhere and in all cultures have essentially the same response to loss—has not been resolved. However, studies indicate that the human response to loss is culturally learned. In other words, people do not "naturally" grieve any more than they "naturally" laugh or cry.[78] Wolfgang and Margaret Stroebe point out:

> Grief is channeled in all cultures along specified lines [and] there are substantial differences in the rules laid down by cultures as to how long the deceased should be grieved over and how long mourning should last. . . . What is sanctioned or prohibited in one culture may differ dramatically from what is or is not permitted in another.[79]

Although death is fundamentally a biological fact, socially shaped ideas and assumptions create its meaning. This is borne out in the experiences of the Hmong who emigrated from Southeast Asia to North America.[80] In the mountains of northern Laos, their traditional funeral customs included firing mortars to alert the village that a death had occurred and slaughtering oxen and buffalo for the funeral ceremony. In the significantly different social setting of their new homeland, mostly urban settings in North America, the tra-

ditional elements of Hmong funeral ritual cannot be readily accommodated and have been dramatically changed.

Similarly, migrant Muslims in Germany are pressured to adapt their funeral ceremonies to European cultural norms and practices. Religious leaders "carry out a balancing act in order to adapt to the new situation without violating the ritual which holds their community together," a cultural dilemma that has been characterized as "the knife's edge."[81]

Hindus who live in England encounter similar cultural imperatives related to death rituals.[82] In India, where there are few undertakers or funeral directors, funeral arrangements are usually made by the deceased's family. Cremation is a public event, and a principal mourner lights the sacred flame of the funeral pyre; in Britain, the body is placed inside a coffin and concealed from view inside the cremator, which is operated by employees of the crematorium. "For the mourners there is neither the smoke to sting their eyes, nor the fire to singe their hair, nor the smell of burning flesh to bring the poignant immediacy and reality of the experience to their consciousness." Living in a very different cultural environment, some Hindus in England feel that they are socially constrained to give up a communal and spiritual ceremony and, in its stead, are left with an anonymous, individualistic, materialistic, and bureaucratic procedure.

The Hmong in North America, Muslims in Germany, and Hindus in Britain illustrate the multicultural nature of modern societies and the resulting challenges to traditional cultural identities. Such challenges apply not only to members of immigrant populations, but to people generally. Most people worldwide now develop a bicultural or "hybrid" identity that "combines their local cultural identity with an identity linked to elements of the global culture."[83]

This change in how people think about themselves in relation to their social environment is especially evident in the lives of children and young adults, as "where a child grows up now matters less than in the past in determining what the child knows and experiences."[84]

The Social Learning Approach

According to social learning theory, people learn through conditioning how to behave as members of a society. Behavior is shaped "by the stimuli that follow or are consequences of the behavior, and by imitation or modeling of others' behavior."[85] When we conform to social norms, our behavior is rewarded; when we fail to conform, our behavior is punished or goes unrewarded. This conditioning mechanism is obvious as parents discipline their children for certain behaviors and reward them for others, according to the norms and standards that the parents want the children to learn and emulate.

Much of our learning about social norms occurs through reinforcement, imitation, interaction, rationalization, and other such behavioral and cognitive processes. We may not even be aware that we are conforming to some social norms because they are embedded in our way of life. We accept them as natural, "the way things work." For instance, in modern societies, people are unlikely to consider disposing of a relative's corpse by placing it on a scaffold outdoors where it will gradually decompose; yet, to Native Americans living

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Childhood activities such as "playing dead" can be a means of experimenting with various concepts, trying them on for size, and thus arriving at a more comprehensive and manageable sense of reality.

on the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, platform burial was a natural part of their social norms.

A person with a different cultural orientation may perceive as deviant the norms we accept uncritically. Ronald Akers says:

> Every society and group has a set of social norms, some applying to everyone in the system, some to almost everyone, and others only to persons in particular age, sex, class, ethnic, or religious categories. Some norms apply to a wide range of situations; others govern specific situations. In a heterogeneous society, different systems of normative standards exist side by side, and one may automatically violate the expectations of one group simply by conforming to those of another.[86]

In culturally diverse societies like the United States, we have ample opportunities to apply the insights of social learning theory to expand our understanding of customs and behaviors associated with dying, death, and bereavement. A young Hispanic American woman who had recently attended her first "Anglo" funeral said that she was "genuinely puzzled" at the absence of storytelling and gentle humor about the deceased's life. "Everyone was respectful of the family," she said, "but I was surprised that it was all so serious. I'm used to people talking and laughing at funerals." By recognizing that social norms function much like the rules of a game or the script of a drama, we can observe their influence in the ways people grieve and the ceremonies they enact to commemorate death.

The Mature Concept of Death Revisited

The process of socialization is complex and ongoing. As we experience loss in our lives, we modify previously held beliefs, exchanging them for new ones that provide a better fit with our current understanding of death and its meaning in our lives. A "mature" concept of death, acquired during childhood, becomes a foundation for further development in adulthood.[87] Sandor Brent and Mark Speece note that a basic understanding of death is "the stable nucleus, or core, of a connotational sphere that the child continues to enrich and elaborate throughout the remainder of life by the addition of all kinds of exceptions, conditions, questions, doubts, and so forth." Instead of the "neat, clean, sharply delineated concepts of formal scientific theories of reality," the end result of this process may be a kind of "fuzzy" concept that acknowledges the reality of death while leaving room for elaborations about its meaning. Thus, the binary "either/or" logic that young children use to grasp the core components of a mature concept of death is a precursor to the greater sophistication in understanding death that comes later in life.[88]

David Plath says:

> We are born alone and we die alone, each an organism genetically unique. But we mature or decline together: In the company of others we mutually domesticate the wild genetic pulse as we go about shaping ourselves into persons after the vision of our group's heritage. Perhaps the growth and aging of an organism can be described well enough in terms of stages and transitions within the individual as a monad entity. But in a social animal the life courses have to be described in terms of a collective fabricating of selves, a mutual building of biographies.[89]

Understanding ourselves as cultural beings, we are better able to understand others as cultural beings. Even though we identify (or are identified by others) with a particular group, we are also individuals who sometimes do things our own way. Psychologists tell us that every person is composed of "multiple identities" and that the ability to manage different identities is an important aspect of the self.[90] Culture does not determine behavior but, rather, gives us a "repertoire of ideas and possible actions" through which we understand ourselves, our environment, and our experiences.[91]

Further Readings

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In this celebration of el Día de los Muertos, *or Day of the Dead, help in a
California community, a child enters into the festivities by drawing a skull,
an activity that reinforces her identity as a participant in age-old traditions
that mark her culture's particular attitudes and behaviors relative to death.
In pluralistic societies, such celebrations both perpetuate cultural traditions
and allow them to be shared with people from the wider community, who
may choose to adopt elements of those traditions in their own lives, thereby
creating a distinctive sense of local identity with respect to death-related
customs and practices.*

C H A P T E R *3*

Perspectives on Death: Cultural and Historical

*D*eath is a universal human experience, yet our response to it is shaped by our cultural environment. Learning how people in different cultures relate to death can shed light on our own attitudes and behaviors. Cultures can be thought of as occupying a continuum from "death-welcoming" to "death-denying."[1] As you read about the cultures described in this chapter, consider where you might place each of them on the welcoming-denying continuum. Consider, too, where your own "cultures"—the national, ethnic or subcultural, and family groups of which you are a member—might fit on such a continuum.

Broadening our perspective to include cultures other than our own increases the range of choices available in our encounters with death. People tend to view the world from a single perspective—their own. We counter this tendency by becoming aware of how we are prone to apply our own cultural critera as benchmarks for judging the values of other communities.

In becoming culturally competent, we need to be aware of the fallacy of stereotyping others. Stereotypes are sometimes used as a learning strategy to organize and interpret information, but, in fact, there may be more differences within cultural groups than between cultural groups. It is important to keep in mind that culture is not defined simply by ethnicity. Especially within culturally diverse societies, we can expect to find great variation within each ethnic group.[2] Also, discrepancies may exist between *expressed* norms and *observed* behaviors

within groups.[3] Identity is situational and adaptive, and it can serve multiple purposes. The meanings people attach to a particular cultural identity vary among cultural groups.[4]

Culture is dynamic, and attitudes toward death change over time. Engaging the ideas and customs of other cultures is an antidote to ethnocentrism—that is, the fallacy of making judgments about others in terms of one's own cultural assumptions and biases. Seeing others as they see themselves, sharing in some way their perceptions and customs, enriches individual as well as social life and, indeed, may be the essence of education.

Traditional Cultures

Traditional cultures typically view death not as an end but as a change of status, a transition from the land of the living to the world of the dead. The living are careful to help the dead in their journey to the other world. They take precautions to offset fears about the potential malevolence of the dead, who might harm the living if not shown respect.

Human concern for the dead predates written history. A cave excavated at Atapuerca in northern Spain is said to be the first evidence of human funerary behavior, dating to at least 300,000 years ago.[5] Many human remains recovered in Europe from the Upper Paleolithic period, about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, are recognized as having been intentional burials, accompanied by manufactured objects, personal effects, and other grave goods.[6] In some burials, the corpse is stained with red ochre and placed in a fetal posture, suggesting revitalization of the body and rebirth (see Figure 3-1).[7] In Neanderthal burials, ornamental shells, stone implements, and food were sometimes buried with the dead, implying belief that such items would be useful in the journey from the land of the living to the land of the dead. In considering such evidence, we are reminded that "the dead do not bury themselves, but are treated and disposed of by the living."[8] The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico classified burial of the dead as a basic social institution and pointed out that humanity received its name *humanitas* from the word *humare,* which means "to bury."[9] These early burials illustrate the long history of social groups bonding together and expressing shared emotion when death occurs.

Questions about the meaning of death and what happens when we die are central concerns to people in every culture and have been since time immemorial. An essential concern for living well—and dying well—is present in all human cultures.

Origin of Death

The foundations for human attitudes, values, and behaviors are generally found in myths—that is, stories that explain ideas or beliefs.[10] What do such stories tell us about how death became part of human experience?[11] In some stories, death becomes part of human experience because ancestral parents or an archetypal figure transgressed divine or natural law, through either poor judgment or disobedience (see Figure 3-2). The stories sometimes in-
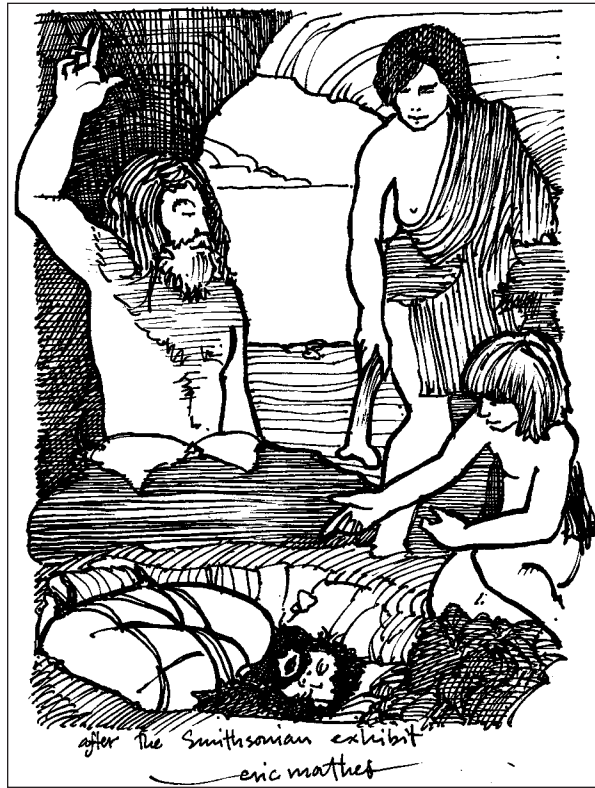
Figure *3-1 Neanderthal Burial*

❧ When the first man, the father of the human race, was being buried, a god passed by the grave and inquired what it meant, for he had never seen a grave before. Upon receiving the information from those about the place of interment that they had just buried their father, he said: "Do not bury him, dig up the body again." "No," they replied, "we cannot do that. He has been dead for four days and smells." "Not so," entreated the god, "dig him up and I promise you that he will live again." But they refused to carry out the divine injunction. Then the god declared, "By disobeying me, you have sealed your own fate. Had you dug up your ancestor, you would have found him alive, and you yourselves when you passed from this world should have been buried as bananas are for four days, after which you shall have been dug up, not rotten, but ripe. But now, as a punishment for your disobedience, you shall die and rot." And whenever they hear this sad tale the Fijians say: "Oh, that those children had dug up that body!"

Figure *3-2 Fijian Story (Traditional): The Origin of Death*

When Hare heard of Death, he started for his lodge & arrived there crying, shrieking, *My uncles & my aunts must not die!* And then the thought assailed him: *To all things death will come!* He cast his thoughts upon the precipices & they began to fall & crumble. Upon the rocks he cast his thoughts & they became shattered. Under the earth he cast his thoughts & all the things living there stopped moving & their limbs stiffened in death. Up above, toward the skies, he cast his thoughts & the birds flying there suddenly fell to the earth & were dead.

After he entered his lodge he took his blanket and, wrapping it around him, lay down crying. *Not the whole earth will suffice for all those who will die. Oh, there will not be enough earth for them in many places!* There he lay in his corner wrapped up in his blanket, silent.

Figure 3-3 *Winnebago Myth: When Hare Heard of Death*

volve a test of some person or group. When the test is failed, death becomes a reality. A story told by the Luba of Africa describes how God created a paradise for the first human beings and endowed it with everything needed for their sustenance; however, they were forbidden to eat of the bananas in the middle of the field. When humans ate the bananas, it was decreed that humankind would die after a lifetime of toil. This motif is akin to the biblical story of Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden, an account of death's origin that persists in the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In some myths, a crucial act that would have ensured immortality was not properly carried out; an *omission* rather than an *action* introduces death to humankind. Some stories tell of a messenger who was supposed to deliver the message of eternal life, but the message was garbled due to malice or forgetfulness, or it did not arrive on time. Among the Winnebago of North America, the trickster figure, Hare, is an example of this motif (see Figure 3-3). Momentarily forgetting his purpose, Hare failed to deliver the life-saving message. In a variant of this motif, two messengers were sent—one bringing immortality, the other bringing death—and the messenger bringing death arrived first.

In the "death in a bundle" motif, death is introduced into human experience when a bundle containing the mortal fate of all humankind is opened, either inadvertently or because of poor choice. A story from Greek mythology told by Aesop is a variant of this theme (see Figure 3-4). Another motif describes how a message of immortality was addressed to human beings, but people were not awake to receive it.

Although most myths portray death as unwelcome, some describe how it is actively pursued because of weariness with life or disgust with its misery. In these stories, people barter for or buy death from the gods so life does not go on interminably, or death is obtained as a remedy for overpopulation.

All of these myths echo a theme that is surprisingly familiar: Death comes from outside; it cuts short an existence that would otherwise be immortal.

It was a hot, sultry summer afternoon, and Eros, tired with play and faint from the heat, took shelter in a cool, dark cave. It happened to be the cave of Death himself.

Eros, wanting only to rest, threw himself down carelessly—so carelessly that all his arrows fell out of his quiver.

When he woke he found they had mingled with the arrows of Death, which lay scattered about the floor of the cave. They were so alike Eros could not tell the difference. He knew, however, how many had been in his quiver, and eventually he gathered up the right number.

Of course, Eros took some that belonged to Death and left some of his own behind.

And so it is today that we often see the hearts of the old and the dying struck by bolts of Love; and sometimes we see the hearts of the young captured by Death.

Figure 3-4 *Aesop: Eros and Death*

This notion still influences our attitudes. We understand the biological processes of disease and aging, yet still feel that, if only this defect could be repaired, we could remain alive. We find ourselves believing that death is foreign, not really part of us.

Ultimately, of course, we cannot avoid the recognition of our own mortality. The epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of a king who sets off on a journey to find the secret of immortality, a journey undertaken because of the death of his friend, Enkidu. After overcoming great perils while searching for the power to renew one's youth, Gilgamesh returns from his quest empty-handed. Finally, grieving the death of his beloved friend, Gilgamesh realizes that he too will die. Our mortality may be acknowledged most profoundly in grieving the death of a loved one.

Causes of Death

Even when we find a meaningful explanation about how death came into the world, there remains the question "What causes *individual* human beings to die?" The immediate cause of a death from accidental injuries or wounds sustained in battle is clear, but its ultimate cause is open to question: Why did this fatal event happen to this person at this particular time? Might it be due to some evil influence, possibly shaped by magic? An unexpected or untimely death is likely to be viewed as unnatural. When such deaths occur, an explanation may be sought in supernatural causes. Although such explanations are not subject to proof or disproof, they comfort the bereaved by helping make sense of what otherwise seems inexplicable.

Illness and death signal the fact that something is "out of balance." When a child dies among the Senufo people of Africa's Ivory Coast, for example, it disturbs the whole community. To restore a sense of security and proper order, animal sacrifices are offered to purify and protect the community from further calamity.[12]

In seeking the cause of a death, traditional societies typically embrace an ecological orientation.[13] They look at the possible role of such phenomena

as the wind or moon, heredity, and behavioral excesses, such as staying out late and not getting enough sleep. A variety of socioeconomic and psychosocial, as well as natural and supernatural, factors are explored. The cause of death may be related to the person's social interactions. Was anger, anxiety, fright, or envy involved? The search for answers takes place within an environment that encompasses both the living and the dead. Did the person offend the ancestors or neglect to carry out the prescribed rites for the dead? The health of the whole community depends on maintaining a proper relationship with the environment, including its unseen aspects.

Power of the Dead

In cultures that maintain strong bonds between the living and the dead, "the land echoes with the voices of the ancestors."[14] Together, the living and the dead comprise the clan, the tribe, the people. The bond between living and dead is a sign that the community endures. In Balinese society, the village territory belongs to the ancestors, and the living members of the community maintain contact with them to ensure their livelihood and well-being.[15] The community is a partnership of living and dead. This understanding is implicit when people refer to the "founding fathers" of a nation or college, who are spoken of metaphorically as "being with us in spirit" as living members of the group celebrate their common purpose with those who preceded them.

In traditional societies, grief may be expressed with loud wails or with silent tears, but almost always there is deep respect for the still-powerful soul of the deceased. If the soul or spirit of the deceased is not treated properly, harm may result. Conducting the prescribed funeral rites ensures the successful journey of the soul into the realm of the dead, a journey that benefits the living. Of special concern are evil-intentioned spirits that wander about aimlessly, seeking to disrupt the well-being of the living. Such spirits are often associated with catastrophic deaths, such as deaths in childbirth.

In the rhythm and flow of communal life, the deceased—in death as in life—is part of the whole. As unseen members of an ongoing social order, the dead are often allies who can perform services for the living—as interpreters, intermediaries, and ambassadors in the realm beyond the reach of our physical senses. Such communication with the dead is often facilitated by a *shaman,* a visionary in the community who projects his or her consciousness to the other realm and acts as an intermediary between the worlds of living and dead.[16] Because the dead are not bound by human time, *necromancy* (from the Greek, meaning "corpse-prophecy") offers access to past and future events.[17] By entering into a trance, a shaman contacts the dead and reports back the prophetic message that will benefit the living.

Ancestors serve as role models and uphold standards of conduct. They form a crucial spiritual link between human beings and powerful—but distant and impersonal—gods. Keeping alive the memory of one's ancestors and calling upon them allow individuals to sustain family loyalties and maintain bonds beyond death.

Names of the Dead

If calling a person's name is a way of summoning the person, then refraining from using a name will presumably leave its bearer undisturbed. Hence, a common practice related to the dead is name avoidance: The deceased is never again mentioned or is referred to only obliquely, never by name. For example, the deceased might be referred to as "that one," or allusions may be made to particular traits or special qualities a person was known for during his or her lifetime. Thus, "Uncle Joe," who gained renown as an expert fisherman, might be referred to after his death as "that relative who caught many fish." A woman who had displayed extraordinary bravery might be referred to as "that one who showed courage." In some cultures, the deceased is referred to by his or her relationship to the speaker.

Customs like these involving name avoidance continue into the modern era among indigenous people who value traditional cultural practices. When a famous Aborigine painter died in 2002 at the age of seventy in the central Australian town of Alice Springs, family and friends asked the media not to publish his name out of respect for the Aborigine belief that the dead not be identified by name.[18] Although he had achieved international fame during his lifetime for the Dreamtime paintings depicting his homeland, he became anonymous in death because his people's beliefs forbid the mention of his name.

Name avoidance can be so complete that living people with the same name as the deceased must adopt new names. Among the Penan Geng of central Borneo, naming practices involving death are incorporated into all forms of social discourse.[19] When a person dies, "death names" are given to closest kin. Thus, as a person goes through life, he or she may take on a series of names and titles that refer to different categories of relationship to the deceased.

Some cultures, rather than avoiding the deceased's name, give it special emphasis. For example, the name may be conferred on a newborn child. Such naming takes place out of a desire to honor the memory of a loved one or to ensure that the soul of the dead person is reincarnated. In some cases, when a woman nears the time of giving birth, she has a dream that reveals which of her ancestors is to be reborn, thus determining the name her new baby receives.[20] Among Hawaiians, children may be named for ancestors or even named by the gods. Especially important are names bestowed by gods, which are communicated through dreams. Naming a child for a relative who has died allows the name to live again.[21]

Respect for the dead or anxiety about provoking spirits may prompt name avoidance in traditional cultures. In modern societies, however, people avoid mentioning the deceased's name to prevent conjuring up painful reminders of the loss. In both situations, name avoidance may be a way of managing grief. Similarly, when a child is named after a beloved grandparent or respected friend, aren't parents hoping that qualities valued in the namesake will be "reborn" in the child? Although cultural forms differ, common threads run through human experience.

Western Culture

Beginning in the early Middle Ages, about the year 400, and continuing for a thousand years, people in Western European culture shared a view of the universe as bound together by natural and divine law.[22] The teachings of the Church influenced the manner in which people died and offered hope for the afterlife. An acceptance of death associated with this outlook generally prevailed until the European cultural Renaissance, or rebirth, in the 1400s and 1500s.

During the early medieval period, people viewed death with the understanding that "we shall all die." This reflected a sense of death as the collective destiny of humankind. The end of life was not thought to be synonymous with physical death; rather, the dead were "asleep"—in the Church's keeping—with assurance of resurrection at the apocalyptic return of Christ. With this faith, people tended not to fear what awaited them after death.

This sense of a common, collective destiny began to change during the period of the High Middle Ages, about 1000–1450, transforming into an emphasis on the destiny of the individual. The collective idea that "everyone dies" was replaced by an individual acknowledgment, "I will die my own death." This change occurred over the course of several centuries and coincided with a general enrichment of life and culture. The achievements of this

Death Knells

During many centuries one item of expense for survivors was the fee that must be paid for the ringing of the soul bell. Every cathedral and church of medieval Christendom had such a bell, almost always the largest one in the bell tower.

By the time John Donne wrote the immortal line "for whom the bell tolls," ringing of the soul bell—in a distinctive pattern, or knell—was popularly taken to be merely a public notice that a death had occurred. This use of the soul bell came into importance relatively late, however.

Not simply in Christian Europe but also among primitive tribes and highly developed non-Christian cultures of the Orient, bells have been linked with death. Notes from bells (rung in special fashion) served to help convince a spirit that there was no need to remain close to a useless dead body. At the same time, noise made by bells was considered to be especially effective in driving away the evil spirits who prowled about hoping to seize a newly released soul or to put obstacles in its path.

Ringing of the soul (or passing) bell was long considered so vital that bell ringers demanded, and got, big fees for using it. Still in general use by the British as late as the era of King Charles II in the seventeenth century, bell ringers then regulated the number of strokes of the passing bell so that the general public could determine the age, sex, and social status of the deceased.

Webb Garrison,
Strange Facts About Death

period include the building of the great cathedrals of Notre Dame and Chartres in France, Canterbury in England, and Cologne in Germany, as well as the creation of literary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.*

Whereas, during the earlier period, the teachings of the Church had provided assurance of resurrection on the Last Day and entry into heaven, people now became personally anxious about Judgment Day, the cosmic event that would separate the just from the damned. An individual's good or bad deeds, not the community's faith, would determine his or her ultimate and eternal fate. The *liber vitae,* or Book of Life, which previously had been pictured as a sort of vast cosmic census, was now imagined to contain the biographies of individual lives, a kind of balance sheet by which each person's soul would be weighed.

The period of Renaissance and religious reformation, beginning about 1450, has aptly been called an "age of transition." Gutenberg's *Bible* went to press in 1456 and, in 1517, Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg Castle, inaugurating the Protestant Reformation. The dominant culture became increasingly humanistic, secular, and individualistic. The living were distanced from the dead by the Protestant reformers' denial of Purgatory, an intermediate state "where the dead might be imagined as residing after the decease of their natural bodies" and where the living could have "a sense of contact with the dead through prayer."[23] Geographic boundaries fell away, with explorations such as Columbus's voyage to America in 1492, and a scientific revolution ensued with publication in 1543 of Copernicus's *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres,* which posited the radical notion that the earth revolves around the sun.

Transformations in cultural and intellectual life were accompanied by changes in how people related to death. Conventional wisdom was challenged by competing ideas in the religious marketplace and by the revolutionary discoveries of scientists and explorers. As the reassuring notions of earlier centuries were questioned, people began to feel more ambivalent about death and the afterlife. The scientific revolution of the 1500s and 1600s challenged traditional notions of authority and ushered in an age of "enlightenment" in the 1700s, with an emphasis on reason and intellect. This era marked the birth of a modern worldview. Death was no longer something to be contemplated only in the realm of the sacred. It became an event that could be manipulated and shaped by human beings.

These modernizing trends accelerated with an industrial revolution, from about 1750 to 1900. This 150-year period was a time of rapid technological innovation, mechanization, and urbanization, accompanied by progress in public health and medicine. The attitude toward death during this period emphasized the death of the other, "thy death."

This emphasis occurred in connection with the Romantic movement in the arts and literature, which exhibited a fascination with acts of chivalry, as well as with mystery and the supernatural. Secular notions about death and

the afterlife began to replace (or coexist with) religious concepts. Nature symbolism was increasingly present in death-related art and memorials, and there was widespread interest in spirits and spiritualism.

Within the context of an emphasis on "thy death," the meaning of death focused on separation from the beloved, giving rise to impassioned expressions of grief and desires to memorialize the dead. Hence was born the ideal of the "beautiful death," in which the sad beauty of a loved one's death elicits feelings of melancholy, tinged with optimism for eventual reunion with the beloved in a heavenly home. With the death of her prince consort, Albert, in 1861, Queen Victoria of Great Britain set the trend for elaborate funeral etiquette and mourning customs, as well as for a cult of widowhood.[24] She wore a black mourning bonnet for the rest of her life and often communed with Prince Albert at his grave in the Royal Mausoleum, where she herself would be laid to rest after her death in 1901.

Through more than a thousand years in Western culture, attitudes toward death reflected a progression from an emphasis on collective destiny in which "we all shall die," to the personal awareness of "one's own death," and then to a preoccupation with the deaths of loved ones, "thy death." Despite these changes in emphasis, French historian Philippe Ariès characterizes virtually the whole of this period as one of "tamed death." Death was an ordinary human experience, not something to be hidden away from view or excluded from social life.

According to Ariès, the long era of "tamed death" came to an end in the twentieth century. World War I (1914–1918) was a major turning point in modern history. It marked the advent of "total war," which affected civilians as well as combatants. It also demonstrated the increasing importance of technology in virtually every aspect of life. In health care, technology brought about the "medicalization" of dying and death. Dying had been a public and communal event; now it became private.[25] Events that had been part of people's ordinary lives were placed under the control of professionals. The deathbed scene moved from home to hospital. Customary signs of mourning all but disappeared. In the twentieth century, the prevailing attitude toward death could be described by such terms as "forbidden death," "invisible death," and "death denied."

With this historical summary in mind, we are prepared to take a closer look at how changing attitudes toward death influenced specific customs and practices, such as the manner of dying and the deathbed scene, burial customs and memorialization of the deceased, and the cultural expression of the Dance of Death.

Dying and the Deathbed Scene

"I see and know that my death is near": Thus did the dying person during the Middle Ages acknowledge impending death. Anticipated by natural signs or by inner certainty, dying was understood as manageable. On pious deathbeds, the dying offered their suffering to God, with the expectation that all would take place in a customary manner. Sudden death was rare; even

This deathbed vigil in a Spanish village is characteristic of the way in which human beings have responded to death for thousands of years. Only recently have such scenes been superseded in modern societies by the specter of dying alone, perhaps unconscious, amid the impersonal technological gadgetry of an unfamiliar institutional environment.

wounds in battle seldom brought instantaneous death. (The possibility of un-expected death was fearful because it caught victims unaware and unable to properly close earthly accounts and turn toward the divine.) Those who kept vigil around the deathbed could confidently say that the dying person "feels her time has come" or "knows he will soon be dead."

Marked by simple and solemn ceremony, dying occurred within the context of familiar practices. Ariès describes a typical Christian death during the early Middle Ages: Lying down, with the head facing east toward Jerusalem and arms crossed over the chest, the dying person expressed sadness at his or her impending end and began "a discreet recollection of beloved beings and things." Family and friends gathered around the deathbed to receive the dying person's pardon for any wrongs they might have done, and all were commended to God. Next, the dying person turned his or her attention away from the earthly realm and toward the divine. Prayer requesting divine grace followed confession of sins to a priest, and then the priest granted absolution. With the customary rites completed, nothing more need be said: The dying person was prepared for death. If death came more slowly than expected, the

dying person simply waited in silence. Elizabeth Hallam writes, "The deathbed was a space which developed a rich visual and aural texture where each word and gesture became meaningful in physical, social, and spiritual terms."[26]

Dying was more or less a public ceremony, with the dying person in charge. The recumbent figure in the deathbed, surrounded by parents, friends, family, children, and even mere passersby, remained the customary deathbed scene until the late nineteenth century, although subtle changes did occur over time. For example, as the destiny of the individual gained emphasis around the twelfth century, there were corresponding changes in the deathbed scene. Besides the entourage of public participants, there now hovered an invisible army of celestial figures, angels and demons, battling for possession of the dying person's soul. *How* a person died became profoundly important. Death became the *speculum mortis,* the mirror in which the dying person could discover his or her destiny by tallying the moral balance sheet of his or her life. The time of dying was a unique opportunity to review one's actions and make a final decision for good or ill. The moment of death became the supreme challenge and ultimate test of an entire lifetime. This emphasis on individual responsibility for the destiny of one's soul was communicated in the *memento mori* of the time, "Remember, you must die!"

In later centuries, scientific rationalism came to share the stage with religion. There was little change in the outward aspects of the deathbed scene; family and friends still gathered as participants in the public ritual of a person's dying. But religion was less prominent in the thoughts of the dying person or the grief of survivors. People now compared the act of dying to the emergence of a butterfly from its cocoon. A secular hope for immortality and eventual reunion with loved ones became more important than churchly images of heaven and hell. Gradually, the focus changed from the dying person to his or her survivors.

By the mid-twentieth century, the rituals of dying had been overtaken by a technological process in which death occurs by "a series of little steps." Ariès says, "All these little silent deaths have replaced and erased the great dramatic act of death." Writing in the 1970s, he added, "No one any longer has the strength or patience to wait over a period of weeks for a moment which has lost a part of its meaning." At the turn of a new millennium, this assessment is challenged by initiatives in end-of-life care, such as hospice and palliative care, which offer opportunities for dying persons and their families to find meaning in the last acts of a human life.

Burial Customs

As with the deathbed scene, changes in burial customs reveal transformations in attitudes toward death over time. In the Roman era, graveyards were situated on the outskirts of the settlements they served, and burial within the town's precincts was permitted only as a special honor.[27] With the rise of Christianity in the early Middle Ages, however, such burial customs began to change as believers adopted the idea that the saintliness of Christian martyrs

was powerful, even in death, and that these saints of the Church could help others avoid the pitfalls of sin and the horrors of hell.[28] Thus, it became advantageous to be buried near the grave of a martyr to gain merit by proximity. (A modern analogy might be that of a movie fan being buried near a film star at Forest Lawn or a veteran requesting burial near a Medal of Honor winner, although medieval folk were generally more concerned with the welfare of their soul than with earthly prestige.)

As Christian pilgrims began journeying to venerate and honor the martyrs, altars, chapels, and eventually churches were built on or near the martyrs' graves. Initially, only notables and saints of the Church received such burial, but eventually ordinary folk came to be buried in common graves located in the churchyards and surrounds of churches and cathedrals. In later centuries, the great urban cathedrals allowed burials within their precincts. In this way, the state of the dead was intimately linked with the Church.

Charnel Houses

Burial within churchyards led to the development of *charnel houses,* arcades and galleries where the bones of the dead were entrusted to the Church. Limbs and skulls were arranged along various parts of the churchyard, as well as within and near the church. (In Paris, it is possible to visit catacombs where, as one visitor exclaimed, "piles of femurs and skulls" are "stacked eight feet high and ten yards deep, as neatly as lumber in an Oregon mill yard.")[29] The bones in these charnels came from common graves, which were periodically opened so that the bones could be safely kept by the Church until the Resurrection.

The public nature of these charnel houses reflects a familiarity with death and with the dead. As Romans had congregated in the Forum, their counterparts in the Middle Ages met in charnel houses, which functioned as public squares. There, they would find shops and merchants, conduct business, dance, gamble, or simply enjoy being together.

"As yet unborn," Ariès says, "was the modern idea that the dead person should be installed in a sort of house unto himself, a house of which he was the perpetual owner or at least the long-term tenant, a house in which he would be at home and from which he could not be evicted."

Memorializing the Dead

About the twelfth century, as part of an increasing emphasis on individualism, a desire arose to preserve the identity of the person buried in a particular place. Prior to this time, except for burials of members of the upper classes or notables of the Church, graves had no markers identifying who was buried there. Now, simple grave markers of the "Here lies John Doe" variety began to appear, as did elaborate effigies of the dead at the burials of notables. The thirteenth-century sepulchral effigy of Jean d'Alluye depicts a recumbent knight in chain mail, sword girded and shield at his side, feet resting on the image of a lion, a vivid expression of the intellectual and social milieu of the

Library of Congress

*This ossuary located at a European monastery is a survival of the medieval
charnel house, a gallery of skeletons and skulls and bones.*

age of chivalry, with its tension between faith and heroism. Although effigies
were created only for people at the highest social rank, they give us clues
about how people of the time viewed death.

Effigies reflect the emerging belief that the bereaved could maintain
bonds with the deceased by perpetuating their *memory*. Over time, such
memorialization became increasingly important. By the time of the Renais-
sance, as secular ideas competed with religious beliefs, burials began to take

place in cemeteries that were not associated with churches. The opening of the Cemetery of Père Lachaise outside Paris in 1804 signaled the culmination of a radical change in Western attitudes toward life and death.[30]

In the United States, the rural cemetery movement began in the 1830s with the aim of replacing the simple, untended graveyards of the Puritans with lush, well-kept cemeteries like Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Woodlawn in New York City. Places like Spring Grove in Cincinnati, Ohio, established in 1844 and occupying 733 acres, including a large undeveloped area of woodland at its center, promoted a new concept of cemetery design in which landscape took precedence over monuments.[31] In parklike settings, the bereaved visited private graves and communed in memory with the deceased.[32] Ornate monuments were erected to honor the dead, and elaborate funeral rituals included an extensive assortment of mourning paraphernalia. The deceased were imagined to be in a heaven where survivors hoped to be eventually reunited with their loved ones. An interest in occult practices, such as séances and communication with spirits, grew popular.[33] These mourning customs of the nineteenth century are marked by a sense of sentimentality that made death seem less final or severe. By the mid-twentieth century, such "excessive" mourning customs gave way to an apparent desire to mute the reality of death. Glennys Howarth says,

> The elaborate mourning rituals of the nineteenth century carried the expectation that people would adhere to the etiquette of mourning paraphernalia (such as the wearing of "widows weeds") and resulted in an outwardly public expression of grief. By contrast, the twentieth century has been marked by a reluctance to indulge public demonstrations of grief.[34]

In the modern era, except for occasional memorials to the war dead, most cemeteries do not encourage monuments interrupting the flat expanses of embedded "grave markers." Architectural historian James Curl says:

> The neglected cemeteries, poorly designed crematoria, and abysmal tombstone designs of the present insult life itself, for death is an inevitable consequence of birth. By treating the disposal of the dead as though the problem were one of refuse-collection, society devalues life.[35]

The Dance of Death

With origins in the ecstatic dances of pre-Christian times, artistic themes involving the *danse macabre,* or Dance of Death, came to fullest expression in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[36] Partly a reaction to horrors of war, famine, and poverty, the Dance of Death was influenced primarily by the mass deaths caused by the plague, or Black Death, which came to Europe via a Black Sea port in 1347.[37] When the first wave of pestilence ended in 1351, a quarter of the European population had died. As a cultural and artistic phenomenon, the Dance of Death reflects ideas about the *inevitability* and *impartiality* of death.

The *danse macabre* was expressed through drama, poetry, music, and the visual arts. It was sometimes performed as a masque, a short entertainment in

which actors costumed as skeletons danced gaily with figures representing
people at all levels of society. Paintings of the Dance of Death depict individu-
als being escorted to graveyards by skeletons and corpses, a grim reminder of
the universality of death. The Dance of Death conveys the notion that, re-
gardless of rank or status, death comes to *all* people and to *each* person. In
the oldest versions of the Dance of Death, the figure of death seems scarcely
to touch the living as it singles them out. Death has a personal meaning but is
part of the natural order. In later versions, people are depicted as being
forcibly taken by death.

By about the fifteenth century, death is portrayed as causing a radical, vi-
olent, and complete break between the living and the dead. This is reflected
in macabre themes that involve cadavers and the deterioration of the corpse.
Along with the display of skeletons, naked corpses, and figures of the grim
reaper, the Dance of Death eventually includes erotic connotations. The radi-
cal disruption of death is likened to the momentary break with ordinary con-
sciousness that occurs during sexual intercourse.[38] It's as if the grim reaper
has become a deadly lover.

Hans Holbein the Younger, authors' collection

MIGUEL   Y   LA   CRIADA.

José Guadalupe Posada, Swann Collection, Library of Congress

The somber mood of Hans Holbein's depiction of Die Totentanz, *or Dance of
Death, contrasts with the treatment of the same theme by Mexican artist José
Guadalupe Posada. In Holbein's medieval woodblock print,* The Child, *we see the
anxiety of family members as the skeletal figure of Death ominously takes a child; in
Posada's print, there is a sense of gaiety and festivity. Although expressed differently,
the two works convey a common message: Death comes to people in all walks of life;
no one is exempt.*

This is also the era of public anatomy dissections, which were attended by ordinary townspeople as well as surgeons and medical students. At the University of Leiden, an "Anatomical Theater" was held in the apse of a church, where human remains were artistically displayed and posed in dramatic gestures. Frank Gonzalez-Crussi cites the example of a child's arm "clad in an infant's lace sleeve" and, held in the child's hand, "between thumb and index finger—as gracefully as an artist's model might hold a flower by the stem—a human eye by the optical nerve."[39]

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the blatant eroticism in the Dance of Death had been sublimated into an obsession with the "beautiful death." The relationship between love and death, which had been confined mostly to religious martyrdom, was extended to include romantic love. Antecedents of this notion are found in the code of chivalry and in the ideals of courtly love. Romances like those of Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet promoted the idea that, where there is love, death can be beautiful, even desirable.

Originally a reaction to fear of sudden death caused by an epidemic of plague, the *danse macabre* emphasizes the uncertainties of human existence, the knowledge that death can come when least expected and disrupt the most loving relationships. These themes of death's universality and inevitability are also portrayed in the Mexican celebration of *el Día de los Muertos,* the Day of the Dead, and modern artists draw upon these themes to convey the epidemic nature of AIDS as well as threatening aspects of other potential catastrophes. More subtly, images associated with the *danse macabre* persist in the form of skeletons and other scary regalia found on children's Halloween costumes.

Invisible Death?

In tracing the manner in which attitudes and behaviors change relative to dying and death, a common theme emerges: Human beings seek to manage death in ways appropriate for their cultural and historical circumstances. If we compare our present practices with those of earlier generations, dying and death are in many respects less visible, less part of our common experience. As mentioned in Chapter 1, care of the dying and the dead is now largely the domain of hired professionals. Deathbed scenes are often dominated by efforts to delay death. The role of family and friends as witnesses to a loved one's dying has diminished. Mourning customs that held sway in the past now seem excessive. Funerals and memorial services are shorter, more discreet, and private. Robert Fulton says, "From the end of the First World War until the late 1950s, death in America, it could be said, took a holiday."[40]

Death-related attitudes and practices continue to evolve, however. There are signs that people are becoming dissatisfied with the late twentieth century's tendencies to compartmentalize, professionalize, and medicalize dying and death. Present attitudes and practices relative to dying and death increasingly reflect a diversity of choices and options. Neil Small points out that "the modern exists as a layer on top of other ways of making sense of experience," many of which are pre-modern.[41] We are not satisfied with "one size fits all" answers and explore more meaningful ways of encountering death, both historically and cross-culturally.

Cultural Case Studies

Even when another culture initially appears exotic in comparison with what is most familiar to us, closer examination usually reveals significant correspondences between the "foreign" and the "familiar"—correspondences that evoke learnings about behaviors and attitudes that, because they are familiar, we have not really considered. Exploring other cultures provides perspectives that allow both appreciation and criticism of our own attitudes and customs.[42]

Native American Traditions

In discussing the indigenous peoples of North America, we first must recognize the fact that more than 500 tribal groups live in the United States, "each a separate people and each endowed with unique traditions."[43] In addition, historical practices were affected by social upheavals that accompanied the "westward expansionism" of white society.[44] Nevertheless, these tribal peoples share a "common body of thought," or "Indian worldview," that allows us to examine certain themes associated with Native American attitudes toward dying and death.

One of these themes is reverence toward the dead, who are often believed to serve as guardian spirits or special envoys to the spirit world. Chief Seattle, leader of the Suquamish people in the 1800s, said, "To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. . . . Be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."[45] Wandering far from the graves of one's ancestors, seemingly without regret, is not the Native American way. The land, the whole of the physical environment, is the basic source of American Indian identity and ultimate source of spiritual power.[46]

Within Native American societies, there is an emphasis on "living one day at a time, with purpose, grateful for life's blessings, in the knowledge that it could all end abruptly."[47] This relationship to death is typified in the Lakota battle cry: "It's a good day to die!" Stephen Levine says,

> This embodies the possibilities of a life reviewed and completed. A life in which even death is not excluded. I am speaking here of a whole death that succeeds a whole life. . . . When everything is brought up to date, and the heart is turned toward itself, it is a good day to die.[48]

Because death may come at any time, we are wise to be prepared, an outlook evident in the emphasis the Cree people place on being careful to say farewells before going away on a lengthy or difficult journey; unforeseen death may intervene.[49]

There are numerous stories of Native Americans whose preparation for death enabled them to face it stoically, even indifferently, sometimes composing "death songs" as they confronted their own death. In some cases, a death song was "composed spontaneously at the very moment of death" and "chanted with the last breath of the dying person."[50] These death songs express a resolve to meet death fully, to accept it with one's whole being, not in

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Two Death Songs

In the great night my heart will go out
Toward me the darkness comes rattling
In the great night my heart will go out

> Papago song by Juana Manwell
> (Owl Woman)

The odor of death,
I smell the odor of death
In front of my body.

> A song of the Dakota tribe

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defeat and desperation, but with equanimity and composure. Death songs summarize a person's life and acknowledge death as the completion of being, the final act in the drama of earthly existence.

Among most Native Americans, time is viewed not as linear and progress-oriented, but rather as cyclic. Åke Hultkrantz says that Native Americans are "mainly interested in how this cycle affects people in this life"; they have "only a vague notion of another existence after death."[51] Rigid beliefs about the state of the dead or the afterlife tend to be of little or no importance. Instead, Hultkrantz says, "One individual might hold several ideas about the dead at the same time [because] different situations call for different interpretations of the fate of humans after death." The Wind River Shoshoni, for example, have a variety of beliefs about death: The dead may travel to another world or may remain on earth as ghosts; they may be born again as people or may trans-migrate into "insects, birds, or even inanimate objects like wood and rocks." Hultkrantz says that "most Shoshoni express only a slight interest in the next life and often declare that they know nothing about it."

Among some Native Americans, the soul or spirit of the deceased is thought to linger for several days near the site of death before passing on to the other world. Great care is required during this period, both to ensure the progress of the deceased toward the supernatural realm and to safeguard the living. The Ohlone of the California coast adorned the corpse with feathers, flowers, and beads, and then wrapped it in blankets and skins. Dance regalia, weapons, a medicine bundle, and other items owned by the deceased were gathered together and, with the corpse, placed on a funeral pyre. Destroying the deceased's possessions helped to facilitate the soul's journey to the "Island of the Dead." This action also removed reminders that might cause the ghost to remain near the living. This belief is echoed in a Yokut funeral chant

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Warrior Song

I shall vanish and be no more
But the land over which I now roam
Shall remain
And change not.

> Hethushka Society, Omaha tribe

that says, "You are going where you are going; don't look back for your family." During the dangerous period, which lasted from six months to a year, the Ohlone considered it disrespectful to utter the deceased's name. In *The Ohlone Way,* Malcolm Margolin writes, "While the mere thought of a dead person brought sorrow, the mention of a dead person's name brought absolute dread."[52] Destroying the deceased's belongings and avoiding his or her name helped confirm the separation of the dead from the living.

Cherokee elders describe a multiple-soul concept that involves four souls and four stages of death.[53] The "soul of conscious life" leaves the body at death and stays nearby for a time as a harmless ghost before traveling the "trail of Kanati" to the land of the dead. When this soul departs the body at the moment of death, the other three souls begin to die. The second soul, located in the liver, takes about a week to die; the third soul, located in the heart and concerned with bodily circulation, takes about a month to die; the fourth soul, located in the bones, takes a year to die. In light of this understanding, Cherokee elders advise that graves should be tended for a year after death but can be neglected afterward "because there is nothing of any significance left in the grave." Formal mourning ends after a year because the process that separates the dead from the living is complete.

In the Great Plains, it was customary to expose the corpse on a platform aboveground or to place it in the limbs of a tree. This not only hastened decomposition of the body, but also aided the soul's journey to the spirit world. Later the sun-bleached skeleton would be retrieved for burial in sacred grounds. As Old Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé lay dying, he told his son, "Never forget my dying words. This country holds your father's body. Never sell the bones of your father and mother." These words were remembered by Younger Chief Joseph as he led warriors into battle to preserve the sanctity of the lands that held the bones of the ancestral dead. (Disputes about the disposition of artifacts and bones retrieved from sacred burial places by archaeologists and others led the U.S. Congress to enact the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990 with the purpose of reuniting Native American skeletal remains, funerary items, and ceremonial objects with living members of the cultures that produced them.)[54]

Sedentary tribes, such as the Pueblo and Navajo, appear to express more fear of the dead than do tribes that are nomadic hunters and gatherers, such as the Sioux and Apache.[55] This contrast is found in a study conducted by David Mandelbaum among the Cocopa and Hopi.[56] When a Cocopa dies, surviving family members wail in an "ecstasy of violent grief behavior" that lasts twenty-four hours or more, continuing until the body is cremated. Clothes, food, and other items are burned with the body. Although the deceased needs these goods in the afterlife, the Cocopa also hope this will help persuade the spirit of the dead person to pass on from the earth. Later, a ceremony is held commemorating the deceased. The deceased's name cannot be spoken at other times, but, at this special mourning ceremony, those who have passed into the spirit world are publicly summoned, and their presence may be impersonated by living members of the tribe. A house constructed es-

L. A. Huffman, Coffrin's Old West Gallery, Bozeman, Montana

*In January 1879, frontier photographer L. A. Huffman recorded this scene
showing the burial platform of a Sioux warrior who had died and been
placed on the scaffold only a few days before. Surrounding the gravesite
is a vast plain, crisscrossed with the trails of wild herds of buffalo.*

pecially for the spirits may be burned as a gift. The ceremony is intended to
both honor the dead and persuade lurking spirits to come out into the open
and leave the earthly realm. Whereas the initial cremation ritual is focused
on the grief of the bereaved family, the subsequent mourning ceremony is fo-
cused on affirming the integrity of the family and the community.

Unlike the Cocopa, the Hopi keep death at a distance. Death threatens
the "middle way" of order, control, and measured deliberation. This attitude
is reflected in Hopi funeral rituals, which are attended by few people and

Burial Oration

You are dead.
You will go above there to the trail.
That is the spirit trail.
Go there to the beautiful trail.
May it please you not to walk about where I am.
You are dead.
Go there to the beautiful trail above.
That is your way.
Look at the place where you used to wander.
The north trail, the mountains where you used to wander, you
    are leaving.
Listen to me: go there!

Wintu tribe

held privately. Mourners are reticent about expressing grief. The Hopi want the whole matter to be "quickly over and best forgotten." They do not wish to invite dead ancestors to a communal gathering. Once a person's spirit leaves the body, it is a different class of being, no longer Hopi. Thus, it is important to make sure that the "dichotomy of quick and dead is sharp and clear."

As these descriptions of the Cocopa and the Hopi show, different social groups may create distinctive responses to death even when they occupy a similar cultural situation. Both Hopi and Cocopa fear the dead, but they cope with this fear differently: The Hopi want to completely avoid the dead, whereas the Cocopa invite the spirits of the dead to join them in ritual celebration, even if only temporarily and under controlled circumstances.

Although rites of passage surrounding death share common elements—themes of separation, transition, and reincorporation—the way in which these elements are actualized through ceremony and other mourning behaviors reflects a society's unique path toward resolution when death comes to a member of the community. Reflecting on the different emphases within Hopi and Cocopa societies can help us evaluate our own attitudes and values relative to death. What do you find valuable about each of these ways of coping with death?

Native Americans inhabit a world described by a sense of sacred time and sacred space, where experiences of place are infused with mythic themes and everything is related to every other being or thing. This worldview is expressed by the phrase "All my relations." As one native person remarked, "We do not believe our religion, we dance it!"[57]

African Traditions

The term *ancestor worship* is used to describe customs such as prayer, sacrifice, or libation, and other acts of respect or reverence shown to the deceased members of a community. "A starting point is the premise that death does not extinguish a person's participation in the life and activities of his family

and community, but rather opens a way to a mode of participation that is different from the mundane mode of the living."[58] The dead are assumed to still have a stake in the society of the living, and it is crucial to give them ritual attention in prescribed ways.

It may be helpful to compare such communion with the "living dead" in African societies to our own relationships to deceased loved ones. When some event or stimulus evokes the memory of a person who was dear to us, we may pause a moment and think about the qualities that made that person beloved. Such momentary reverie often evokes a sense of communion with the deceased, and it may bring insights that are helpful in our lives.

Reverence for the dead in African culture involves the deceased members of a community who are still remembered by name. As generations come and go, and memory fades, the long-dead ancestral members of the community are replaced by the more recently deceased.[59] Thus, the ongoing community of the "living dead" consists of ancestors who are recalled in the minds of the living. This is illustrated by the system of age grouping: Among the Nandi in Kenya, for example, once past childhood, a male member of the tribe moves through the junior and senior warrior levels and eventually enters the age group of senior elders; he next becomes an old man and ultimately, at death, an ancestor, one of the living dead, whose personality is remembered by survivors. When he is no longer remembered, he merges with the anonymous dead. The Nandi believe that, by this time, the dead person's "soul stuff" may have reappeared in a newborn child of the tribe, thus continuing the recurrent pattern of a person's passage through the levels of the age-group system.[60]

Kofi Asare Opoku says that the traditional African attitude toward death is essentially positive because "it is comprehensively integrated into the totality of life."[61] In the African tradition, "the opposite of death is birth, and birth is the one event that links every human being, on the one hand, with all those who have gone before and, on the other, with all those who will come after." This basically optimistic attitude can be found in the festive sounds of trumpets and drums played at African funerals. "Music," says Francis Bebey, "is a challenge to human destiny; a refusal to accept the transience of this life; and an attempt to transform the finality of death into another kind of living."[62]

African funeral rituals prepare the dead to enter the abode of the ancestors. Mourners may give messages to the deceased to take to the other side, just as one might give a message to a person going on a trip to convey to those he meets at his destination. The traditional African concept of the afterlife reflects a "this-world orientation." Kwasi Wiredu says, "The land of the dead is geographically similar to our own [and] its population is rather like us."[63] It has been said that, for Africans, life is afterlife.[64]

In Africa today, reverence toward the dead retains its importance. When the body of a Nigerian villager of the Ibo people was shipped by air from the United States to her home village, the coffin arrived in a damaged condition. Somewhere in transit her body had been wrapped in burlap and turned upside down—violating strict tribal taboos concerning abuse of a corpse. Despite the family's offerings of yams, money, and wine to appease the insult,

Delmar Lipp, Eliot Elisofon Archives, National Museum of African Art

A woman and child in mourning are depicted in this Yombe memorial figure from Zaire. Installed in a shed constructed on the grave, such adornments are thought to provide the deceased with companionship or protection in the afterlife.

members of the tribe reported seeing the woman's spirit roaming about, and relatives began to experience reversals of fortune, which they characterized as a "curse" due to mistreatment of their dead relative. The woman's son said, "My mother was treated as if she were nothing." Thus, her spirit was angry and not at peace. In bringing suit against the airline to which the body had been entrusted, the son said, "If this had been done to us by an individual, my whole tribe would have gone to war. If I win the case, it would be like bringing back someone's head. It would prove I'm a warrior . . . it will show the gods I have done something against someone who shamed my mother."[65]

The richness of traditional African funeral customs is illustrated by the practices carried out among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana.[66] Among the LoDagaa, funeral ceremonies span at least a six-month period and sometimes continue over several years. They occur in four distinct, successive phases, each focusing on specific aspects of death and bereavement.

The first stage begins at a person's death and lasts six or seven days. During the first several days, the body is prepared for burial, the deceased is mourned by the community, rites are performed to acknowledge the separation of the deceased from the living, kinship ties are affirmed, and some of the social and family roles occupied by the deceased are redistributed. The public ceremonies, which last about three days, conclude with the burial of the corpse. The remaining three or four days of this first stage are devoted to private ceremonies in which preparations are made for redistributing the dead person's property.

About three weeks later, in a second ceremony, the cause of death is established. Rather than considering a snakebite, for example, to be the cause of a person's death, the LoDagaa view the bite as an intermediate agent, but not the final cause of death. The real cause of death lies in a network of spiritual and human relationships. Inquiries are made to uncover any tension that may have existed between the deceased and others.

At the beginning of the rainy season, a third stage of the funeral is held. These rites mark a transitional period in the deceased's passing from the role of the living to that of an ancestor. At this stage, a provisional ancestral shrine is placed on the grave.

The fourth and final stage of LoDagaa ceremonies occurs after the harvest. A final ancestral shrine is constructed and placed on the grave, and close relatives of the deceased are formally released from mourning. The care of offspring is formally transferred to the deceased's tribal "brothers," and final rites conclude redistribution of the deceased's property.

These extended mourning ceremonies serve two purposes: First, they *separate* the dead person from the bereaved family and from the wider community of the living; social roles formerly held by the deceased are assigned to living persons. Second, they gather together, or *aggregate;* that is, the dead person joins with the ancestors and the bereaved are reincorporated into the community in a way that reflects their new status. This rhythm of separation and gathering together is common to funeral rites of all cultures. LoDagaa funeral practices are noteworthy because of the formality with which these functions are accomplished. They provide a model of explicitness in mourning that can be compared and contrasted with our own.

This explicitness is evident in the LoDagaa's use of "mourning restraints" made of leather, fabric, and string. These restraints, which are usually tied around a person's wrist, indicate the degree of relationship of the bereaved to the deceased. At a man's funeral, for example, his father, mother, and widow wear restraints made of hide; his brothers and sisters wear fiber restraints; and his children wear restraints made of string, tied around the ankle. Notice that the strongest restraints are worn by mourners who had the

> If we knew the home of Death, we would set it on fire.
>
> Acholi funeral song

closest relationship with the deceased, usually through kinship and marriage but sometimes through friendship bonds. Persons with less intimate relationships to the deceased wear weaker mourning restraints. In all cases, one end of the mourning restraint is attached to the bereaved while the other end is held by a "mourning companion," who assumes responsibility for the bereaved's behavior during the period of intense grief.

The LoDagaa mourning restraints serve two related purposes. First, as objects that can be seen and felt, they validate that the intensity of the bereaved person's grief is appropriate for his or her relationship with the deceased. Second, they discourage expressions of grief that exceed the norms of the community.

In Africa, as elsewhere, the social and economic forces of modern times threaten traditions. But customs are carried forward in innovative ways. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, for example, obituary publication provides a modern forum for an ancient custom. In newspaper obituaries paid for by family and friends, the deceased's status and prestige are denoted by, among other things, the size of the obituary, which can occupy a full page. Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi says it is common to "mark the return of the dead [through obituary publications] every ten years," although this practice lessens over time.[67] The publication of obituaries, Lawuyi says, "demonstrates the possibility of continuity in ancestral beliefs" and "is a symbolic manifestation of a tradition that has taken a new cultural form."

Traditions such as those discussed here are part of the heritage of African Americans. In the black church, pastors, sermons, and songs frequently refer to themes related to death and "homegoing." The terminology of dying—that is, the use of the terms *passed* or *crossed over*—evokes, as Mary Abrums points out, "an image of passing across a fragile invisible line, almost a sleight of hand, where the loved one walked gently into an invisible space."[68] Members of the black church often express belief in the possibility of an ongoing relationship with someone who has passed and of one day being reunited with deceased loved ones.

In recent years, the black church—itself a hybrid of Protestantism and West African traditionalism—has been joined by newer religious communities with roots in African traditions. These include the Afro-Caribbean religions of *Santería, Espiritismo,* and *Orisha-Voodoo,* as well as traditional Yoruba religion (*Anago*). Ancestors typically hold an important place in such religions. Santería (from the Spanish word *santo),* for example, literally means "the way of saints." It recognizes that there can be no orishas (quasi-deities) without the dead, the *egun.* Thus, no ceremony in Santería can be conducted without first thanking the spirits of the ancestors or appeasing the egun.[69] As these traditions become part of the cultural mosaic of today's world, the In-

ternet plays an important role in facilitating development of new African American religious communities.[70] This suggests the possibility of combining traditional worldviews and present circumstances to create a response to dying and death that is personally and culturally meaningful.

Mexican Traditions

From early times, Mexican culture has embodied themes of death, sacrifice, and destiny. For Aztecs, the creation of the world was made possible by sacrificial rites enacted by the gods, and human beings were obliged to return the favor. Sacrificial victims in Aztec rites were termed *teomicqueh,* the "divine dead." Within the divine-human covenant, they were participants in a destiny that had been determined at the origin of the world. Through sacrifice, human beings took part in sustaining life on earth as well as in the heavens and the underworld.[71] When the Spanish came, they may have brought elements from the medieval tradition of the Feast of Fools (associated with Carnaval, *carne vale,* "farewell to the flesh"), where everything is open to criticism, ridicule, and mockery. This humorous tradition became part of *el Día de los Muertos,* the Day of the Dead.[72]

In Mexican culture, people often confront death with humorous sarcasm. Death is cast as an equalizer that not even the wealthiest or most privileged can escape. The emotional response to death is characterized by impatience, disdain, or irony. The skeleton has been called "Mexico's national totem."[73] The popular engravings of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada resemble the medieval *danse macabre,* in which people from all walks of life dance with their own skeletons. Posada illustrated verses, like this, written by poet Constancio S. Suárez:

> It is a most sincere truth
> that this adage makes us see:
> only one who was never born
> can never a death's-head be.[74]

A striking awareness of death is displayed in graffiti and ornaments that decorate cars and buses. Newspapers revel in accounts of violent deaths, and obituaries are framed with conspicuous black borders. The suffering Savior is portrayed with bloody vividness. Mexican poetry is filled with similes comparing life's fragility to a dream, a flower, a river, or a passing breeze. Death is described as awakening from a dreamlike existence.[75]

Commenting on how these themes are displayed in modern-day Mexico, Octavio Paz says, "Death defines life. . . . Each of us dies the death he has made for himself. . . . Death, like life, is not transferable."[76] Folk sayings confirm this connection between death and identity: "Tell me how you die and I will tell you who you are." Surrounded by references to death, the Mexican, says Paz, "jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it [and makes it] one of his favorite toys and his steadfast love."

Every year, in November, Mexicans celebrate death in a national fiesta known as *el Día de los Muertos,* the Day of the Dead.[77] Blending indigenous ritual and Church dogma, the fiesta—which coincides with All Souls' Day, the

Smithsonian Institution

An ironic attitude toward death characterizes the Day of the Dead fiesta in Mexico.
Death is satirized while memories of deceased loved ones are cherished by the living.
Family members often place the names of deceased relatives on ornaments such as this
candy skull and these candy coffins. This practice assures the spirits of the dead that
they have not been forgotten by the living and provides solace to the living in the
form of tangible symbols of the presence of deceased loved ones.

Christian feast of commemoration for the dead—is a special occasion for communion between the living and the dead. Bread in the shape of human bones is eaten; sugar-candy skulls and tissue-paper skeletons poke fun at death and flaunt it. Among the most traditional observances of the fiesta are those on the Island of Janitzio in Michoacán and in the Zapotec villages in the Valley of Oaxaca. The following account of *el Día de los Muertos* in the village of Mixquic is representative of observances throughout Mexico.[78]

The fiesta begins at midday on October 31, as bells toll to mark the return of dead children, *angelitos* ("little angels") "whose purity of heart makes them especially effective in mediating between the world of the living and the realm of the supernatural."[79] In each house, the family "sets a table adorned with white flowers, glasses of water, plates with salt (for good luck), and a candle for each dead child." The next day families gather at San Andres Church. Bells are rung at noon to signify the departure of the "small defunct ones" and the return of the "big defunct ones." Then, before nightfall, several thousand graves near the church are swept clean and decorated with rib-

bons, foil, and marigold-like cempaszuchitl flowers ("flower of the dead").
Maria Nuñez, a caretaker of the village, says:

> The celebration kicks into high gear on the evening of November 1 and into the
> next morning, when thousands file into the small candle-illuminated graveyard
> carrying tamales, pumpkin marmalade, chicken with "mole"—a spicy sauce of
> some 50 ingredients including chili peppers, peanuts, and chocolate—and "pan
> de muerto," or bread of the dead—sweet rolls decorated with "bones" made of
> sugar. People sit on the graves and eat the food along with the dead ones. They
> bring guitars and violins and sing songs. There are stands for selling food for the
> visitors. It goes on all night. It's a happy occasion—a fiesta, not a time of mourning.[80]

Octavio Paz observes that *el Día de los Muertos* is a time for revolting against
ordinary modes of thought and action; the celebration reunites "contradic-
tory elements and principles in order to bring about a renascence of life."[81]
Jorge Valadez says,

> The rituals honoring and remembering the dead not only bring members of the
> community together; they also reinforce the belief that death is a transitional
> phase in which individuals continue to exist in a different plane while maintaining
> an important relationship with the living.[82]

Celebrants challenge the boundaries that ordinarily separate the dead
from the living. Davíd Carrasco says, "The souls of the dead reassure the liv-
ing of their continued protection, and the living reassure the dead that they
will remember and nurture them in their daily lives."[83] It is important that
families pay their respects to the dead, but mourners are cautioned against
shedding too many tears; excessive grief may make the pathway traveled by
the dead slippery, burdening them with a tortuous journey as they return to
the world of the living at this special time of celebration. Although a height-
ened awareness of death is part of everyday life in Mexican culture, it is given
special emphasis during *el Día de los Muertos* as people gather to commemo-
rate enduring ties between the living and the dead.

Asian Traditions

A key concept in Asian philosophy is *harmony,* which is manifested in
proper conduct, especially in interpersonal relationships. This emphasis on
harmony stems from the fact that descendants of a common ancestor share a
lineage that may go back centuries. Important in this regard is the Chinese
ideal of *hsiao,* which translates as filiality or filial piety. In Asian societies, an-
cestors typically occupy a central place in the family as deceased members
who continue to have reciprocal relationships with the living members of the
household.[84] Life is a whole that embraces both the world of the dead and
the world of the living; there is eternal reciprocity between dead ancestors
and their heirs.[85] The living and the dead are dependent on each other; the
living perform the necessary ancestral rites while the dead dispense blessings
to their descendants. The Chinese philosopher Mencius said that the most
unfilial act was to leave no heirs because there would be no one to perform
the necessary ancestral rites.

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing.

"You lived with her, she brought up your children, and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.

"Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped."

Chuang Tzu

In Chinese funerals, specific mourning garments show the degree of kinship between the bereaved and the deceased (similar to the LoDagaa use of mourning restraints). Following Taoist traditions, Chinese death rituals make use of ancient principles of *fêng-shui* (literally, "wind-water"), an art of divination concerned with the proper positioning of elements in harmonious relation to one another. It is crucial to determine the most auspicious siting of human dwellings, for both the living and the dead; failure to do so can cause sorrow. Chinese cemeteries are usually situated on elevated, sloping ground—preferably with mountains behind and the sea in front—with a view of fertile fields the ancestors are leaving for their descendants. During funeral ceremonies, the foot of the casket is usually positioned facing the door so that the spirit or soul of the deceased will have an unobstructed pathway into the next world. Attention to such details assures the bereaved family that everything is done in the proper way to facilitate the ancestor's journey to the afterlife.

The Chinese celebrate the return of deceased ancestors in a spring festival known as *ch'ing ming*, which has been called a kind of Chinese Memorial Day. Families visit graves and burn paper replicas of money, clothes, jewelry, and even modern necessities like video cameras and cell phones as a way of showing regard and care for their ancestors.

The Japanese festival of *bon* or *o-bon* is similar in many respects to the Chinese *ch'ing ming*. Usually observed each year in August, *o-bon* marks the return of ancestral spirits to their families. Known in English as the Festival of the Dead, the Feast of Lanterns (because lamps are lit to guide the spirits on their journeys home), the Feast of All Souls, or simply as the midsummer festival, *o-bon* is a modern expression of ancient customs relating to the souls of the dead and the reverence due them by the living.

> Empty-handed I entered the world
> Barefoot I leave it.
> My coming, my going—
> Two simple happenings
> That got entangled
>
> Kozan Ichikyo

O-bon is a fusion of indigenous Japanese beliefs and Buddhist concepts. Based on a sutra, or discourse of the Buddha, known as the *urabon-kyo,* the festival weaves together traditions from Indian Buddhism, Chinese Taoism and Confucianism, and Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. The strands of these traditions are woven almost seamlessly into "the Japanese way." In Japan, practicing one religious tradition does not require rejecting all others. A person might feel close to a number of different traditions insofar as they become an integral part of his or her way of life.

Japanese funeral and memorial practices, like those of other Asian cultures, are notable for both their duration and the strong association between the ancestor's spirit and the well-being of the family. Following a death, the family invites Buddhist priests to the home for prayers that help emancipate the deceased's spirit. After the body is cremated, the ashes and some pieces of bone are placed in an urn, which will be interred at the family's grave. Prior to interment, a funeral service is held, during which incense is offered and priests read Buddhist scriptures. At this time, the deceased is given a special posthumous or "Buddhist name," which indicates that the material aspect of the person is extinguished. This name (*kaimyo*) is eventually inscribed on an *ihai,* or memorial tablet, that is placed in the family's *butsudan,* or household altar.

The Funeral (1987), a Japanese film directed by Juzo Itami, offers a glimpse into Japanese death rites, along with elements of comic relief, through its portrayal of a modern family's experiences in rural Japan. American viewers have noted particularly how young children are incorporated into rituals and taught the proper way to behave. For example, after the coffin is closed but before it is taken from the family home, each member of the family uses a stone to strike a blow on the lid of the coffin, symbolically sealing it. A child of perhaps three or four, apparently fond of the sound the stone makes as it hits the wood, starts banging the stone on the coffin lid repeatedly, whereupon he is admonished kindly by an older relative, and the stone is passed along to the next family member.

In the traditional Japanese view, the spirit of the dead is thought to linger at the family home for the first forty-nine days after death. During this period, rites are held to remove the pollution of death and prepare the soul for enshrinement in the *butsudan,* where the family's ancestors are honored. Although these rites may be abbreviated today, they traditionally include seven

This butsudan, *prominently situated in the home of a Japanese American family in California, is representative of altars found in Japanese homes, where deceased relatives and ancestors are honored through prayers, gifts of food, and other ways of showing respect. As a focal point for ongoing relationships between the living and dead members of a household, the* butsudan *is a place where such relationships are demonstrated through concrete actions.*

weekly ceremonies, culminating, on the forty-ninth day after death, in the deceased person's transformation into a benevolent ancestor.

Memorial services continue to be held for the deceased at periodic intervals—typically, on the hundredth day after death, on the first anniversary, the third anniversary, and at fixed intervals thereafter (the seventh, thirteenth,

and twenty-third), until the thirty-third, or sometimes the fiftieth, anniversary. The memorial tablets (*ihai*) placed in the Buddhist altar in the home are regularly honored by the family with simple offerings and scripture readings. The priest of the family's temple may be requested to perform memorial masses in the home, especially on anniversaries of the person's death.

Besides the family *butsudan* in the home, the other main focus of Japanese ancestral rites is the *haka,* the family grave, where ashes of family members are interred. The grave must be maintained properly, which includes cleaning it and making offerings to the dead. As with the *butsudan,* the *haka* is a place of ritual. Incense and flowers are offered to the ancestors, and water is poured over the gravestone, a gesture of purification that dates back to antiquity and that some people now perform without fully recognizing its ancient meaning and symbolism. For the Japanese, it is quite ordinary to talk to their ancestors, either at the gravesite or at the family altar in the home, often in conversational ways, telling the deceased about things that are going on in life or asking for advice. Through such activities, the connection between the dead and the living is maintained.

The Chinese follow similar practices in honoring their ancestors. Traditionally, each ancestor's soul was embodied in a spirit tablet—a rectangular piece of wood, upon which was engraved the deceased's name, title, and birth and death dates—that was kept on the family's home altar. Many Chinese families maintain memorial walls in their homes, sometimes substituting photographs for spirit tablets, as a way to maintain the presence of the dead within the family.

Of particular importance in Chinese traditions is the ultimate destination of the deceased's bones. Many Chinese immigrants to America believed that their souls would not rest unless they had living descendants to care for their spirit tablets and graves. To allay such concerns, the passage contracts for Chinese workers often contained a clause specifying that, if they died while in the United States, their remains would be returned to ancestral plots in China.[86] Among overseas Chinese, it was customary to exhume the bones of the deceased after ten or twenty years and send them back to their ancestral villages in China. However, it sometimes happened that lack of funds or health department rules caused the bones to remain in America. For this reason, Chinese cemeteries in the United States often have a "Bone House," where the bones of deceased Chinese patiently await return to the homeland.

Celtic Traditions

It is commonly agreed that all European cultures can trace their roots to Celtic origins.[87] In ancient times, Celtic people occupied much of central and western Europe, ranging from the British Isles in the west to Turkey and the Black Sea coasts in the east, from Belgium in the north, south to Spain and Italy. The tribal societies of the Celts were led by warriors who justified their authority by skill, courage, and good fortune in battle. Fame after death was the hallmark of human achievement. As someone larger than life, but less than divine, the hero was viewed as being in contact with supernatural powers and the Otherworld.

Death-Song

If they ask for me
 Say: He had some
 Business
In another world.

  Sokan

With deep reverence for nature, the Celts relied on the powers ruling sky, earth, and sea to bring them strength and luck and to protect them from hostile forces. Sacred groves and sacred springs, lakes and bogs, figure prominently in Celtic religion and were among the earliest places of worship. The Celts believed everything was alive, inhabited by soul or spirit, which could be helpful or harmful.

The part played by battle-goddesses, battle-maids, or *valkyries* is important in both Nordic and Celtic traditions and can be traced back before the Viking Age. Valkyries were thought to haunt the battlefield, where they rejoiced in the bloodshed and deaths of warriors. Described as wearing swords, carrying spears, and riding over air and sea, they were viewed as apportioning victory or defeat in battle and welcoming fallen heroes into *Valhalla,* a place of heavenly honor and glory. The phrase "being a guest in Valhalla" was synonymous with death. Valhalla literally means "the hall of the slain." Of great height, it is roofed with golden shields and its rafters are spears. Valhalla was not viewed as the dwelling place of all the dead; it was intended for outstanding heroes. The Celtic attitude toward death in battle can be summarized as follows: "To be a warrior among warriors was the ideal life for the Celt, but to die in a fight surrounded by friends, poets and a hundred dead enemies was the supreme consummation."[88]

Both burial and cremation were practiced at various times in Celtic history. The Celts were often buried with personal effects, clothes, jewelry, and other items that apparently reflect belief in immortality. Articles held dear by the deceased were burned or buried so that they could continue to serve in another life. The status of the deceased and his or her place in the community were indicated by the extent and type of grave goods. Based on archaeological evidence, scholars believe that the Celts enacted elaborate funeral ceremonies involving clan gatherings and feasting at funeral banquets. In one especially lavish burial, probably of a chieftain, tomb furnishings include a large bronze couch on which the body was placed, as well as a four-wheeled vehicle that may have been a hearse or have represented a chariot for traveling to the Otherworld. The tomb contained bronze dishes and drinking horns, enough to accommodate nine people, the number considered ideal for a drinking party, suggesting a ritual feast.

The Celtic attitude toward the dead appears to have been somewhat ambivalent. Despite fearing the dangerous dead, the Celts also regarded the dead as guardian spirits who could help and support the living. Dead heroes and

warriors were viewed as a source of power and inspiration. There was a strong sense of communication between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Memory toasts were drunk in honor of the dead. Generally, the dead were helpful to their descendants, especially when reverence was paid to them.

The realm of the dead was not seen as a static place; rather, the emphasis was on the journey to and from it. The life of the soul was not interrupted by the death of the individual, but could continue in a world apart from that in which mortals dwelled. Death was viewed as simply a changing of place. Life went on in all its forms in another world, a world of the dead, the Otherworld. When people died in that world, they could be reborn in this world. Thus, a constant exchange of souls took place between the two worlds: Death in the Otherworld brought a soul to this world, and death in this world took a soul to the Otherworld.

Contact between the living and the dead was especially possible during the breach in time known as *Samhain* (November 1), which marked the end of one year and the dawn of the next according to the Celtic calendar. As the most important festival of the year and a precursor to modern-day Halloween, the harvest feast of *Samhain* lasted several days, a time when supernatural communications with the gods as well as the dead could take place. At that time, the walls between this world and the "other" are most transparent, the souls of the dead driven toward the living "like swirling leaves."[89]

The Celtic priesthood, known as the *Druids,* presided over the sacrificial rites and interpreted omens.[90] They acted as intermediaries between the world of humankind and the domain of the supernatural. Their main teaching appears to have been immortality of the soul as a future bodily life, not merely as spirit or shadow of life after death. Indeed, the Celts seem to have been among the first peoples to develop a belief in personal immortality. Such beliefs helped the Celts face the fear of death and made them brave in battle.

The Celtic heritage continues to be evident in such observances as Halloween. In addition, the Celts, who valued skill in words nearly as much as skill in battle, delighting in word-games and intricate poetic language, also made notable contributions to world literature, perhaps most famously in the legend of King Arthur. Traces of Celtic myth are also found in Chaucer and in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *As You Like It,* as well as more recently in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* which contains strong echoes of the Otherworld and includes Druid-like characters in the forms of magicians Gandalf and Saruman. In Tolkien's *The Hobbit,* the ring lord is called the *Necromancer,* a name from Nordic mythology meaning "enchanter" or "wizard" and which refers to the sorcerer's skill of speaking with the dead to gain knowledge. There is an elegiac note in Old English poetry, like *Beowulf,* in which there is a sense of grief at the awareness that all things are passing away and life is on loan.[91]

Today, interestingly, more people claim some sort of Celtic identity than at any other time in history. Celtic religious beliefs are being rediscovered as part of the modern resurgence of pagan, nature-venerating, polytheistic religions. (The literal meaning of the word *pagan* is "rural" or "country dweller.") The influence of Celtic culture is most clearly found in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, where Celtic languages are still spoken by well over a million people.

Through emigration by the Irish and by Scottish Highlanders, Celtic traditions were carried to the United States, as well as to other parts of the world.

Celtic music is heard worldwide in pubs and taverns and at music festivals.[92] The keening sounds of dirges and laments played on bagpipes and *uilleann* pipes were part of many funeral processions held for firefighters killed as a result of the terrorist attacks in September 2001. The themes and techniques associated with Celtic music also survive as strong undercurrents in North American country and bluegrass music. The Celtic heritage is recognized as an important component of European and European-American culture.

Mixed Plate: Cultural Diversity in Hawaii

The population of Hawaii represents a rich ethnic and cultural blend. Eleanor Nordyke points out that Hawaii is "the only region where all racial groups are minorities and where the majority of the population has its roots in the Pacific Islands or Asia instead of Europe or Africa."[93] Hawaii was settled by Polynesians who sailed to the Hawaiian archipelago and whose first contact with Europeans came in 1778 with exploration of the Pacific by Captain James Cook.[94] Later, successive waves of immigrants came—including Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Okinawans, Koreans, and Filipinos—many arriving as temporary laborers in sugarcane fields and then remaining to make Hawaii their home. Today's residents include Caucasians from Europe and North America, Samoans, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians, as well as African Americans, Latin Americans, Pakistanis, Tongans, Fijians, Micronesians, immigrants from other parts of Oceania, and others. The pan-ethnic identity of being a "local" represents "the common identity of people of Hawaii and their shared appreciation of the land, peoples, and cultures of the islands."[95]

Each group has its own story, unique history, and corresponding traditions. Most also have their own cultural networks, with their own ways of keeping story, history, and tradition alive, as well as providing mutual support in times of need. With the Japanese, it's kin groups; the Portuguese have the church; the Chinese, clubs; and Filipinos have provincial clubs.[96] Hawaii illustrates the possibility of preserving the cultural richness of distinctive traditions by accommodating, and assimilating, their expression.

Characteristics of Hawaii's Peoples

Among native Hawaiians, the extended family group, or *'ohana,* is at the center of traditional values.[97] Children have an important place in family gatherings, including funerals. The intimate relationships of the *'ohana* involve close bonds between living family members and their ancestors.[98] Ancestral remains are sacred, especially those of the *ali'i,* members of the royal family. Indeed, as George Kanahele says, the Hawaiians' love of family is the basis of their love of the land:

> In a religious society in which ancestors were deified as *'aumakua* [gods] and genealogy elevated to prominent status, a place, a home, was much more valued because of its ties with the ancestors. A Hawaiian's birthplace was celebrated not

simply because he happened to be born there, but because it was also the place where so many generations of his ancestors were born before him. It was a constant reminder of the vitality of the bloodline and of the preciousness of life past, present, and future.[99]

In the spring of 1994, the Hawaiian community was shocked into mourning when two *ka'ai,* or woven caskets, containing bones believed to be those of deified Hawaiian chiefs were taken from the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.[100] A grief-filled ceremony was held at the Royal Mausoleum to inform the ancestors of the missing bones and express the desire for the bones' safe return. Chants and wailing laments asked the ancestors' forgiveness and formed part of a ceremony that reportedly was last held a hundred years ago.

Among the earliest immigrants to Hawaii were the Chinese.[101] Like those of native Hawaiians, Chinese cultural values emphasize the importance of family and relationships. They also retain elements of traditional funerals and mourning.[102] For example, in accordance with the belief that the needs of the dead resemble those of the living, Chinese funerals in Hawaii typically include offerings of food, money, and other items that will be needed by the deceased in the afterlife. Papier-mâché "servant dolls" are placed in front of the casket, and a Taoist priest chants instructions about how to take care of the deceased in Heaven. The boy servant might be told, "Take care of your master; fetch him water and firewood." To the girl servant, the priest might say, "Keep the house clean and, when you go shopping, don't waste your master's money." In the Taoist funeral, which lasts nearly all day, the priest chants and musicians play instruments while family members perform rituals at the priest's direction. Symbolic money (called "Hell Notes"), which the dead person will spend in the other world, is contributed by mourners and burned in a container during the service. The more money burned, the more the deceased has in the next life. Relatives and friends visit and express condolences. Following Taoist traditions, the ancient divinatory art of *fêng-shui* is called upon for auspicious placement of the casket during the service. Similarly, Chinese cemeteries in Hawaii are situated amid great natural beauty and on sloping ground, in accord with the principles of fêng-shui. A proper burial facilitates the journey of the deceased's spirit to the afterlife.

The Japanese also place high value on the family and its extended household.[103] Unlike the Chinese, who typically choose ground burial, the Japanese prefer cremation and then interment of the remains in a *haka,* or family memorial, which may have space for a dozen or more urns. At funerals, the primary mourner is often given *koden*—contributions of money to help defray expenses—with the donation increasing as kinship ties become closer. An elder son, for example, makes a larger contribution than, say, a cousin. Among the Japanese in Hawaii, most homes have a *butsudan,* or household altar, as a focal point for honoring the family's ancestors, and families participate in the midsummer *o-bon* festival honoring the dead. Celebrations like the Japanese *o-bon,* as well as the Chinese festival *ch'ing ming,* are community affairs in Hawaii, with people of diverse backgrounds and traditions joining together.

Most cultural groups living in Hawaii share a valuing of family ties and respect for ancestors. John F. McDermott says:

> In all groups, except perhaps the Caucasian, the extended family plays a central role. There is an emphasis on the family as a key social unit, and on family cohesion, family interdependence, and loyalty to the family as central guiding values. The individual is seen as part of a larger network, and duties and obligations, as well as much of the sense of personal security, derive from that context. . . . Caucasians, too, value the family, but they face the world as individuals.[104]

Although European American culture plays a major role in modern Hawaii, it is appropriate to think of Caucasians not as dominant, but as one of many groups that constitute the "ethnic mosaic" of the islands. Newcomers often find that this social reality requires some adjustment. Caucasians who move to Hawaii from mainland United States do not think of themselves as migrants; they view themselves as representing mainstream culture and usually expect others, not themselves, to adapt.[105] Those who remain in Hawaii, however, adapt to the unique culture of Hawaii and assume a "local" identity that reflects an appreciation of the land, peoples, and cultures of the islands.

Assimilation and Accommodation in Death Rites

The various ethnic groups in Hawaii tend to maintain a distinctive identity and culture while sharing elements of their identity and culture with the overall community. As different ethnic groups became part of the cultural mix in Hawaii, a common language, called "pidgin," developed and became a symbol of local identity. Borrowing words and grammar from the native tongues of its speakers, pidgin is not only an expressive means of communication among people of disparate backgrounds, but also a way for people to identify with their adopted homeland. Today, speaking pidgin allows people to transcend cultural boundaries and establish rapport with each other on the basis of "local" identity.

A Caucasian nurse describes how pidgin was useful in talking with a Filipino man who was dying. As the man's body wasted away, he was frightened. Offering comfort, the nurse told him, "Spirit good, body *pau* [finished]." In using a pidgin word, borrowed from the Hawaiian language, she was able to affirm, in a culturally appropriate and comforting way, the strength of his spirit while acknowledging that the life in his body was being consumed by disease.

Local identity is fostered by familiarity with customs practiced by the different ethnic groups and flexibility in adopting elements of those customs into one's own life. For instance, the native Hawaiian tradition of feasting at important ceremonial events is widespread among Hawaii's residents. At funerals, mourners often gather after the ritual to share food and conversation. Mortuaries in Hawaii accommodate this by having kitchen and dining facilities where food can be prepared, brought by mourners (potluck), or catered and served to gathered family and friends.

Similarly, funeral announcements in Hawaii usually include the notice "Aloha attire requested," to which mourners respond by wearing colorful shirts or *mu'u mu'u* (long "missionary" dresses), along with beautiful and fragrant flower leis. The lei is very special in Hawaiian culture, and different flowers and leis carry symbolic meanings. For example, a *hala* lei is associated

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In contemporary societies, where a variety of cultural traditions are practiced by different ethnic and subcultural groups, people may find themselves "trying on" customs and practices that differ from those of their own heritage group. The opportunity to participate in the rites and ceremonies of other cultures, to assume a "local identity," even if only temporarily, can broaden our understanding and expand our range of choices for revitalizing even those customs with which we are most familiar.

with the breath (*ha*) and connotes passing away or dying. The ginger, or *'awapuhi,* lei is a symbol of things that pass too soon, as indicated in the Hawaiian folk saying, " *'Awapuhi lau pala wale,*" or "Ginger leaves yellow too quickly."[106] In the customs of "feasting" after a funeral and wearing flower leis, traditions associated with the indigenous Hawaiians have been adopted as expressions of local identity and community feeling.

Given the religions practiced in Hawaii—Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism, among others—mortuaries are generally set up to offer appropriate accoutrements and symbols for all these traditions. The central portion of the altar at one mortuary is designed as a revolving display so that images and symbols of the appropriate religious tradition can be easily moved into view.

Hawaii's diverse inhabitants have not minimized differences between different ethnic groups so much as learned to appreciate and make room for their expression. The fastest-growing ethnic group in Hawaii is "mixed race," or *hapa.*[107] When people marry outside their heritage group, thereby joining in kinship with families from different cultural traditions, their customs,

beliefs, and practices blend together in a new family. As spouses from different traditions adopt elements of each other's culture, their children naturally become acquainted with both cultures.

The boundaries between different groups are loosened through social interaction, becoming "soft instead of hard, often overlapping rather than sharply defined," resulting in a situation wherein "no group has totally surrendered the core of its traditional cultural identity."[108]

Death in Contemporary Multicultural Societies

Shared experiences and a sense of community shape the customs and beliefs of a particular society. The ways we cope with death are not created out of thin air. The root meaning of *tradition* is "to hand down." Each generation receives culture from the preceding generation, alters it, and passes it on.

Modern societies are composed of a number of social groups, each with distinctive customs and lifestyles. The presence of a "cultural mosaic" created by different ethnic and cultural groups can enrich a society.[109] People sometimes talk or write about "The American Way of Death," but this phrase conceals what, in fact, are many different "ways of death," reflecting attitudes, beliefs, and customs of culturally diverse groups. David Olson and John De-Frain remind us that "tremendous diversity exists among people who are commonly grouped together."[110]

In a cosmopolitan world, individuals may wrestle with the dilemma of maintaining their cultural distinctiveness while also taking steps to broaden the conventional terms of what it means to be a member of their culture. For example, influenced by body disposition practices in the global context, an individual might opt for cremation instead of burial, despite the latter being the strongly held preference and traditional within her own group. Such choices reflect the fact that today's societies are increasingly homogeneous (similar) *across* cultures and heterogeneous (diverse) *within* them.[111]

Still, ethnicity and other cultural factors often have an impact on such matters as coping with life-threatening illness, the perception of pain, social support for the dying, manifestations of grief, mourning styles, and funeral customs.[112] African American funerals and mourning practices illustrate how customs can persist despite the passage of time and changed circumstance. As Ronald Barrett points out, elements of traditional West African practices retain their importance for many African Americans.[113] This is evident in customs such as gathering at the gravesite to bid godspeed to the deceased and referring to funerals as "home-going" ceremonies honoring the spirit of the deceased. David Roediger says such customs "grew from deep African roots, gained a paradoxical strength and resilience from the horrors of midpassage, and flowered in the slave funeral—a value laden and unifying social event which the slave community in the United States was able to preserve from both physical and ideological onslaughts of the master class."[114]

Similarly, Spanish-speaking people in northern New Mexico continue to practice traditional forms of *recuerdo,* or remembrance, which memorialize

the dead and comfort the bereaved.[115] Presented as a written narrative or ballad, the *recuerdo* tells the story of a person's life in an epic, lyrical, and heroic manner. This is a kind of farewell, a leave-taking, or *la despedida,* on behalf of a deceased person. Such memorials frequently contain reminders of the transitory nature of life and express the notion that life is on loan from God for only a short time.

When everyone in a society shares the same beliefs and customs, there are known and socially accepted ways of dealing with death and grief. Cultural diversity may jeopardize this comforting situation because there is less agreement about which practices are socially sanctioned for managing death and minimizing "existential dread."[116] Uncertainty about the social norms for dealing with death is apparent when people at modern funerals are anxious about how they should act or what they should say to the bereaved.

In rediscovering the commemoration of death, we must beware the temptation to take "recipes" for coping with death or disposing of the dead from other cultures or a nostalgia-infused past. It can be worthwhile, however, to foster an appreciation of how other cultures relate to death and to adapt aspects of those "deathways" into one's own life and practice.[117] Ronald Grimes advises, "Our definition of death rites must be large enough to include not only ritualized preparation for death and rites performed near the time of a death, but also ritual activities that follow long after the occasion of a person's death."[118] Moreover, as Robert Harrison reminds us, mourning rituals are missing something important if they do not "provide the means, or language, to cope with one's own mortality even as they help one cope with the death of others."[119]

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