

**Advanced Preceptorial 321--Dying and Death**  
**Spring Semester**  
**Tue/Thur**  
**Diana Beck & Tim Kasser**

**Introduction and Course Overview:**

“Death, dying, and bereavement are fundamental and pervasive aspects of the human experience. Individuals and societies can only achieve fullness of living by understanding and appreciating these realities. The absence of such understanding and appreciation may result in unnecessary suffering, loss of dignity, alienation and diminished quality of living. Therefore, education about death, dying, and bereavement is an essential component of the educational process at all levels, both formal and informal,” says a statement from the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement.

The aim of education about death, dying, and bereavement is to contribute to general education as a basis for personal development and responsible social participation. In the human life cycle, encounters with personal mortality, life-threatening situations, dying, loss, and bereavement are centrally important. Because of this centrality, encounters with personal mortality, etc. have potentially profound psychological, physical, spiritual, intellectual, behavioral, social, and cultural impacts.

In our complex relationship with death, we are both survivors and experiencers. Acknowledging the impact of death in our lives awakens us to the preciousness of life. Death can be viewed as a threat or as a catalyst toward greater awareness and creativity in life. It touches on the past, the present, and the future, and on the actions of individuals and societies.

Taking a course about dying and death offers an opportunity to take death “out of the closet” and examine it from many perspectives. “What we can do is balance our fears with openness, our anxieties with trust. We can try to understand the dynamics of grief, to make room for loss and change in our lives and in the lives of others” (DeSpelder and Strickland, 1998, pg. 552). This study of dying and death will probably engage both our mental and emotional capacities. In this course, rather than providing answers, we will raise questions to help you speculate about the path ahead and we will help you know where to look and how to seek answers to those questions.

**Required Texts:**

Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”

Plato, The Trial and Death of Socrates

Norman, ‘Night Mother

Taylor (Ed.), Ghosts of The Prairie Magazine, #5

Moody, Life After Life

In addition to the above required readings, copies of several articles will be on reserve at Seymour Library. **These articles are also required reading.**

## Other Activities:

### 4 Videos:

Terminal Illness: When It Happens To You  
The Mexican Day of the Dead  
The Tibetan Book of the Dead  
Excerpts from Life after Life and 48 Hours with Dan Rather

### 2 Guest Speakers:

John Watson, Coroner  
Troy Taylor, Ghostbuster

1 Field Trip: Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home

1 Ghost Hunt: local sites by lottery, others to a Monmouth area cemetery

1 Book: The afterlife codes

## Course Schedule:

3/20 - Introductions and Overview of Course

What brings you here? What do you want to take away from this course?

3/22 - Initial Thoughts on Death

Project: Deathography (3 copies)

3/27 - Death Case Study I

Reading: Tolstoy, "The Death of Ivan Ilych"

3/29 - Death Case Study II

Reading: Plato, the "Crito," the "Apology," and the "Death Scene from the Phaedo" in The Trial and Death of Socrates

Reading: Reserve - Read at least 5 Deathographies

Copies of all deathographies from both sections of Dying and Death will be put on reserve in Seymour library. Read at least five of them and come to class prepared to discuss the general experience of reading a number of deathographies and the particulars of some individual deathographies.

4/3 - "The Stories the Dead Tell" -- **Meet in SMAC - A 110**

Speaker: John Watson, Knox County Coroner

Reading: Reserve - Iserson, "My Body and the Pathologist," Chapter 4 from Death to Dust

4/5 - Biology and Death

Reading: Reserve - Nuland, "Doors to Death of the Aged," Ch. 4 from How We Die

Reading: Reserve - Olshansky, et al., "Confronting the Boundaries of Human Longevity"

Project: Death Genealogies

4/10 - Death and the Individual

Reading: Reserve - Sheldon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, "Tales From the Crypt: On the Role of Death in Life"

Reading: Reserve - excerpt from Lifton and Olson, Living and Dying

- 4/11 - Video: Terminal Illness: When It Happens To You  
Place and time: 7:00 p.m. **Meet in SMAC - A 110**
- 4/12 - Death and the Family I: Terminal Illness  
Reading: Reserve - Viorst, "Love and Mourning," Ch. 16 from Necessary Losses
- 4/17 - Death and the Family II: Suicide  
Reading: Norman, 'Night Mother  
Reading: Reserve - excerpts from "Suicide," Chapter 12 in DeSpelder & Strickland, The Last Dance
- 4/19 - Death and Culture Case Study I: Mexico -- **Meet in SMAC - A 110**  
Reading: Reserve - excerpts from Sayer, The Mexican Day of the Dead  
Video: The Mexican Day of the Dead
- 4/24 - Death and Culture Case Study II: Tibet -- **Meet in SMAC - A 110**  
Reading: Reserve - excerpts from Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, The Bardo Guidebook  
Video: The Tibetan Book of the Dead
- 4/26 - Death and Culture Case Study IIIa: The United States—Images of Death in Popular American Culture  
Reading: Reserve - excerpts from "Attitudes Toward Death," Chapter 1 in DeSpelder & Strickland, The Last Dance  
Project: Report on Images of Death
- 5/1 - Death and Culture Case Study IIIb: The United States -- Final Decisions  
Reading: Reserve - Gill, "Whatever Happened to the American Way of Death?"  
Reading: Reserve - Leming and Dickinson, "The Contemporary American Funeral"  
Reading: Reserve - Tillotson, "Cremation"  
Trip: We will be touring Hinchliff-Pearson-West Funeral Home.
- Please note that this field trip will take into the lunch hour, so plan accordingly.
- 5/3 - Discussion of Death and Cultures  
Reading: Reserve - "Perspectives on Death: Cross-Cultural and Historical," Chapter 2 in DeSpelder & Strickland, The Last Dance  
Project: Interviews due
- 5/8 - Ghosts -- **Meet in SMAC - A 110**  
Speaker: Troy Taylor  
Reading: Ghosts of The Prairie Magazine, #5  
Evening: Ghost Hunt
- 5/10 - Near Death Experiences -- **Meet in SMAC - A 110**  
Reading: Moody, Life After Life  
Website: Read information at "<http://afterlifecodes.com/>"  
Video: excerpts from Life after Life and 48 Hours with Dan Rather

5/15 - Last Thoughts

Reading: Review readings for a synthesis discussion on “What I Have Learned”

5/17 - Fifth Annual Thanatological Conference - Day 1 -- **Ferris Lounge**

Project: First group of presentations

5/22 - Fifth Annual Thanatological Conference - Day 2 -- **Ferris Lounge**

Project: Second group of presentations

Your final research project will be due by the end of our regularly scheduled final exam time.

### **Grading Policies**

Letter grades will be assigned for each project. Your final grade for the course will be determined by converting the project letter grade to its Knox numerical equivalent (i.e. A- = 3.7, B+= 3.3, C=2.0, etc.), multiplying that by the percentage assigned to the project and then adding these totals to determine your average.

Late work will be graded down a “step” per day late--an “A” will become an “A-,” a “B-” will become a “C+,” etc. All written work must be typed, double spaced and exhibit college level writing skills. In other words, the presence of incomplete sentences, sloppy editing, poor grammar, etc. will result in a lower grade.

### **Projects and Percentages**

#### 1. Deathography - 5%

Review the experiences you have had with loss and death. In a 4-5 page paper inventory and describe the most influential loss experience(s) you have had. Analyze the impact this loss or these losses have had on your attitudes toward death and make connections between these and your current beliefs about death. Think about your own relationship to death, what place death has in your life, and what kinds of meanings death holds for you. Turn in three copies of this work--one copy with your name on it and two copies with a pseudonym.

#### 2. Death Genealogy - 10%

Talk to family members about how your relatives have died. Find the dates, causes, and the location of death (i.e., did the person die at home or in the hospital, etc.) of as many of your relatives as you can. Go back as many generations as possible, but try to find this information on at least three generations before you (i.e., up to your great-grandparents). Construct a family tree that contains this information. A handout discussing family genealogy “how-to’s” will be provided. In addition, write a 2-3 page synopsis addressing:

- a. any patterns you see regarding cause of death, age at death, etc.
- b. your reaction to these patterns
- c. your family members’ feelings about discussing this topic

The family tree you construct, as well as the synopsis, will be graded so put effort and thought into its construction. We will be assessing the aesthetics, completeness, neatness and comprehensibility of the tree.

### 3. Report on Images - 15%

Pick a medium of popular culture (e.g., newspapers, artwork, music, TV programs, videos, jokes) and using several examples of it, explore how it presents ideas about death. How is the topic dealt with in the medium? What attitudes and behaviors are expressed? What about each image (or sound) caught your attention or triggered an emotional response? Explore these and other questions, and evaluate the forms and functions of the messages regarding death in 4 or 5 pages. Please bring to class any examples of your medium to illustrate your points. Doing this project with a **partner(s) is required.**

### 4. Interviews - 10%

With a partner(s) from this class (**required**), interview someone from a country you have never lived in. Ask questions about the following:

- a. funeral rituals
- b. beliefs about life after death
- c. mourning customs
- d. any other issues you might find interesting

Then write a 2-3 page reflection on the responses you have received. This reflection should include an analysis of the beliefs, rituals, and customs, the functions you think they serve, how they might be similar to or different than, better or worse than the practices in other (or another) countries.

### 5. Presentations - 15%

On May 17 and 22 we will have a Thanatological Conference. At this conference students will present to the class a summary or synopsis of the work they are doing for their final project. The material should be summarized in some visual form, and you will be expected to stand by your display offering explanations and answering questions during the conference.

**Please note that if you are working with a partner(s) on your final project, you will present this work with the same partner(s).**

### 6. Final project - 20%

Explore a topic of your choice concerning dying and/or death. Topics must be cleared with your instructor by 4/18, and can either examine in greater detail a subject presented in this class or investigate something we are not examining. **You may work alone or in a group of two or three.** We are quite open to a variety of different topics and different modes of presentation (i.e., films, papers, art work, poetry, interviews, etc.). Because of this variety, it is difficult to give a strict page length to the assignment, but think about it being as much work as a 10-15 page paper. Please come and talk with us if you are having trouble deciding on a topic.

### 7. Five Discussion Questions - 10% (5 questions @ 2% each)

In order to facilitate discussion, at **five** points throughout the term, prior to the start of that day's class, students will submit to the instructor (typed and signed), a question of interest on the readings for **that day**. Questions must be relevant to the readings and be designed to help stimulate discussion. Instructors' evaluations of the questions will be based on the level of thoughtfulness exhibited in formulating the questions and the level of discussion generated. Please note that we will accept questions on 3/27, 3/29, 4/5, 4/10, 4/12, 4/17, 5/3 only.

On three other days, 4/3, 5/1, and 5/8, prior to the start of class, we will accept questions for our guest speakers. These questions should not be about the readings specifically, but relevant to the topic the speaker is addressing. The same criteria as above will apply to these questions and they will "count" toward your total of five.

#### 8. Participation - 15%

Many class sessions will be discussion sessions and your participation in these discussions is what will make the class a success. It is possible that this topic might initially be a difficult one for some to talk about, but everyone's participation is needed and will be encouraged. (If this is, or becomes, a problem for you please see the instructor.) Throughout our discussions, each of us will be expected to show kindness, consideration and care when others are talking, while still being able to disagree and discuss constructively. In your contributions, we expect to see evidence that your thoughts and understandings are being informed by the readings and by previous discussions. We will assess your participation comments, questions, examples, experiences, reflections, etc. by noting their relevance to the topic at hand. These contributions should demonstrate that you are reflecting and thinking about the topic. A good participant is also a good listener, disagrees in a non-attacking way, and doesn't "hog" the floor. Attendance at all class sessions is encouraged and the consistency of your attendance will, obviously, also have an impact on your participation grade.