

# Preface

**T**he study of death—or thanatology, from the Greek *thanatos*, meaning “death”—is concerned with questions that are rooted at the core of our experience. Thus, the person who sets out to increase his or her knowledge of death and dying is embarking on an exploration that is partly a journey of personal discovery. In writing *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, our goal is to offer a comprehensive and readable introduction to the study of death and dying, one that highlights the main issues and questions. This book embodies an approach to the study of death and dying that combines the intellectual and the emotional, the social and the psychological, the experiential and the scholarly.

*The Last Dance* provides a solid grounding in theory and research as well as in methods for applying what is learned to readers’ own circumstances, personal and professional. It encourages readers to engage in a constructive process of self-discovery. The text is not an indoctrination to any one point of view, but an introduction to diverse points of view. It emphasizes the values of compassion, listening, and tolerance for the views of others. Readers may well form their own opinions, but, when they do, we hope it is only after considering other possibilities in a spirit of open-mindedness. Unbiased investigation leads to choices that might otherwise be neglected because of ignorance or prejudice.

While retaining all of the popular features of earlier editions, the eighth edition of *The Last Dance* reflects the ongoing evolution of death studies. Every chapter has been revised to enhance clarity of presentation and integrate the latest research, practices, and ideas. Accompanying this edition is a companion Web site of activities and resources to promote mastery of the material covered in the text itself.

The study of death is unavoidably multidisciplinary. Accordingly, contributions from medicine, the humanities, and the social sciences are all found here in their relevant contexts. Throughout the book, principles and concepts are made meaningful by use of examples and anecdotes. Boxed material, photographs, and other illustrative materials expand upon and provide

counterpoint to the textual presentation. Specialized terms, when needed, are clearly defined. We urge readers to make use of these features.

For those who wish to pursue further study of particular topics, a list of recommended readings is provided at the end of each chapter, and citations given in the chapter notes provide guidance to additional sources and references, including pertinent selections in the companion reader to this text, *The Path Ahead: Readings in Death and Dying*. Thus, while the text serves as an introduction to a broad range of topics in death studies, readers are pointed to resources for investigating more deeply topics that evoke special interest.

In the book's first three chapters, we examine the influence of sociocultural forces on our understanding of death. We look at attitudes toward death, how we learn about death through processes of socialization, how historical and cultural factors shape our attitudes and practices relative to dying and death, what it means to live with an awareness of mortality, and death in a cosmopolitan society. These first three chapters provide a foundation for appreciating how specific issues in death, dying, and bereavement are dealt with in distinctive ways by different individuals, families, and social groups. In Chapter 3, we look not only at death in Western culture, but also in Native American, African, Mexican, Asian, and Celtic traditions. Throughout the text, attention is given to the importance of ethnic traditions in shaping our relationship with death in culturally diverse societies.

Chapter 4 focuses on "death systems," showing how matters of public policy affect our dealings with dying and death. Here you will find discussion of such topics as the response to disasters, medicolegal views of homicide and capital punishment, procedures for legally defining and making a determination of death, rules and customs regarding organ donation and transplantation, ways of classifying different modes of death into socially useful categories, how death notification is accomplished, the manner in which investigative duties are carried out by coroners and medical examiners, and the criteria that apply to performing autopsies. The chapter includes an instructive cross-cultural example describing how Japan has dealt with ethical, moral, and legal questions involving brain death and organ transplantation.

The changing nature of health care, especially care of the dying, is given detailed coverage in Chapter 5. Topics include the caregiver-patient relationship; care provided in hospices and palliative care, and at home; types of elder care; trauma and emergency care, as well as social support for dying patients and their families. Caregiver stress, as well as principles of "care for the caregiver," and a discussion of being with someone who is dying round out this chapter.

Issues and decisions pertaining to the end of life take the focus in Chapter 6. Some of these issues and decisions become important in the context of diagnosis and treatment—for example, informed consent. Other end-of-life issues and decisions tend to come to the fore when individuals face the more immediate prospect of dying. These include choices about withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining medical treatments, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia, as well as issues involving artificial nutrition and hydration.

Yet other issues involve matters that can be dealt with before the crisis of a life-limiting illness—for example, making a will, obtaining life insurance, and completing advance directives to express wishes about medical treatment in the event one becomes incapacitated. Some of these may be initiated early in life but not completed until after a person's death. These include the settling of an estate through the legal procedures of probate and the disbursement of proceeds from insurance and other death benefits to survivors.

Chapter 7 provides comprehensive coverage of how people live with a life-threatening illness. Attention is given to the psychological and social meanings associated with such illnesses and insights about the various ways individuals and families cope with “living/dying,” from the time of initial diagnosis to the final stages of the dying trajectory. The chapter provides an overview of treatment options and issues, as well as complementary therapies and pain management.

The ceremonies and rites enacted by individuals and social groups after a death form the focus of Chapter 8. Such death rituals and customs create opportunities for expressing grief and integrating loss. The chapter examines the nature and function of “last rites,” with particular attention paid to the history of mortuary services in the United States. Included is practical information about selecting among the available options for funeral services and body disposition.

Chapter 9 is devoted to an in-depth discussion of bereavement, grief, and mourning. Alternative models of grief are discussed and evaluated, with the recognition that “one size fits all” models are inadequate. A comprehensive understanding of the ways people experience and express grief, and of the variables that influence grief, results in an awareness that there are many methods for providing social support to the bereaved. Despite loss, bereavement can present opportunities for growth.

Making use of a life-span perspective, Chapters 10 and 11 deal with death-related issues associated with different stages of life, from childhood through old age. Chapter 10 includes discussion of situations involving children with life-threatening illness as well as children as survivors of a close death, such as the death of a parent or sibling. It provides guidelines for helping children cope with change and loss. Chapter 11 examines losses occurring in adulthood, such as the death of a child, parent, spouse, or close friend, as well as losses associated with aging.

Chapter 12 takes up the subject of suicide and examines various risk factors that have relevance at different stages of life. Additional topics discussed in this chapter include theories of suicide and suicidal behavior, types of suicide, suicide notes, the antecedents of suicidal behavior, and psychological autopsies. Suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention receives attention, and the chapter concludes with discussion about helping someone who is in a suicidal crisis.

Broadening the scope of death-related threats, Chapter 13 addresses a variety of topics crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of death and dying. These topics include risk-taking, accidents, violence, war, and

emerging diseases, including AIDS, which continues to threaten the health of many people around the world. This chapter includes discussion of the threat of terrorism, including analysis of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath.

Questions about the meaning of human mortality are at the forefront in the final two chapters of the book. Chapter 14 draws on a variety of religious and secular traditions, as well as accounts of near-death experiences, to present a wide-ranging survey of concepts and beliefs concerning immortality and the afterlife. Whether death is viewed as a “wall” or as a “door” can have important consequences for how we live our lives.

Chapter 15 emphasizes personal and social values that are enhanced through death education. Examples of new directions in thanatology are discussed, including bridging research and practice, clarifying the goals of death education, gaining an international perspective, and creating compassionate cities. Bringing together a host of topics covered in the text, the chapter presents food for thought about death in the future and stimulates readers to consider how a “good death” might be defined.

*The Last Dance* has been reviewed by professors in a broad range of academic disciplines. Their suggestions have helped to make this text an outstanding teaching tool. Formal reviews have been provided by

Susan Adams, University of Central Arkansas  
Joel R. Ambelang, Concordia University, Wisconsin  
Lisa Angermeier, Indiana University at Bloomington  
Thomas Attig, Bowling Green State University  
Ronald K. Barrett, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles  
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Robert Wrenn, University of Arizona, Tucson  
Joseph M. Yonder, Villa Maria College of Buffalo  
Margaret H. Young, Washington State University  
Andrew Scott Ziner, University of North Dakota

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L. A. D.

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