



# **SPEAKING OF DEATH**

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**America's New Sense of Mortality**

**MICHAEL K. BARTALOS**

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# SPEAKING OF DEATH

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# SPEAKING OF DEATH

America's New Sense of Mortality

*Edited by Michael K. Bartalos, M.D.*

Foreword by Robert Belknap, Ph.D.

*Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*

*J. Harold Ellens, Series Editor*

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*It is less important that we all believe alike than that we all inquire freely and put at the disposal of one another such glimpses as we may obtain of the truth for which we are in search.*

—John Dewey, *Experience, Knowledge and Value*



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## FOREWORD

This book emerged at Columbia University from many meetings of the University Seminar on Death. The Seminar on Death was founded in 1970 by Dr. Austin H. Kutscher and is one of about 80 university seminars that link New York professors and others across the boundaries of institutions and departments. Each of the seminars manages its own program of monthly meetings. Some solve practical or intellectual problems, and others bring experts together to discuss other people's solutions. The Seminar on Death has been concentrating on a subject that demands both practical and intellectual attention, coping with death.

Few institutions have thanatology departments, but many have experts in medicine, psychiatry, journalism, religion, anthropology, art, literature, or other fields who encounter the intellectual and practical meanings of death in ways that vary enormously. The Columbia university seminars are designed to turn such experts, who might otherwise never meet, into a community devoted to enquiry.

Some subjects demand a narrow, focused monograph. This subject is so loaded emotionally that it demands a book like this. The authors, and the University Seminars, hope that readers of diverse persuasions as well as philosophers, psychologists, social scientists, practitioners, and advocates will mine this book for the variety of experience, expertise, and outlook that it brings together on a subject that helps to shape our virtues and vices.

This diversity enriches the text of the book. For some, the denial of death generates all religion and almost all culture. For others it leads to outlandish

behavior, or to the kind of scene that needs a doctor or a dramatist to describe it, as in this example from the book:

Several years ago, this writer made a home visit to an elderly gentleman who was dying of kidney failure. Prior to my visit, his wife instructed me not to talk about the progression of his disease because her husband was focused on maintaining hope and did not believe he was dying. During the first ten minutes of the home visit, while his wife answered an incoming phone call, the patient whispered to me: “Do you know I’m dying? My wife can’t talk to me about it—it’s too painful and she has to believe that there’ll be a miracle and that I won’t die.”

The beauty of this denial resides in its symmetry but also in its exploration of the utility of truth—Sir Philip Sydney said poesy could not lie because it did not claim to be true. The couple who thought they were deceiving one another in their last days together were not lying about death either; they did not mention it at all. Both recognized it but tried lovingly to exclude it from their relationship. This book studies our civilization’s long denial of death, debates whether it is ending, and considers whether its end would be a good or a bad thing. The truth is noble, but sad and painful truths demand the kind of response that this book offers, the disputatious interaction of good minds.

*Robert Belknap, Ph.D.*  
*Director, Columbia University Seminars*

# PREFACE: FACING OUR MORTALITY

We live in cataclysmic times. The schisms between groups of humans are deep, the stakes are high, antagonisms fierce, and emotions at their highest pitch. Our interconnectedness and advanced technology have brought us closer, not closer to embracing but closer to annihilating each other. The falsehood that was the stuff of our life is exploding in our faces. Our relationship to our environment has brought us to the brink of an ecological disaster (Wilson 2006). Our relationships to others are still governed by outdated concepts (Dennett 2006) of mythical figures with imagined precepts, super-human powers, and demands that reflect the tribal views of the people who lived in early historic times (Hitchens 2007). Our relationship to ourselves is likewise in need of revision.

## OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Our time—it seems to me—is a time of encounter, a time when we finally become aware of our shortcomings and recognize that we have a genuine crisis on our hands, not unlike the legendary dragon with several heads each exuding deadly fire, and that unless we act decisively and wisely, intelligent life on earth could come to an end.

## OUR RELATIONSHIP TO OTHERS

We are forced to face the falsehood that has shrouded our existence until now. We cannot survive and maintain human proximity unless we become

guardians of our planet (Wilson 2006). We cannot have peace while maintaining our illogical belief systems that continue to breed hatred, pain, and suffering (Dawkins 2006). Instead we need to establish a global society where mutual respect, concern for each other, and cooperation are the moral imperatives (Bartalos 1990).

The attitude of too many toward others is exploitive and abusive. Legions of humanity's exploiters inflict unquantifiable human suffering under such diverse guises as leading politicians and captains of industry who are spreading global capitalism (Soros 1997). Religious leaders and leaders of terrorists are encouraging the faithful in self-demolition and in massacre of the innocents (Ellens 2007), and individuals with selfish motives are helping to maintain social, political, and economic systems that are unjust and in violation of human rights, dignity, and health. We have an aversion toward people who look or act or speak or think differently than we do. We also have little tolerance for individuals with unconventional sexual orientations and/or sexual identities.

## OUR VIEW OF OURSELVES

Why is it that we do not see ourselves as reasonable human beings in charge of our destiny, using our intellect for the betterment of all mankind? Why are we quick to attack and slow to cooperate? Why do we consider ourselves lowly creatures who are unable to handle our own affairs? Why do we assume that prayer is superior to reasoned action, to goodwill, and to cooperation in solving our problems? We indeed behave in a lowly fashion that reinforces our negative self-image. I hold that the doctrine of original sin is the culprit for such self-defeating behavior.

As children we are told by our religious teachers that mortality is a punishment for the sins of our archaic forebears Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God's order. Individuals who were told at a young age that they are doomed to die as the result of a wrong that they never committed carry a deep, often unarticulated, resentment against such a colossal miscarriage of justice. If you add to this a lifetime spent trying to live up to the precepts of a religion whose rules were drawn up in complete disregard of the biological dictates of the human organism and therefore are impossible to follow in every details, at life's end you have a guilt-ridden individual who is terrified of dying, terrified of the final judgment, and terrified of what will follow thereafter. In broad outlines this scheme is discernible in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the three major monotheistic religions. It is taught in all three religions that the only way out of this dilemma is the unconditional acceptance of the precepts and diligence in following the prescripts of each respective religion. The demands, in each case, are such that no individual can achieve all that is required of her. Further, since all three religions claim that only their

respective doctrine is true, the embrace of the teachings of any one of these religions sets one automatically in conflict with all others. Indeed, it is an utterly unfair and manipulative arrangement that, if adhered to, makes global cooperation impossible. And indeed, we do demonstrate lowly behavior as we, through the practice of religion, spread antagonism and cause misery both among the faithful and the “others.” We cannot dream of world peace as long as religions compete. To achieve a lasting global peace, the religions need to form a true brotherhood or sisterhood devoted to helping every human being or for a new, truly humanistic mentality to arise that could absorb and accommodate the now fragmented, mutually suspicious, but equally betrayed populations.

Now that the ailment has been diagnosed, what, then, is the treatment plan? I feel that we should attempt to remove the negative emotions that are attached to dying. Contrary to religious doctrine, there is no basis to assume that one is born a sinner (or a saint, for that matter; we are born with the potential for both). No one should be held responsible for a crime they did not committed. A rational judge or god could not disagree with that. Thus instead of horror, fear, and indignation, the knowledge of our mortality should remind us of the limited time we have on earth to develop our talents and to contribute to the common good. The knowledge of our mortality should serve as an impetus for benevolent actions, for good will towards others, and not to become the source of despair and self-incrimination.

We need to reform our view of ourselves. We need to stop our irrational selfishness and callous indifference toward others. While we may despise dying, we can still formulate a worthwhile agenda for living. In nearly all areas of human endeavor, change is called for and change is slowly forthcoming. This volume deals with a small but important segment of the human problem complex, namely, our attitude toward dying. It represents an attempt to rise above the divisive influence of religious doctrines and to appeal to what is common to us all: our humanity. The Age of Encounter.

We Americans as a group, nudged on by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the looming global ecological disaster, gathered our composure, metaphorically speaking, took a deep breath, and with a giant leap became conscious of our ephemeral nature. This realization gives cause for celebration. Through this step in our collective consciousness, we reached an important milestone toward maturity. We finally dared to look into the mirror and come face to face with our mortality. The concept of mortality, both ours and that of others, has entered our conscious thinking. We now consciously recognize our temporariness and have begun to deal with it. The mental state of awareness demands action, and action is taking place. Ours is the Age of Encounter, the age when we are acting on our newly recognized problems. This represents a new era, an era of pragmatic activism, in Western thought.

In the area of mortality awareness, our current state of encounter will likely prove to be a way station on the road leading from the denial of our mortality toward its acceptance. We cannot yet speak of an acceptance of our mortality. That stage will be reached when the awareness of our temporariness becomes fully integrated into our self-image, into our thinking, and into our actions. This book is an attempt to define the current era of mortality awareness and to help society on the road toward maturity, that is, toward the acceptance of our mortality as individuals and toward our survival as a species.

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# INTRODUCTION: THE AGE OF ENCOUNTER—THE NEW REALITY

As the twenty-first century made its debut, two propositions were current regarding the attitude of the American people and American culture toward death and dying. The older view, still shared by many, held that denial of death is a characteristic of our culture, while others were beginning to claim that awareness of death is the new reality. Following the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, attendees of the University Seminar on Death at Columbia University in New York—a faculty-level study and debating group that has been in existence since 1970—decided to examine the validity of the conflicting opinions stated above. Their findings and their reflections are described in this book. In brief, they concluded that death, indeed, is no longer in the tabooed territory. An awareness of death has developed along with an awareness of such contemporary problems as the population crisis, the dwindling natural resources, the global energy shortage, the health care crisis, the gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, and the rise of violence-prone extremists in the dominant religions of the world.

## OVERVIEW

In the foreword, Michael Bartalos argues that the recent change in our attitude toward death is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is part of a larger transformation whereby we grudgingly face the problems created by our irresponsible use of the earth's natural resources and the social ills fostered by our exploitive social and economic policies. A new awareness



is rising in the human psyche, prompting us to face and deal with issues of human existence and finitude, just as we face and deal with our other broad societal issues.

Part I of this book deals with selected areas that reflect on our current attitude toward living and dying. Christina Staudt reviews the road traveled from denial to our current awareness of our mortality as it is reflected in the thanatology literature. Sherry Schachter describes her experiences with dying cancer patients and makes us sensitive to the observation that what at times might appear to be denial is in fact a coping device. The patients in question are well aware of their predicament, but with an overburdened agenda they have to limit the number of problems that they can deal with at a given time. While they are alive they have to deal with other matters, too, and coping demands that they do not dwell uninterruptedly on their mortality. As Alan Segal analyzed Americans' belief in an afterlife, he observed that a surprisingly large number believed in some form of existence after death. One explanation of this phenomenon is that as circumstances force people to accept their finitude, in the absence of other emotionally acceptable alternatives they turn toward mythical explanations.

Increased preoccupation with improving the length and the quality of life can be regarded as an indirect indication of the increasing societal acceptance of mortality. In the face of death, life assumes an increasing importance. Kevin Keith provides an analysis of the current phenomenon that is referred to as the life extension movement. The final chapter in this section deals with the news media. Because of its influence, Christina Staudt chose *Time* magazine and examined how the momentous event of 9/11 was covered in print and in photographs by the publishers of this influential U.S. weekly.

In Part II, we contemplate issues that we must deal with on the next segment of our journey, that is, on the road from awareness to acceptance. For starters, Bartalos contrasts the states of mortality denial and mortality acceptance and the collateral meanings that each condition entails. Jerry Piven provides an overview of the psychoanalytic theories as they apply to mortality awareness, coping and its reverse, violence. Thomas Caffrey offers the cogent observation that in the life of many of us there comes a time when the trajectory of one's existence suddenly changes, when dying suddenly appears not far off. "Caffrey's warp" signals the time when the business of living transmutes into the business of dying. It is a time when one's outlook changes and when life strategies need to change too. It demarcates a period of human existence with unique characteristics and meaning.

Finally, Michael Bartalos, in chapter 9, proposes a method of cultivated acceptance of our mortality by contrasting his views with those of Ernest Becker. In this process he attempts to stay at an all-human level, that is, at a level above religious differences. While he does not endorse the teachings of any religion, he strives to offer a way that is compatible with and is

augmentable by a humanistic religious belief. Bartalos recommends his brand of philosophy, called contextual individualism, combined with his brand of psychological approach (adaptive or tensamatic psychology) and a cognitive-like methodology, as a way of lending meaning to living and to dying. Along the way he offers new definitions of illness and health and living and dying. One part of the chapter offers practical advice on conscious preparation for and acceptance of dying. In Bartalos's vision, the individual human being needs to be an active participant in shaping his/her future.

Part III is a look into the near and very distant future. Both chapters here are written by Bartalos. In the first, he expresses his aversion to and disapproval of the ancient and current use of religious sentiments as a recruiting tool for deadly political missions. In the final chapter, using commonly understandable language, he reviews some recent proposals by cosmologists and physicists regarding the fate of our universe eons from now. The reviewed material points toward a way whereby humankind's achievement might survive indefinitely. Ways are envisioned by scientists by which humanity's intellectual heritage might be stored, packaged, and transported from one universe into another and reconstructed after such transfer—all this without violating the known laws of physics. This insight represents a momentous event in human intellectual development that went totally unnoticed by the general public. It is extremely significant because it is the first time that we can visualize a physically feasible afterlife. It is the first time that we can see a credible alternative to the immensely negative apocalyptic view. This insight provides the first glimmer of hope that human achievements might not be doomed to oblivion.

The authors of this book are in general agreement that today the biological facts of living and dying are better integrated into our personal life and into our societal manifestations than they were at any time in the recent past. Throughout the book, an effort was made to refrain from the endorsement or promotion of any particular religious or political belief. The views expressed here are solely those of the individual authors. Readers may wish to consult the Web site of the Columbia University Seminar on Death: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/seminars/death/deathseminarindex.html>.



PART I

**MANIFESTATIONS OF MORTALITY  
AWARENESS**



## CHAPTER 1

# FROM CONCEALMENT TO RECOGNITION: THE DISCOURSE ON DEATH, DYING, AND GRIEF

*Christina Staudt*

Concealment and disregard, forms of implicit denial, were the prevailing attitudes to death in Western societies for most of the twentieth century, reaching a culmination in mid-century.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to *The Meaning of Death* (1959)—a groundbreaking attempt to document contemporary thinking, practices, and attitudes related to death—Herman Feifel identified denial as one of the central themes characterizing death in the twentieth century. Half a century later, denial is a much less notable aspect of the American “death system.”<sup>2</sup> We have gone from ignoring and hiding mortal matters to, increasingly, recognizing and exploring the final stage of life. Instead of looking away, we are now trying to figure out techniques for observing death safely and with some level of comfort. Our aim is, if not to control death itself, then at least to supervise the process leading up to the ultimate outcome, and then to manage the remains and the aftermath.

Twenty-first century manifestations of mortality awareness do not hark back to the Victorian style of acceptance when death and dying centered on family and church. The growing recognition of the rights and needs of the dying in the early twenty-first century germinated in paradigmatic cultural, social, and scientific changes during the second half of the previous century. Advances in medical research, the information revolution, and the environmental movement, have all helped usher in the new approach to death and dying in this millennium. How we traveled through the last half century to arrive at the current, increasingly more widespread urge to understand and manage the vagaries of death can be traced through the public discourse of death and dying. To place the more recent developments in context, this

chapter begins with a short review of death systems in the Western world over the last several centuries. This is followed by a review of the emergence of the literature on death in the last 50 years and the mention of critical events that precipitated the documents. More detailed discussions, with salient examples from contemporary discourse, are offered of the areas where the development towards a climate of greater acknowledgment is particularly apparent: the visual media, the hospice movement, legislation related to self-determination, and funerary practices. In my final observations and reflections I point to works that show a lingering attitude of denial and ambivalence but conclude that the overarching characteristic of our death system in the early twenty-first century is the impetus to manage and supervise our *finale* on earth: The pendulum between concealment and recognition has swung in favor of recognition. A postscript about death and diversity offers a *caveat* to the generalizations in the chapter and to the conclusion.

## WESTERN APPROACHES TO DEATH AND DYING—A BRIEF HISTORY

Social norms and conventions on death and dying differ among the people of the world and are always amorphous and in flux. Practices and attitudes overlap from one era to the next, undergo change, and migrate among connected societies.

Philippe Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death* is currently the most accessible, broad historical survey of the attitude to death in Western civilization over time. Claiming Vladimir Jankélévitch and Edgar Morin as his inspiration (see especially Jankélévitch and Morin), Ariès presents literary, liturgical, testamentary, epigraphic, and iconographic documentation to categorize Western death cultures over the past two millennia as "tame death," "death of the self," "death of the other," and "invisible death." Writing in the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century, Ariès identifies death denial as a phenomenon of modern industrial times and the paramount attitude to death in modern Western civilization. Widely cited by scholars of all disciplines since its publication in France in 1977 (and in English translation in 1981), Ariès's work is accepted as a major contribution to the field, even among detractors who fault it for oversimplification. His categories are useful in setting the stage for our investigation of the defining features of the attitude to death in the post-modern Western world.<sup>3</sup>

According to Ariès, "tame death," characterized by tacit acceptance, covers approximately the first millennium of the Common Era, a time when prescribed, ritualized roles controlled the conduct of the dying and their surrounding community. Belief in an afterlife connected earthly life with a mystical universe in one cosmology.

The “death of the self,” signified by the individual’s desire to play an active role in the course of his own death, unfolded first among the rich, educated, and powerful around the turn of the first millennium and became widespread by the eighteenth century. Popularized with the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century, *artes moriendi*, treatises and illustrations describing the art of dying well, placed the burden of an appropriate ending of life on the individual person. The practice of creating written wills spread from a small powerful elite in the Middle Ages to the growing merchant class that would become Europe’s bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century. The designated beneficiary of the inheritance shifted over time from the Church to the family of the deceased, but the principle of self-determination in regard to death and wealth remained intact. The idea of the “death of the self” was visually depicted in macabre *transi* figures—popular in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Such two-tier tomb sculptures illustrated how the “self” divided into its two natures on the deathbed, the immortal, idealized person bound for heaven shown on top of the casket and the disintegrating body depicted below.

In the nineteenth century, Romantic currents and the emergence of the nuclear family as the heart of society placed close family members and loved ones at the center of the encounter with death, introducing the approach that Ariès calls the “death of the other.”<sup>4</sup> This focus gave rise to affectionate, cult-like practices such as displays of photographs and memorabilia of the dead, personalized graves, and visits to the cemetery on All Saints’ Day and other holidays. *Artes moriendi* changed character, with an eye to making death a beautiful experience for the family as well as the dying person. The afterlife became popularly reconstructed as a place where loved ones would be united.

As described by Ariès, denial of death was negligible during the periods when “tame death,” the “death of the self,” and the “death of the other” were the dominant attitudes to the end of life. The dying and the dead were present among the living; religious and social rituals imparted meaning to the end-of-life experience and helped the dying and the bereaved manage the passage; and belief in an afterlife and the immortality of the soul softened the cruelty of death and the suffering that accompanied it. In contrast, denial is a central characteristic of Ariès’s model of death in the twentieth century; he labels the approach alternatively “invisible death” and “death denied.”

Characterized by advanced, impersonally applied medical technology, the end of life began to retreat from view in the 1920s. In this model, the dead are hidden from the public while physicians marshal their resources to prolong life at whatever cost to the dying person and his family. The inability to overcome death is seen as a failure, making repression, isolation, and denial normative responses. A contributing factor to denial of death, in Ariès’s estimation, is the separation in most people’s mind of death from evil. The



ancient connection to evil gave death a place in the Judeo-Christian worldview and helped explain its role in the universe. In Christianity, the crucifixion of Christ delivers sinners from evil and promises eternal salvation to the faithful upon their own death. Without such spiritual justification, death becomes an incomprehensible, savage force without redemptive value, and denial emerges as a plausible defense.

## THE WANING OF DEATH DENIAL

In the 1950s and 1960s, the concealment of death, which marked the entire twentieth century in the West, was at its most evident. A handful of notable scholars in different disciplines expressed their concerns about society's lack of attention to issues of death in contemporary Western society but their work had minimal impact on practices in ordinary life. The political historian and commentator Franz Borkenau, writing in the mid-1950s, looked into the future and perceived an increasingly secular society living under the threat of the atomic bomb. He feared the emergence of a culture that might reject immortality and embrace death. Employing a comprehensive historical perspective, he classified different civilizations as predominantly "death denying," "death defying," "death accepting," or "death transcending." He considered death denial "the most deeply rooted of the archetypes" and believed that a balanced synthesis of death denial and death acceptance indicates the highest forms of civilization, while a deepening of denial is a sign of societal disintegration. Concerned that modern Western society might increasingly turn to death denial as its primary coping mechanism, he placed his hope in psychoanalysis and science, believing that these disciplines might succeed in making the immortal "personality" more intelligible and restore the balance between death denial and death acceptance in the West (Borkenau 1955; Fulton 1965, 42–56).

The social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer observed in his essay "The Pornography of Death" (1955), that death and its representations had become taboo in the Western world. He posited that death and dying were denied in the mid-twentieth century with the same vehemence as sex in the Victorian era; neither had a place in polite society. Gorer originally commented on the state of affairs in mid-twentieth-century Britain, but he found his observations equally applicable to the United States a decade later as he noted in the introduction to the U.S. edition of *Death, Grief and Mourning* (1967).

The American psychologist and death study pioneer, Herman Feifel, sounded an alarm about society's and individuals' ingrained tendency to avert their eyes from matters of mortality in *The Meaning of Death*, published in 1959. In his introduction he noted that that "denial and avoidance of the countenance of death" constituted one of the three leitmotifs among the range of approaches to death presented by the "philosophers, religionists

and scientists" writing for his volume, and that "this has implications not only for the individual but for society as well." His anthology was a concerted attempt to break the prevailing taboo. By gathering reflections and information about death from experts representing different disciplines, Feifel sought to stimulate fresh insights on eschatological matters. He believed that "our science-conscious culture...does not furnish us with all the necessary parameters for investigating and understanding death" and saw "a pressing need for more reliable and systematic, controlled study in the field" (1959, xv–xvi). While Feifel's work was noted in academic circles, its message did not penetrate into society as a whole and did not lead to change among the general public.

Even in academia death was slow to emerge as a subject for monographs in the 1960s. The field was meager also in anthropology and art history, disciplines that could point to long traditions of works related to burial and death prior to the era of the so-called invisible death (e.g., *The Golden Bough* [1890] by a founder of the field of anthropology, James George Frazer, arguing that the handling and perception of corpses in different civilizations are central to their respective mythologies; and the seminal study of tomb sculpture [1924] by the so-called father of art history, Erwin Panofsky). While articles related to mortuary practices and funeral monuments appeared with some frequency in academic journals, and especially on archeological topics, the list of books published by academic presses on death-related subjects remained sparse throughout the decade. Among the noteworthy publishing events are *Death and Western Thought* (1963) by Jacques Choron, which establishes a close interconnection between philosophical traditions and the traditions surrounding death and dying; *Man's Concern with Death* (1968), with British historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee as the editor and principal contributor, a major attempt to cover every aspect of death from its definition to philosophical and cultural matters; and Geoffrey Gorer's *Death, Grief and Mourning*, published in slightly different versions in Britain and the United States in 1965. When Robert Blauner, a psychiatrist, reviewed the U.S. edition of Gorer's book he sounded an optimistic note: "this book is one of a half-dozen or more social science investigations of mortality that have appeared in the past two years—a welcome indication that the cover of repression on this taboo topic is being increasingly lifted" (Blauner, 1968, 521).

In fact, it was not the productions of the academic world that began to lift the veil concealing the matters of death and dying for the American public but two books by two very different European women who were passionately engaged in their work in the United States. The first glimpse came in 1963, when the British-born, some-time communist activist Jessica Mitford, who worked as an investigative reporter of the America Civil Rights' movement, was persuaded by her husband to look into the U.S. funeral industry. The result was *The American Way of Death*, a scathing account of the

exploitive pursuits of funeral directors. Congressional hearings on the practices of the industry ensued as a result of the attention this book engendered. It turned out that placing a taboo on the matters of death had a financial as well as an emotional cost and the public began to sit up and take notice.

The second book that caught the imagination and attention of the public was *On Death and Dying* (1969) by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Reprinted several times since then, this book is frequently considered groundbreaking and its publication is generally considered the starting point of the death awareness movement in the United States. During the 1960s, the Cold War and the superpowers' buildup of a nuclear arsenal placed America in peril of annihilation and created a public atmosphere of dread. The Vietnam War brought the reality of death and dying into America's living rooms via television. The atmosphere of fear and frustration was compounded as the threat of being drafted into combat hung over many American families, and others were mourning or feared for those who actually served. The assassinations, first of President Kennedy in 1964 and then of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, were repeatedly shown on television and reported in pictorial form, as were the shooting of Kent University students by agents of the state and the riots in Watts and other inner cities. The societal sense of unrest mounted, and the presence of violent death in the world became more difficult to ignore. Untimely death, outside the control of the individual, seemed a real possibility for many. Yet the deaths of relatives and friends that occurred as a matter of course, due to aging or illness, continued to remain largely invisible and unaddressed in mainstream American communities. The publication of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* in 1969 began to change the status quo and moved the subject of ordinary death and dying into the public arena.

## **PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS ABOUT DEATH—PARALLEL DISCOURSES IN THE PUBLIC AND ACADEMIC SPHERES**

Dr. Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-born psychiatrist had worked with the terminally ill since her arrival in the United States in 1958 and had attempted to educate medical students on the special needs of the dying. In *On Death and Dying* (1969), she posited a model of five steps that people follow after receiving a terminal diagnosis. The idea that the dying person necessarily follows the stages set forth by Kübler-Ross—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—has since been refuted and refined. Nevertheless, this, her first book—she later published several more—became an international best-seller and is arguably both the turning point in bringing the needs of the dying back into public discourse and the beginning of the postmodern phenomenon we now refer to as the death awareness movement.

But the road was long and hard for those who sought to wrest dying and death from the medical establishment and back under the control of the individual and her family.<sup>5</sup> An apparently critical step toward recognition was Kübler-Ross's testimony in 1972 at the first national hearings on the subject of death with dignity, conducted by the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. Kübler-Ross stated, "We live in a very particular death-denying society. We isolate both the dying and the old, and it serves a purpose—they are reminders of our own mortality" (National Hospice and Palliative Care, "History of Hospice Care"). In spite of the prominence of the forum, her words took a long time to penetrate the general consciousness to any substantial degree.

When Feifel, two decades after publishing his first volume, laid out the issues that focused the debate on death in the 1970s, in *New Meanings of Death* (1977, 4), he noticed that "surface considerations of death... have become more lively," although "Americans still approach dying and death warily and gingerly" (1977, 4). Feifel remained concerned that a waning of belief in personal immortality might complicate the public's ability to cope. He wrote of death as having changed from traditionally being "a door" to "becoming a wall" (1977, 4). Feifel's concern about the problems that may loom for a science-focused society that is trying to understand death was shared by the social scientist and philosopher Erich Fromm. Fromm postulated that since at least the Renaissance the haughty ambition of Western civilization has been to conquer and dominate nature and that death is irrefutable evidence that we have failed in our task, contributing to our urge to deny death (Funk 2003, 103).

Denial as a defense against death emerged as a central issue in the discourse on death and dying in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This was largely due to the publication in 1973 of *The Denial of Death* by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, who came to deeply influence the debate on death among psychologists and psychoanalysts as well as among the broader public. The crux of Becker's thesis is that the fear of death ultimately determines all our actions and experiences as individual beings and as communal societies. His argument starts with the premise that awareness of our own mortality gives our lives unique meaning and drives the human spirit. According to Becker, denial is human beings' natural, instinctive, and universal way to cope with the fear produced by an awareness of death. From this he infers that all our physical, cultural, and symbolic systems and productions are founded in the fear of death. Referring to Kierkegaard and Otto Rank, he posits that our need for religious rituals and communal ceremonies, as well as our construction of heroes and monuments, grows out of our death anxiety.

Among those who countered Becker and saw life-affirming solutions to the problem of denial was Erich Fromm. He did not see the denial of death as intrinsic to the human being but rather as her inability to love life well. Fromm argued for the cultivation of the joy of life, productivity, creativity,

self-expression, and humanistic religiousness as the means of transforming a person. He saw denial as a consequence of the individual's focus on "having" rather than "being." "There is only one way—taught by the Buddha, by Jesus, by the Stoics, by Master Eckart—to truly overcome the fear of dying, and that way is by *not hanging onto life, not experiencing life as a possession*. . . . The fear is not of dying but of *losing what I have*: the fear of losing my body, my ego, my possessions, and my identity; the fear of facing the abyss of nonidentity, of 'being lost.' . . . The more we rid ourselves of the craving for possession in all its forms, particularly our ego-boundness, the less strong the fear of dying, since there is nothing to lose" (1976, 126, 127).

In *The Broken Connection* (1979), Robert Jay Lifton, a post-Freudian psychiatrist who has treated the topic of death from several historic and psychological vantage points, also argues from a more life-affirming perspective than Becker that "while the denial of death is universal, the inner life-experience of a sense of immortality, rather than reflecting such denial, may well be the most authentic psychological alternative to that denial" (13). Lifton sees a sense of immortality as "an appropriate symbolization of our biological and historical connectedness" (17). To Lifton, it is the awareness of the end of life—not the denial of death as for Becker—that underlies "whatever additional constructs or gaps we call forth in our symbolizing activity" (47). Lifton does not see death denial as central to humankind's attitudes and approaches to life but as one component of our psychological makeup that drives us to seek meaning in our impending death.

Edelstein, Nathanson, and Stone, documenting a symposium among psychoanalysts, considered the nuances of purpose for which the denial of death is employed to process human experiences in *Denial—A Clarification of Concepts and Research* (1989). Some presenters at the symposium entertained the idea that denial is not invariably an inappropriate response to death, that it can be a skill as much as a defense and should not necessarily be a negative description of actions taken or avoided (see Schachter, Chapter 2 in this volume).

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the threat of a nuclear attack by a foreign superpower was eliminated. While it came to be replaced by the threat of terrorism by groups of fanatics and "rogue" states, the American psyche seemed to begin to accommodate the idea that death and dying were integral parts of life and that they needed attention. A major factor in this development was the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. Recognized by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1981, AIDS had a devastating impact on American society and notably on homosexual communities. Finding a cure, or at least life-prolonging treatment, for AIDS became a *cause célèbre*, and AIDS education came to feature in school curricula as well as public service announcements. The depiction of victims and writings about the disease and its deadly consequences became commonplace,

not just in medical journals and the mainstream press; AIDS and its victims also became the central characters in plays, novels, stories, and musicals (see Vaucher 1993; E. White 1997).

The 1990s began to see the fruits of the work of those who had been members of the hospice movement and had advocated for medical self-determination at the end of life. The baby boomers were caring for their aging and dying parents and did not like the options available. Knowing that 20 or 30 years hence they would be in their parents' place, they marshaled their energy to remedy what they saw. Many were particularly appalled by the advances in medical technology that made it possible and common to extend the life span when there was little apparent quality of life.

The need to know and understand all aspects of death became critical. Respondents included Sherwin Nuland with *How We Die—Reflections of Life's Last Chapters* (1994) and Cedric Mims with *When We Die—The Science, Culture, and Rituals of Death* (1998). A physician and a microbiologist respectively, Nuland and Mims describe scientifically what happens to the body as it goes through the four most common ways of dying and what happens to the body in its state as a corpse. Writing for the general public, they avoid a textbook format and include a great deal of cultural and sociological information, together with personal comments and illustrative narratives from their clinical experience, bringing the dying process and its aftermath into the cultural realm and within reach for the lay person.

Issues of increasing concern in the latter part of the twentieth century were related to individuals with a terminal diagnosis and their place in the health care system. Long and debilitating illnesses frequently preceded death as the tools of medical technology made it possible to prolong life but not always with the desired quality. Doctors and nursing staff encountered situations on a daily basis that required decisions on withholding or withdrawing treatment. To help resolve these ethical dilemmas, which had not existed in eras prior to life-sustaining machines, bioethics teams were set up in hospitals. Bioethics in its contemporary guise is a discipline founded in the 1960s. One of its pioneers was Robert Fulton, the editor of *Death and Identity* (1965), who became the first Director of the Center for Death Education and Bioethics (CDEB), located at the University of Minnesota when it was founded in 1969 and later relocated to the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse). Another notable person in the field is the philosopher and ethicist Daniel Callahan who, in 1969, co-founded The Hastings Center, an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit bioethics research institute located in Garrison, New York. The purpose of the CDEB and the Hastings Center is to explore fundamental and emerging questions in medicine, health care, and biotechnology. Much of their research has centered on the care and decision making at the end of life. Daniel Callahan's, *The Tyranny of Survival and Other Pathologies of Civilized Life* (1973) was seminal in bringing attention to the unrestricted

use of all-out technologies to keep a person alive arguing that this may not always be morally defensible, either for the community or the patient and her family “if the price of survival is human degradation, then there is no moral reason why an effort should be made to ensure that survival” (93). This delicate point has continued to be debated for the last 35 years. The National Reference Center of Bioethics (NRCB) of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University publishes an annual *Bibliography of Bioethics* of the mounting volume of books, journal articles, government reports, and Web documents on this and other related issues in the field of bioethics. The 2008 volume contained almost 6,000 citations covering the “ethical, legal, and public policy aspects of health care and biomedical research” (National Reference Center of Bioethics, 2008).

Simultaneous with the private and public debates among clinicians, patients, and families to achieve fair and comfortable treatment for individuals at the end of life, academia became increasingly engaged in the phenomenon of death. The scholarly work on death in the 1970s and early 1980s mostly employed traditional methods of data collection and research of its respective fields. It addressed matters of mortality at considerable geographic or temporal distance—possibly to allow the scholar (and his reading public) a “safe” entry into the field of death without treading too close, at a time when the taboo of death was only beginning to be lifted. Examples from different disciplines of books that are frequently cited might include: in archeology, J.M.C. Toynbee *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (1971); in American studies, David Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death—A Study in Religion, Culture and Social change* (1975); in anthropology, Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, eds. *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (1979); and in social history, Joachim Whaley, ed. *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (1981).

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, academic studies of death became increasingly highly theorized with scholars of English, linguistics, and cultural studies drawing on French poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, and Jean Baudillard. (A summary of some of the most influential works of poststructuralism is available on The Science Encyclopedia, History of Ideas Web site.) Scholarly writers also turned to, and expanded on, theories of Marxism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Semiotics (including Deconstruction) for their Cultural and Literary Criticism. And the 1990s also saw a plethora of books with focus on identity politics (race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation). A representative list of studies on death, which employ one or more of these tools, would likely include Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (1982); Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (1984); Ronald Schleifer’s *Rhetoric of Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* (1990); Regina Barreca’s anthology *Sexuality and Death in*

*Victorian Literature* (1990); Elizabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992); and Sarah Webster Goodwin's and Elisabeth Bronfen's anthology *Death and Representation* (1993).

The serious literary and historical discourse on death exemplified above is firmly rooted in contemporary, more or less fleeting, popular theories and moves convincingly and sure-footedly among the representations and historical evidence under analysis. It expands the horizon and allows for new ways of thinking about old problems—and it is also of limited consequence beyond the walls of academia. In contrast, the themes surrounding death in the public and private sphere over the last five decades in the scientific, ethical, and clinical debate battle the problems of daily life in hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics and are marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. They exhibit an underlying current of concern about overcoming taboos and the fears of death and about balancing the needs of the dying and their families with the resources and obligations of the health care system.

Looking back on the twentieth century, Mervyn F. Bendle (2001) argues that the shift in the culture of death from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is so monumental that it marks the arrival of a new episteme of death.<sup>6</sup> The change from one episteme to another is characterized not by a gradual, linear development but by a seismic shift, usually occurring during intellectually fertile periods or historical upheavals. According to Bendle, the twentieth-century episteme of death flows “from the cumulative effects of vast institutional and discursive systems based on rationalism, scientism, technological rationality, bureaucratic calculation, utilitarianism, economic rationalism, and neo-liberalism” and has “displaced traditional epistemes derived predominantly from religious philosophical, mythological and traditional sources” (2001, 353). Bendle sees the twentieth-century experience of death as dominated by two institution-based processes: the “medicalization” and the “militarization” of death, with militarization being the main factor in the first part of the century and medicalization overshadowing militarization in the second half. In the health care sector, death has generally been so medicalized that it is managed with relatively little concern for the value of the individual person and the needs of families and their communities (2001, 362). Death, of course, continued to be inevitable, but the dying and everything to do with their management were removed as far as possible from the living and the normalcy of quotidian life. Aspects of Ariès' and Bendle's historic models of concealed death remain with us in the twenty-first century, but the movements pushing back against it have become so forceful that we can justifiably say that the twenty-first century is well on its way to giving birth to yet a new episteme of death. The tendency toward denial lingers when the issues get too complex, but “death denied” and the “invisible death” are no longer signature marks of the American death system.



Before looking further into what we are calling the “American death system” of the twenty-first century, an important question needs to be asked and a note inserted. Endnote 2 explains what is here meant by “death system.” But what (and whom?) is referenced in the word “American?” The answer is “A general, mainstream notion of something (or someone) that is present within the geographical boundaries of the United States.” Given the ethnical, religious, and cultural diversity of the United States, such a definition becomes less meaningful, as psychologists, social workers, ethicists, and clinicians discovered when, in the late 1980s and the 1990s, they began to pay attention to the variations in attitudes and approaches to matters of death among different ethnic groups. The differences are critical in meeting individual needs at the end of life. Because of the many variables, statements on death and personal identity risk being specious as well as underscoring or creating stereotypes; and they have therefore been avoided in the general text of this chapter. As a postscript to this chapter, I have included an overview of some of the diversity-related issues that need consideration in a discussion of death in “America.” The postscript serves as a notice that much of what is being said in this chapter about the public may not be applicable to large swathes of the population.

## **THE EMERGING TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DEATH EPISTEME: AWARENESS, MANAGEMENT, AND SUPERVISION**

It is a joke among baby boomers that they are accustomed to rebelling against authority and having their way, controlling their environment, creating their own style, and getting what they want. And that this won’t change just because they happen to be dealing with death. As the members of the post–World War II generation now moves into the sunset years of their lives, they plan to do it their own way. The demographic bulge that they represent has a force that has been felt in the past.

Whether or not we credit the baby boomers with fertilizing the seeds of change toward recognition sown in the twentieth century, the evidence of a new attitude toward death is discernible, especially in the growth of the hospice and palliative care movement; in changes in legislation related to medical self-determination; and in contemporary tendencies to prepare final arrangements. Since the death system at any given time is an integrated set of discourses and practices, causes cannot be cleanly separated from effects; it is better to think of these areas as concentrations of activity, with an impact on the system as a whole. But for organizational purposes these areas of noticeable change will be surveyed separately below.

The growth and nature of new practices strongly suggest that the emerging episteme of death centers on management and control. The findings of

a survey on issues related to death and dying conducted among mature residents in Massachusetts (conducted in March/April 2005 and published in September 2005) offer supporting evidence.<sup>7</sup> The survey (Massachusetts Commission on End of Life Care Survey Project 2005) showed that death should no longer be viewed as a taboo subject; 8 in 10 respondents indicated that they are very or somewhat comfortable talking about death. In all, 85 percent of the respondents considered it very important to get honest answers from doctors and to understand their treatment options. A concern about quality of life at the end of life emerged as a consistent theme. People expressed their desire for “communication, connection, comfort and control” (9).

To the list of new spaces of discourse density we need to add the fact that we have moved into the information age and that this has allowed images of the dead and dying to enter our homes via television and the Internet in unprecedented numbers and forms. The whole electronic communication revolution, especially the Internet, also acts as connective tissue among disciplines and peoples around the world and serves to magnify and expedite ideas. Although it is difficult to determine what is demand driven and what is supply driven when it comes to visually explicit reporting of wars and catastrophe and blood-soaked entertainment, there is no arguing that the dead and dying have been brought into our living rooms to a saturation point that would make them difficult to ignore. How can we not be aware?

## The Visual Ubiquity of Death

Arguably, Ariès’ descriptive labels for the Western death system, “death denied” and “invisible death,” definitively expired on September 11, 2001. Although no corpses resulting from the terrorist attack were shown on television that day, all the news media were filled with reminders and memorials of this new “day of infamy” in American history for weeks and months afterward. A force seems to have been set in motion that brought us across an imaginary line, and in short order we were flooded with images of war, famine, and pestilence. Only a few years earlier, similar events were sparsely presented, or censored altogether.

The Internet and 24-hour media outlets have brought unprecedented access to disastrous and threatening events and have also introduced us to cultures and social practices around the world that would only recently have appeared alien. The relatively predictable news on the shifting, but mostly stable, balance of power between the Cold War superpowers has been replaced by reports of the threats of rogue nuclear powers and terrorist attacks. The death toll of devastating natural disasters and genocidal ethnic conflicts reach us along with vivid pictures of those who have died or are dying. The news media, with a long history of unrelenting fascination with murder and violence but also an acknowledged role in reporting on war, disaster, and

current affairs, are offering death imagery in vivid techno-color in real time, around the clock. The Twin Towers collapsing in fire and ash (2001). A journalist pleading for his life at gunpoint (2002). Muslim women in Iraq bent in mourning over their husbands' dead bodies (2002–). Starving children in Darfur (2003–). Long swathes of beach in Banda Aceh with remnants of homes and their former residents (2004). Terri Schiavo's vacant smile (2005). A corpse floating in the Mississippi River after the ravages of Hurricane Katrina (2005). Virginia Tech students mourning their dead classmates (2007). Firefighters battling deadly California wildfires (2007). Cyclone victims starving in Burma (2008). Schoolchildren crushed under buildings after a Chinese earthquake (2008).

Not to mention the less visually harrowing reports on insidious threats to our well-being by pandemics—SARS (2002–3), avian influenza (2003–), *E. coli* infestations of fresh spinach and at Taco Bell (2006–); life-threatening toys and pharmaceuticals from China; and childhood obesity, which according to the American Academy of Pediatrics may result in the current generation of young people being the first in national history to die younger than their parents (Daniels 2006, 47–67). Living, indeed, seems more mortally dangerous than ever.

It appears there is only a limited demand to curtail the flow of information, except to protect underage children from exposure to excessively violent material. Americans have become used to having access to information in all areas of life, and this has also translated into matters related to death and dying. While there is still respect for the idea that for reasons of propriety certain personal pictures may be withheld, the American public does not appreciate having its information censored. There has been a burst of outrage over the fact that the coffins of Americans who died in Iraq and Afghanistan have been hidden from public view and that the funerals have been poorly and rarely covered by the press. What may once have been a sign of respect for the dead and their families is now frequently interpreted as being a sinister concealment of the reality of war by the Bush administration. The public in this case wants to be aware of the bodies that come home and wants to participate in the grieving process.

Coming in from around the globe, images and their accompanying commentary give definition to our time and help construct who we are and the values we embrace. The media messages bring us together in common causes (9/11 and the tsunami) but also widen the ideological rift among factional groups (as, for example, with the Terri Schiavo video and reports of American soldiers killing Muslim civilians). While death denial has not been erased, either in individual psyches or in overall cultural attitudes, death-related matters can at times be seen to be obsessively embraced.

Death imagery appears everywhere, seemingly integral to the American imagination. Morbid references and explicit images of the dead and dying