

DEATH EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS  
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:  
A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

by

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## SUMMARY

### DEATH EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

This work was undertaken with a view to developing a textbook for United States secondary schools on the subject of death and dying through a religious lens. The purpose of this work is to provide high school teens with the means of coping with loss and a foundation for crafting their own meaning of life and death.

Taking a close look at death attitudes among young people in the United States, as well as high school faculty and staff for the purpose of determining whether or not death education can be provided for public high school students, the work starts from the premise that said death education, using a religious model, should be provided for teenagers because the religious model provides the necessary elements of idea, ritual, and community, so necessary for building a world-view. Research was conducted in the form of survey and historical review to determine the efficacy of the proposed course of study.

Upon analysis of the available information on death education history and course offering, as well as analysis of the survey results, the conclusion was reached that the provision of death education in the nation's public high schools would go a long way to reducing death anxiety amongst United States teenagers, and also give the adolescents a model for creating their own sense of meaning for all of life that includes death.

Thesis title:

DEATH EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

Key terms:

Death; dying; death education; religion; meaning; life-meaning; meaning-making; life-cycle; adolescents; public school

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## DECLARATION

Student Number 4342-461-9

I declare that DEATH EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SIGNATURE  
(Rev RT Ruffin)

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DATE

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Death Education in Secondary Schools in the United States of America:  
A Religious Perspective

## **CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The thesis**

Death education is a controversial, yet highly important subject for the public school system in the United States (US). It is so important, in fact, that this thesis is dedicated solely to the argument that cultural changes in the US have made it necessary to provide an elective course on death and dying in the nation's high schools for the express and intentional purpose of helping adolescents learn how to cope with death and dying in their lives, learn skills to aid in the comfort of others, and make meaning in their lives. Adolescence is rife with spiritual and religious doubts, which makes the provision of a safe environment wherein adolescents may discuss the available information that surrounds death as part of life, to include the religious, all but imperative. We are not here suggesting a course which teaches that

religion is the only model from which to view death, but rather, we are proposing that students, indeed, people in general, will raise the question of religion whenever death comes to mind or is discussed, and that the nature of the religious model is ideal for the purposes of our proposed course of study.

## **1.2 Who should receive death education?**

The discussion itself revolves around two main areas: 1. education of professional grief counselors and medical personnel and 2. education of children beginning in elementary school. Advocates of elementary education are generally in agreement that the earliest approach to death education should focus on “teachable moments.” For example, if a child comes to school sad or confused about the death of a pet, close relative, or friend, these moments should be “seized” by teachers, nurses, counselors and administrators to generate class discussion. It is understandably questionable as to the helpfulness of a more formalized approach to death education in the early years as the commonly held belief, based on what psychologists like have said about cognitive development, is that small children are not mentally prepared to understand concepts like death beyond their concrete meanings.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, much more research is necessary before an assessment may be made in this area. However, it should be noted that there are a plethora of books written on the child’s level that address death and dying. The titles alone tell us what we understand as the best approach to death and dying education with children: *Dog Heaven, Sad Isn’t Bad, Help Me Say Goodbye, Tear Soup, Water Bugs & Dragonflies, What is Heaven Like?* The first and the last books listed above tell us in no uncertain terms that religious ideas are a prominent theme. Stevenson and Stevenson (1996, 248),<sup>2</sup> following Sonja Hunt of the Institute for Leadership Studies, signify the necessity for educators to show plainly the importance of addressing death in schools. They also point out that death education needs will vary between districts and even schools, and therefore, that educational models for teaching the subject must be chosen carefully.

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<sup>1</sup> Piaget’s stages of cognitive development will be discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> We will take a closer look at Robert Stevenson’s work as found in an interview with Eugenia Pfeiffer in Chapter Seven.

While there has been some movement to provide older children and adolescents with death education, growth in this area is very slow. In order to limit the scope of this research, the question we wish to ask might optimally be stated as, “What is the best approach to death education for secondary public schools through a religious lens?” As the US is a highly pluralistic society, it must also be asked, “Is it even appropriate to address death education through a religious lens in public schools?” Perhaps it is one thing to talk about death in world religions simply as a matter of practice within those religious traditions and another thing to approach death from an “ultimate meaning” position as seen through that same lens. Yet, the difficulty with not addressing the issue of religion and ultimate meaning is that that topic rarely, if ever, fails to arise whenever people talk about death.

Part of our understanding of the need for death education comes from how it has been approached both personally and socially down through the years. Thus, we turn now to look at the “why” of death education. The question is, “why talk about death and dying?”

The reader will note some crossover between our section on “who” should receive death education and our section on “why” death education should be provided. In asking why, we will look at religion as a model for death education, psychology as it touches on parental concerns, adolescence and society in general, special considerations such as suicide, anxiety, and social upheaval, and some historical elements. We will then turn our attention for a brief look at the adolescent mind, which we more wholly discuss in Chapter Two, followed by the mechanics of death education, the research methodology, the summary remarks and the chapter outline for the remainder of this work. Finally, we include a list of bibliographic resources, both useful to the reader and/or cited by the author.

### **1.3 Why death education? Or, why talk about death?**

#### **1.3.1 Death through a religious lens**

One of the more difficult losses to deal with is the loss of a parent. Cait makes an interesting argument about this particular life situation (2004, 165). Her study looked at women who were bereaved as adolescents and how they reconnected to their dead parent. The understanding among psychologists and death researchers has been that one must let go of one’s attachment to the deceased in order to move on and

live a happy, healthy life. The new way, if you will, is to reconnect to the deceased in some sort of memory, or spiritual fashion, and to adjust to their absence. The suggestion is that religion and/or spirituality can be useful in this respect. Yet religion and spirituality are not the preferred way for some people, despite religion's pervasive presence. In fact, Warren maintains that unless people are deeply religious, their feelings with regard to death are essentially unmoved (1989, 131). We contend that education is key, that knowledge aids in one's ability to cope, and that religious ideas are so prevalent that an attempt to avoid rather than address these ideas is nearly, if not completely, impossible, and possibly delusional.

Maybe this only appears to be so because, as Robert Kastenbaum discovered, "...death-oriented students tend to be more outspokenly religious," (Kastenbaum 1959) which may indicate that students who take death education electives are more likely to be of a religious mind. On the other hand, as Edgar Jackson painstakingly says, people tend to look to their societies for their frame of reference with regard to death attitudes (1959). And this, says Jackson, calls for an intentional and practical religious function in matters pertaining to death, i.e., it calls for rituals that express the understanding of a society toward death, and are adopted by youths with regard to their own deaths and the deaths of others. According to Jackson, this is necessary because religious views of death disdain partial secular views embraced by the society via various disciplines (psychology, medicine, etc), thus giving the individual a spiritual buoy for the soul (1959, 232). We agree with Charles Glenn that the religious provides individuals and their societies a starting-point for identifying shared values from which youths may develop both a sense of community and personal autonomy (Glenn 2003, 299-325). The death educator who approaches death curriculum from a religious viewpoint will find that personal experience is a formidable teacher.

Experience is key when making a case for death education because, for most of people, real things death-related have been all but completely removed from day-to-day living. Gone are the days when large numbers of people lived on farms where death was a common occurrence. Rare are the days when illness suddenly appears and, just as suddenly, snatches one away or claims the life of a loved one. Between those days when death visited one's home frequently and today, science, medicine,

and the industrial revolution changed the world, and with it, the way one lives (and dies). Gordon and Klass point out that “Most people do not understand modern medical procedures, so death becomes the province of experts...”(1979, 12). The modern age found society removing death from the home to the hospital and prolonging the lives of the elderly to the point where death hardly seemed real, even to the friends and relatives of the dying and deceased. It is now something that happens to people only when they grow very old, have lived good, long lives, and are duty-bound to move on. Children, in particular, are only privy to whispers and glimpses...whispers that Grandma is nearing her demise and glimpses of Grandma as they help her into the car or carry her to the waiting ambulance to take her to the hospital, where she will die among strangers and a few adult relatives.

However, as the reader shall see, children have a desire to say goodbye to Grandma. They also have questions about Grandma’s fate. Will Grandma go to Heaven, or will she cease to exist? Will Grandma feel pain? Will Grandma be scared? Will I forget Grandma? So, in the process of sanitizing society of the experiences surrounding death and dying, a world of confusion was created for everyone, especially children and adolescents.

### **1. 3. 2 Some parental concerns**

It should also be noted that parents report discomfort in talking to their children about death, if in fact they even make the attempt. Perhaps these same parents would have the skills to communicate with their children on this topic had they been educated in death and dying themselves. The byproduct of this confusion is the lack of a lived life-meaning for all concerned. Therefore, it seems necessary to fill in the gaps before the adolescent reaches adulthood. Education that would remove death from the realm of the unreal and the taboo, and place it squarely within the realm of reality and the normal, could do much to alleviate any fears about death being entertained by youths. As it stands now, there seems to be a tacit understanding that death is only real for others, yet clearly, death comes to everyone. Taking death out of the ‘unreal’ and giving it a meaningful place within the life-cycle is not something the teenager is thus-far equipped to do. Ronald Barrett has pointed out that little has been done to determine the difference in death attitudes between youths who have experienced loss and those who have not (Barrett 1996, 32). Our work addresses



this issue in brief (see Chapter 6, on research results), based upon questionnaire responses.

The point has been made that the reason adolescents are ‘tasked’ with making meaning of death, is that adult society has abdicated its responsibility in this regard (Gordon 1986, 23). Gordon also says that social rituals, of the kind often developed by religions, are what creates and holds a society together. She is talking about a social vacuum in rites of passage, such as are still engaged in by Jews, where children become “nominal” adults and are henceforth able to participate in death rituals, among others. But for most of people in the US this has been lost, and so, too, is death and dying indoctrination lost. Ironically, some researchers note how adolescence is the time when youths do the most questioning of their faith and/or religion, which would indicate that this is hardly the time to ignore it. For this is the time, so it is said, that people reflect deeply on their lives and values (Cait 2004, 163,176).

The community has relinquished its responsibility, and the adolescent, like most people in this individualistic society, must now fend for himself. This often means that his only recourse for meaning-making is in looking to his peers, who know as little as he does. It is easy to imagine that a perverted view of death might be the result. With a perverted view of death, a perverted view of life is also likely to occur. This viewpoint is often a negative one, says Gordon, because the adolescent has not been given the materials to create an outlook of hope for the future. In fact, the adolescent is constantly bombarded with negative images of death, in a society that Gordon believes worships youth as it simultaneously defames old age (1986). Speaking to this situation is the recent media craze over the undead – vampires – that has taken hold of the young via the entertainment industry.

Vampires are dead, but in a sense they are also forever young. They stand at the threshold between life and death, where now the veil has become very thin. They exist on the limen of the reality that one knows, and the reality for which one hopes. This is a way of connecting this life to the “next,” such as occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of Spiritualism (Stephenson 1985). Society has become complex and confusing, and has relegated its traditions to the dung-heap and left the adolescent to try to make sense of it all on his own.

### **1. 3. 3 Special considerations - suicide**

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the importance of death education in all sectors of American society. It may well be that it would be wise to educate children about death from a very young age, but we are here concerned with determining how the adolescent fits into the death education equation, for the eventual purpose of designing a textbook that will be helpful and enjoyable for both the teacher and the student – a text that views death in all its many forms and aspects, from a religious point-of-view. Two other major areas of death and dying research will also not be looked at at-length in this work. The first is suicide.

We mention it now in order to address the fact that much of death research revolves around the concern of some parents and educators who say death education increases the rate of suicide amongst youth. While we do not believe this view contains much merit, we think it must be attended to so that teachers/staff/school boards, and parents, do not labor under the erroneous impression that adolescents (or, indeed, children in general) are traumatized by death and dying discussion. There is no solid evidence for this supposed trauma, though there are studies that point to the possibility. For example, some researchers say that suicide rates are growing among teens in the US. To this, we say that there is just as much, maybe more, evidence that suggests that if youths are presented with death studies of at least 15 to 16 weeks in duration, their anxiety levels decrease. Other researchers say that suicides are only being reported at higher rates than previously. All of this discrepancy in the research suggests more about the methodology of the research than about the actual outcomes. Death needs to be discussed fully in order to make the shadows go away, because to ignore or deny its existence gives death a power that is unreal. That is, it removes death from the realm of the natural to a place whereby death becomes personified and supernatural. This type of death denial has the effect not of making death disappear, but ironically, of making death more difficult to face. It lurks in the shadows like an armed killer, ready to attack at any moment, while the intended victim pretends it does not exist. In any case, while the reasons for suicide rates in general are currently under investigation, one of the clearer reasons for suicide points to a sense of meaninglessness.

It seems likely that the meaninglessness experienced by many may be partly alleviated by ceasing to look at death as a taboo subject and placing the conversation

into a socially accepted venue such as public school curricula. We are concerned with meaning-making, and it has become the case that suicide has been discussed to the point of pointlessness. Because so many researchers have spotlighted suicide as a major concern, we will not deal with it as a separate issue, but only as necessary to quell the fears of teachers/staff, school boards, and parents.

#### **1. 3. 4 Special considerations - anxiety**

For some of the same reasons we will also not delve into death anxiety, though we will touch on it as we conclude this paper, and it will naturally arise as part of the history, sociology, and psychology discussion. It is our contention that if adolescents are aided in making meaning in and of life, death, the evil image of death and its power to frighten, will fade, even as people begin to see death as part of the life-cycle. We are not suggesting that the grief and confusion caused by death be ignored – quite the opposite. Rather, we believe that the issue, once squarely faced, will no longer take on a larger aspect than it actually produces. Death, as it were, will be reduced to its actual or real size.

#### **1. 3. 5 Social upheaval and some affects on history**

While Herman Feifel is credited with the beginnings of the death education movement in 1950s US, one can see how the need for death education grew out of social and cultural realities long before Feifel gave the movement feet. The baby boomer generation that grew up in the US following World War Two (WWII) is well-known for seeking spirituality. Of course, the term *spirituality* has many different meanings and takes on myriad connotations, but that issue is beyond the scope of the subject of this thesis. For our purposes here, however, it is important to state that the spiritual seeking of the boomers that began roughly in the early 1960s is now simply a part of US culture in a postmodern society. With said spirituality, come questions of death and dying from a religious and theological standpoint. These questions are many and complicated as “post-modern” implies both relative and myriad viewpoints. The postmodern idea itself can barely be defined and, hence, makes the discussion that much more problematic. We will attempt to discuss US spirituality from a pluralistic stance, understanding that its convoluted nature will limit our ability to definitively include all aspects of every question.

### **1. 3. 6 Pluralism and history**

The US has always been pluralistic, but recent years have seen marked growth in plurality. While pluralism in US society is mostly a good thing, there are systemic concerns that point to two major issues. They are 1. the sharp and swift growth of diversity in the country since the change in immigration restrictions that took place in the 1960s, and 2. the growth of gratuitous violence that is spreading across all sectors of society from terrorism and school shootings to media violence as “entertainment.” Both of these issues have changed the look of community life, whether religious or secular in nature.

### **1. 3. 7 History, society, religion and psychology**

Perhaps the socio-religious reasons for death education may be said to mingle with the psychological reasons. Since the demise of the agrarian society in favor of a technological and service-related economy, death has been shoved to the margins of thought. That is, when pre-industrial society lived largely on farms where both animals and people died regularly, and where early medical practices were generally unable to prolong the lives of the animals and the people, death was expected; death was faced directly and at an early age. Because death was faced directly, rituals arose to deal with it both religiously and psychologically. Death was then a normal part of a child’s life, but this is not so today.

Today death seems unreal. As Kastenbaum points out, death education has been going on for many centuries, but it has now, in a sense, been avoided for so long that people have been forced to try to understand it all over again, more-or-less beginning in the 1960s (1998, 414). At that time, medical science was growing in sophistication, and priests and ministers started to find themselves displaced by death educators. Then, in 1976, The Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) was organized for the purpose of providing training for death educators (Kastenbaum 1998, 414). Today there are a number of associations, journals, and books aimed at death education and studies. Ken Doka points out that death education is always taking place, whether it is intentional education or accidental (2003, 87-88). What he means is that *not* teaching something, in fact teaches a great deal.

Still, for most people, death is something one usually only reads about, watches on television and in films, or “plays” in video games. Yet, actors who die in films survive in life. Cartoon figures spurt vivid red, unchanging blood and are magically resurrected. When we ask students in the modern and postmodern world what is the opposite of death, they usually say, “life.” Yet this is not logical. In terms of opposites, one may say that black (absence of color) is the opposite of white (combination of all colors), the light that is “on” is the opposite of the light being “off” and death is the opposite of birth. In the latter understanding, death is seen as a normal part of life, not something to be feared (though certainly many did so) or ignored. Today, life and death as opposites tend to take on qualities of yin and yang proportion. Life is good, pleasurable, happy, and easy. Life means contentment, whereas death is evil, sad, horrible, difficult, and means pain.

Avoiding death in this manner has left young people to struggle their way through an existential morass. Suicide may here stand as a good example of this problem. It seems logical to suppose that a life of meaning – one that includes death as part of the life-cycle – may help to alleviate the fearsome nature of death in the adolescent mind. As a socially accepted topic of discussion, death would lose its taboo status, and people would have opportunity to flesh out its meaning. An excellent way to do this would be to place the conversation into the socially accepted venue of public school curricula. No one would contend that death can be avoided; it is a fact of life.<sup>3</sup> If asked, very few people would consciously state that death is not normal or that it is somehow an avoidable part of life. If one considers the widely accepted idea among researchers that death is in fact a part of life, how can death also be life’s opposite?

Death is something that occurs along life’s path. Granted, as far as one knows, it is the last thing that occurs, yet it is still an occurrence. One is born. Barring an early demise, one grows and goes through puberty. All along the way, one changes physically in a more-or-less commonly experienced way. One ages, and one dies. Perhaps there are more stages following the one known as death, but society has

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<sup>3</sup> We are reminded of someone we know personally, who believes that one day human beings will no longer have to die, if they choose to remain alive; but this, if taken seriously, is a question for another field of enquiry.

at this point no way of knowing for certain.<sup>4</sup> All of this is about the life-cycle. Would one separate birth or puberty, or old age as something apart from life? No, because these are life occurrences, and it is therefore illogical to separate death from life. So, while many have come to fear death, it is a rather strange reaction to a normal occurrence. The reaction of grief to the loss of loved-ones to death is more understandable, but this does not make the dying or the death of these same loved-ones somehow strange or abnormal.

Rosenthal observes that “dying” is often “a metaphor of passage” (1986, 11), while LaGrand sees life and death as inseparable, saying that “Death is surrounded with life; life is surrounded by death” (1988, 35). LaGrand suggests that it is actually feelings that frighten, not death itself (1988, 31). People fear – pain, the unknown – people fear, in a way, fear. Or, as Franklin D. Roosevelt put it, “...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself (Roosevelt 1933).” A more healthy way to look at death, says Victor de Waal, is to learn how death is a process of life and that people are dying from the moment they are born. In this way, he argues, people may develop attitudes that are healthy and inspire greater living (de Waal 1995, 98). This, of course, refers to the purpose *in* life, but we are also interested in helping young people find their purpose *of* life.

It is no wonder that society values youth and vigor to the point of fearing age. This has made ageing a sort of slow death. If one spends years of “dying,” as opposed to being young and beautiful, then it is understandable that death is feared. Dying, as we noted above, begins from birth, but US society has come to view “youth” and “beauty” as somehow static. It is as though there is some line of demarcation one suddenly crosses to begin dying. That *would* be frightening! People must therefore find a way of both understanding and accepting the process of ageing, as well as seeing dying and death as an event in the life-cycle.

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<sup>4</sup> Some well-respected scholars, like the renowned psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, have been known to be interested in the supernatural along the lines of the transmigration of souls, as well as the possibility of communicating with the dead. However, she is renowned for her works of compassion as a pioneer in the Hospice movement, as well as an AIDS victim’s advocate. She was also instrumental in recommending a more personal and humane approach to dealing with the dying.

### 1. 3. 8 More about the religious lens

Yet another reason to approach the study of death from a religious perspective is found in the social situation that followed two wars and a depression. For example, after WWII, the all-pervasive reality of death could hardly be avoided. A paradigmatic shift caused by the world wars led people to think more about their mortality and the meaning of their lives. Such tragic situations were enough to put people off the idea that claimed humanity was moving toward an ethical zenith. Kastenbaum indicates that the reality of human violence and the pervasive nature of death made it difficult for religious people to explain human action or to find meaning and purpose in such an existence (1998, 75).<sup>5</sup> The western utopian paradigm that said humanity was evolving to a higher and higher plain, and would eventually reach the summit upon which no religion was necessary, was dashed to pieces, and religious people, along with everyone else, were hard-pressed to come up with visions of hope.

Brabant, Kalich and Breaux in a comparison analysis of a *Psychology Today* survey run in the early 1970s, and a later survey of college students begun in 1981, note that on the question of how much influence religion had on one's developing attitude toward death, the 1970s group found the religious role to be significant at 42% and the 1980s group found religion to be significant at 75% (2008-2009, 201).<sup>6</sup> This either implies the growing interest and influence of religion (rather than the decrease that was expected), or it is a society-wide *admission* of religion's influence. Since WWII, there have only been more wars as well as local, national, and international acts of violence that serve to add to the morose picture of a loss of utopian dreams.

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<sup>5</sup> R. Kirby Godsey discusses the inherent violence of humanity in *Centering Our Souls* (Mercer 2005). His point is related to Darwin's theory of evolution and human survival. However, as a Christian, he finds the disconnection in our altered relationship to God. He does not think humanity will find meaning in life unless they learn to reconnect to both God and others. In a sense he is saying, as does John's epistle (1John 4:18), that perfect love casts out all fear. In this scenario, love is a verb – something one does.

<sup>6</sup> The 1970 questionnaire was composed of 75 items and appeared in *Psychology Today*. Over 30,000 responses were received. Brabant, the senior author of the 1970 article, spent 9 years gathering data from student response questionnaires at university (1985-2004). The instrument used "*You and Death*" was the same in both instances. Brabant requested and received permission to continue to use the questionnaire after 1990 when copyright laws changed. The second set of samples resulted in 947 usable questionnaires. Both groups contained a comparably higher percentage of female respondents. Beyond a few small anomalies, the age-spread of both groups were remarkably similar (Table 1, 196).

Perhaps the most compelling reason for the study of death through a religious prism is the fact that one can trace human history back to ancient times, where religious and philosophical texts were the main, if not the only, writings that gave answers to the pressing questions about life, death, and sometimes afterlife. As far as people are able to tell, such thoughts, ideas, and discussions, have been around for as long as humans have walked the earth. It would be “naïve,” says Kastenbaum, of death educators to avoid the deep hold that religion has on ideas about death (1998, 412). What is more, Bowker shows how, despite the old ideas of psychology and anthropology that supported the idea that religions were built on fear and avoidance of death, in fact, show that religious life cannot be lived but on terms of death; and, to value death as intertwined with life relationships is the religious assertion (Bowker 1991, 93, 96). This does not mean, certainly, that all educators should personally take religion seriously, or for that matter that parents should take religion seriously, even as it regards death. To suggest such a thing in a society where church and state are intentionally separated is out of the question. On the other hand, to say that death should not be approached through a religious lens is indeed naïve. For even atheists raise the issue during such discussions, if only to shoot religion down. Clearly, the question of death education, using a religious model, cries out for consideration.

### **1. 3. 9 Psychology and professionals**

Another reason we wish to develop with regard to the need for death education in secondary schools is that while there has been enormous interest in the topic of death education, much of it has been concentrated on meeting what is perceived to be “professional” needs. That is, medical training of doctors and nurses, and psychological training of counselors, administrators and teachers has been highlighted as an area of great need in order for such persons to meet loss where they encounter it, whether in the hospital the school, or some other venue. In the case of medical personnel, such training prepares workers to be sensitive to human needs and emotions. While this is also true in the case of school personnel, there is the added training in counseling aimed at relieving psychological grief for individuals touched by death (and other loss). We are not suggesting that such efforts cease, but rather that they be supplemented with the more preventive measure of helping youths



understand death and dying in advance of its arrival, much in the way they are given help with understanding human relations, and human psychology.

Finally, this study is intended to be foundational to the development of a useful pedagogical resource about death for high school students in public schools. In developing and teaching the course at University, it is our experience that students consistently flock to the course, but arrive completely ignorant, somewhat fearful, yet very curious. This, according to all the sources, has been the case since the “death explosion” of the 1970s. It has also been our experience that a majority of students wish to know more about religious doctrine concerning death. Young people are looking for answers and reassurance. This need is as yet unmet.

### **1. 3. 10 The parental role over time**

In viewing the parental role, it becomes clear that it will be most important to include them in the process of death education, from design to implementation. The suggestion that parents must become more involved in the educating of their children is a good one. While this no doubt seems obvious, there is much evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, to indicate that parents in the US are not, in general, very involved in their children’s education. While this situation is currently undergoing substantial change, Glenn makes an excellent case for the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a time when “the powers that be” were actively removing local flavor and values from classrooms all across America because parents and local authorities were considered unqualified to determine how to best educate their own children (Glenn 2003). His point is that public education evolved its own culture of expertise, and that teachers of pre-school through high school, were indoctrinated in the idea that parents should be excluded from curriculum decision-making because they could not let go of the past and insisted on filling their children’s heads with old-fashioned values and religious superstition. Thus began, says Glenn, a long period of public school training in science, progress, and humanism as replacement(s) for religion. It seems the pendulum had swung to the extreme left and is now swinging in the other direction. We would like to see it stop at some midpoint. It would be in no one’s best interest were the pendulum to end up on the extreme right. Death education, in that case, would not allow children to find their own meaning based both on their family and

community traditions, and their own deeply reflected self-understanding. The swing back toward the right had begun in earnest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1974, Earl Grollman published a book called *Concerning Death*. This was the time period when death and dying education had garnered enough interest to result in some public school courses, seminars, and discussions on death and dying within other disciplines, from Health Education to English and Social Studies.

Understanding the possible objections the highly emotional topic of death may generate (an emotion created by society), Grollman writes, “For the parents, it might make sense to have a few workshop sessions which review the resources and materials used in the classroom” (Grollman 1974, 352). This is exactly what Grollman and his colleagues did. They set up a classroom situation that included both children and parents wherein they all viewed a film that portrayed the detailed deaths of a grandmother and a grandfather. While many of the parents were horrified by the explicit nature of the film, the children said things that suggested they liked knowing what to expect. For instance, they appreciated seeing the coffin being lowered into the ground because it became clear that Grandma was not going to return (1974, 353). Also, parents were surprised to hear an eleven-year-old girl specify her wish to be able to say goodbye to her grandparents. As Grollman points out, the adults were squeamish, but the children were frank and open (1974). This squeamishness of the parents is likely to become the squeamishness of the child. How can youths deal with something for which they don’t even have a vocabulary?

### **1. 3. 11 The adolescent mind**

John Morgan makes the two-pronged argument that children of a bygone era would have lived close to death and taken part in its rituals, and that today one is not prepared to manage one’s own emotions when death occurs because society has sanitized the environment of death’s influence (1998, 5-6). For this reason, Morgan, who “introduced the first regularly scheduled course dealing with death” in 1968, advocates the systematic education of death topics for children beginning in the earlier years with “teachable moments” and culminating in the later years of secondary school in full-blown death education that includes the meaning of life development (Morgan 1998).

The psychological reason to wait until late secondary school for the more formal death education course is apparently due to the way in which adolescent thought is generally understood as progressing. All adolescents (barring some mental deficiency), it is believed, are capable of formal, abstract patterns of thought. In Chapter Two, we will look closely at the latest understanding of adolescent thought and development. We will only mention here that meaning-making for the adolescent is of great, maybe primary, importance. This condition of youth is critical to our argument that a death and dying course from a religious perspective is necessary in US high schools. We will discuss why this is cognitively imperative in Chapter Two.

#### **1. 4.1 The how of death education – the mechanics**

The available literature so far discusses whether-or-not parents will feel that their rights are being infringed upon if public school officials talk to their children about death at all, let alone if they attempt to draw their children into discussions about death from a religious viewpoint. The question is: can the latter be done in a reasonably objective manner? It is a question worth pursuing as, again, death is the ultimate equalizer and, arguably, the manufacturer of ultimate meaning-seeking; and religion is the ultimate comforter and, arguably, the ultimate meaning-maker. Gordon and Klass suggest that as death and dying have become personal and depressing subjects in US society, parents may be apprehensive of the affect that death discussion may have on their child's emotional development (1979, 237). The appearance of this notion in society is certainly understandable, but it is not realistic since everyone is surrounded by the topic in unreal and surreal "entertainment" venues. Even so, in such a class, what sort of questions might the students bring up? We consider this point so pertinent that we state it once more: it would be most surprising if the question of religion does not arise in every dialogue about death. Anecdotally, we have for several years been asking people this question, "Have you ever spoken with anyone about death or dying when religion did not come up in the conversation?" We have yet to encounter anyone who claims that the religious question doesn't arise, even in a room full of atheists. This question will again be addressed in Chapter Six when we look at the survey results.

The controversial nature of death education has meant that there has been much discussion with regard to its presentation in public schools (see section on

bibliographic resources) among sociologists, psychologists, medical personnel, and educators. While the discussion seems to have begun in earnest in the 1950s in the US, the progression of actual death education has proceeded extremely slowly, despite the fact that many Thanatologists consider the 1970s the decade of the “death explosion.”

The contention that young people (indeed, most people) tend to think of religion and religious themes when they approach the topic of death is one factor that makes this study around death education important; but, it is certainly not the only one. We have broadly considered four other chief areas of discussion, falling under the major categories of sociology, psychology, and medicine. The history with which these disciplines intertwine may be seen in our previous discourse. The early understandings of death and dying were only barely touched upon as their description is not important to our argument. Such discussions are best left for the textbook that will be developed for use in the public schools, for the purpose of building a base of understanding of all things surrounding death and dying. Summary conclusions that tie education into the broader discussions surrounding death education follow before we move to the section on methodology.

#### **1. 4. 2 Concluding remarks on the relevance of death education in public schools**

In 1977, Daniel Leviton was among the first to give voice to the necessity of death education. Since that time, many means of teaching death education in schools have been devised, generally by blending it with existing school subjects, like health education, literature, and social studies (In Wass 2003). According to Wass, some progress has been made in the area of death education for care providers (Wass 2003, 2). The problem with extending this education beyond a small minority of public schools is related to a perceived infringement on parental rights and church provenance, poor teacher preparation, and the fear that teaching children about death will increase their anxiety (Wass 2003, 1). Several researchers, to include Wass, say that a major difficulty thanatologists face is the fragmented nature of the research and studies that have taken place thus far. Wass suggests that coming to a general agreement for how studies should be developed and organized, objectively arrived at

through investigation, remains an elusive goal (2003, 3). This study does not correct this problem, but it does suggest a way to fill one void – that of adolescent education.

Looking at death in all its forms, from violence (to include war) to illness and old age, to suicide and the cessation of artificial life-support, through a religious/theological film that seats death squarely in the realm of the natural, could go a long way to relieving death-related angst as it is felt by today's youth in the US and possibly elsewhere, though this point is certainly hotly disputed. Youths may contemplate the meaning of death, and the ethical and moral issues that surround it. They can learn self-reflection that may help each of them to determine their own values, as well as help them to see the way others view these things, and thus come to a better understanding of others. We believe, along with Richard Cotter, that learning self-reflection will help teenagers to gain a more mature outlook on life (and death) by assisting them in avoiding their "intense here-and-now perspective" (Cotter 2003). That is, the way teens have of seeing every moment as though it will never end, may be overcome through self-reflective logic. Such self-reflection may help them to decide where precisely meaning is made and if religion does or does not play a part in their personal and communal sense of the world.

Currently, US social and educational systems simply place a "BAND-AID"<sup>TM</sup> on individual wounds as they occur to young people in pain and agony over loss. Death education, rightly approached, could provide a useful instrument for youths to work out personal understandings of death, dying and grief that are a part of life. "More systematic thinking about such issues makes our physical and nonphysical worlds more human and meaningful"(Bardis 1981, ix). However, one cannot determine the most effective approach just by thinking it through. This is analogous to saying "What is the best funeral practice?" Therefore, a discussion of methodological theory and research methodology itself is necessary.

## **1. 5 Methodology**

Our hope is to provide death education by the most widely acceptable means. This point cannot be overstressed. The survey of available information about the topic of death and death education has so far yielded several discussions with regard to parental versus education professionals' attitudes toward both the need and the content of death education in schools. It turns out that most of the studies reveal that

professional educators, administrators and counselors believe that parents are extremely worried about losing their parental control over issues like death, whereas parents are overall not as concerned over this issue as educators believe. The reason for this misunderstanding appears to have something to do with other controversial topics, like sex education and prayer in schools. Basically, this means that parents are thought to hold to a general unease with regard to topics they are supposed to consider both personal and controversial.

The anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer (1965 and 1967), has likened death to pornography, of which one idea is that it has become taboo, and must therefore remain hidden. There are a few commentators on death education that seem to think “the sky is falling.”<sup>7</sup> They are laboring under the erroneous impression that young people do not already think about death, and are worried that bringing up the topic will cause them to consider suicide, as though they never considered it previously. Or, if it does not cause thoughts of suicide to arise, it will surely traumatize teens. Because of this misunderstanding and the more legitimate concerns of parents, it is imperative that the perspectives of the various participants be paramount when considering the most acceptable approach to death education. This requires qualitative research and the promise of anonymity in order to study and assess current attitudes and practices and to make viable recommendations. This requires the development of a method to decide how to best implement educational needs.

First, it will be necessary to look at death education as it is actually being practiced. The evidence thus far indicates that two approaches are generally taken, and often mixed together – the experiential and the didactic. The experiential is said to be best, but the students in our survey rarely suggest experiences as part of the curriculum (Durlak and Reisenberg 1991).<sup>8</sup> What our student respondents do suggest, is discussed in Chapter Six.

Next, sociological information on violent exposure among US youth and death anxiety in this group must be examined to determine what indicators are to be

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<sup>7</sup> We call these persons, “fringe,” and name some of them when the question again arises.

<sup>8</sup> Durlak and Reisenberg analyze 46 studies whose outcomes indicated that experiential learning lessened death fears, while didactic methods either raised fears slightly or left them unchanged.

considered when developing curriculum. For example, a few researchers indicate, as mentioned above, that exposure to death education actually raises anxiety in youths who participate. Many or most of these studies have been short in duration.

Rosenthal found that after an 18-week course, death anxiety in high school students was appreciably reduced, despite the several shorter studies that suggested otherwise (1980, 95-101). She points out that in 1977 Bailis and Kennedy proposed that it takes three stages, psychologically, before death anxiety reduction takes place (1980, 99). This 18-week study is the longest we have been able to find. The idea is encouraging, though certainly far from definitive. However, it does advise that this current study might best be served by research that lasts 18 weeks or longer.<sup>9</sup>

As the work progressed, we found that this was not a feasible proposition. Perhaps others encountered the same ambiguous interest and fears that such a study arouses in people. Many of the staff indicated by survey that they thought a death and dying elective was a good, and even necessary undertaking, but the flip side of this good news was that a few of the staff shied away from the idea for reasons like assumed parental disapproval, and/or a plea that they were already stretched to their limits and could not imagine finding the time to receive the necessary education to teach the course, or indeed the time to even teach the course itself. As it was, it was necessary to indicate to the staff that the survey would only take some five to ten minutes. The principal of the high school where the survey was administered was open to and very interested in the project, thus providing a captive group and the time to administer the survey. It became clear to this researcher at that time that a lengthy study, such as an eighteen-week course, would be difficult, if not impossible to arrange.

Ideally, a researcher would prefer to do a long-term study that follows a large sample of people throughout their lives, beginning in youth or earlier.<sup>10</sup> To state the obvious, while it is not impossible, it is also not practical for this current study. It

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<sup>9</sup> Stevenson (2003), indicates that in his 25 years of death & dying course offerings, amongst those who took his course, there was not one suicide.

<sup>10</sup> We later mention briefly a study that questions students six years after they took a course in middle school. Researchers were specifically interested in finding out what attitudes the students had at the later date and how their later attitudes compared to their attitudes immediately following the course.

seems that in this case, the survey is the most realistic strategy. Kastenbaum (1998, 16) has indicated that the self-reporting survey is the most common form of research in this area. If other researchers have run into similar situations, like the one outlined herein, it is no wonder.

Introspection, (this may also be termed “self-reflection”) must take place at all levels of data assessment to assure that assessments are as objective as possible. Still, the assessment of self-reflective surveys can be problematic. For example, this study has used researcher-developed surveys that, like the Collett-Lester Scale, assess self-reporting. Kastenbaum’s (1998, 16) markers of flaws in the method are quite similar to the flaws found in our research. In this case, college students are not only over-represented, but are, in fact, the only student representatives. This is so because the high school approached for the survey could not imagine getting parents to agree to the survey. Also, minorities are under-represented here, amongst teachers and administrators, as in Kastenbaum’s scenario. There is usually no follow-up at a later date – nor will there be any this time around. No attempt is made to connect reported attitudes with actual behavior, which seems nearly impossible to this researcher, without somehow becoming a participant observer which would entail months or years of waiting for people to die in order to observe subject reactions. The questions regarding death anxiety are not taken within a context of recent experience, says Kastenbaum, though this is not wholly true for our survey. These issues are not to be taken lightly.

Add to the above the human elements of emotion, selective memory, and miscommunication, and one can easily see how carefully all assessment instruments must be constructed. Even so, to the extent that the phenomenological method asks people to describe their feelings, this approach will also be used. We will, in fact, attempt to avoid theory and preconception in an effort to keep things simple. Yet, how to filter out the wishful-thinking and unintended denial of the respondent will have to be considered. As for memory, it is well-known that humans tend to modify actual events, though they are not always aware of so doing.

Finally, one cannot assume that simply because a question is asked of all respondents in the same way, using the same words, that all respondents will hear and understand the question in the same way. In fact, it is highly likely that they will not.



This problem was partially overcome by asking questions that were ‘checks’ of other questions. For example, students were asked whether-or-not a death and dying elective should be provided to high school students. They were also asked what should be added to a high school elective, and what should be left out, that would vary from a college elective. Some who said an elective on death and dying should not be offered to high school students also said what should be added and/or left out of the high school class.

It is also quite possible, especially among the younger interviewees, that they will have little experience with death and/or dying. This will leave them to describe their feelings from a “what if” perspective, which is at best subjective and at worst fanciful. This difficulty cannot be avoided, but its probable appearance must be clearly stated in respect to the deliberation of the data. Observation by the researcher might also be useful, though again, self-awareness will be of paramount importance. Not only must the perspectives and presuppositions of students, parents and administrators/teachers be taken into account, but the presuppositions of the researcher(s) must also be considered. The obvious example relates to the overarching point of the research itself – that is, it is assumed that US youths will be aided in their ability to make meaning of life and death by taking a course on death and dying.<sup>11</sup> It is also presupposed that this ability to make meaning is necessary for a happy and productive life. Finally, it is presupposed that death education will enable youths to overcome death anxiety, and may even reduce rates of suicide. With all of this in mind, a questionnaire aimed at teachers, counselors, administrators, and students would be designed to assess both attitudes toward death education and student needs, that does not force the researcher’s presupposed outcome.

The final part of the process, following data assessment, will include looking at the pros and cons of how to best compile the death education material and a consideration of how to best disseminate the information within school programs. For example, should it be part of health education? To determine the best placement for death education, it will be necessary to look at how any death education has taken place in the past. How has it fared? The presupposition is to say it hasn’t fared well

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<sup>11</sup> With respect to meaning-making, we argue that the religious model works well because it has the necessary elements, elsewhere named.

since such programs are still few (estimated by Wass at a fifth of high schools and 15 percent of middle schools (2003, 07)). Also, Stevenson indicates that when he retired, the program died, presumably because administrators took the school's lower rate of suicide to mean the course was no longer needed...yet it might be preventive...time will tell (Pfeiffer 2003). The conversation is on-going, yet it must still be considered in order to avoid attempting to cultivate the same infertile ground. And, while a number of death educators recommend integrating death studies into the various courses, we maintain that it would be better to provide a separate death and dying course. The rationale for infusing other courses with death conversations is that death permeates all parts of life. We do not dispute this of course, but would like to point out that one might say the same thing for all the other disciplines. Sociology, history, mathematics, etc., are all inescapably intertwined. Once all of this is considered, the challenge will remain to put together a workable educational model and text.

### **1. 6 Summary remarks**

With the help of Herman Feifel in the 1950s and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the 1960s and 1970s (Wass 2003), death and dying awareness has grown considerably among professionals in the United States, though the understanding of how one grieves has been greatly altered since the time of Kübler-Ross. Kübler-Ross is famous for her 5 stages of dying, but this way of understanding the process of grief has now been supplanted by the idea of "grief-tasks." That is, no matter how many "stages" one goes through, it is necessary for the individual to complete tasks that move them from stage to stage. Also, the stages can be 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 in duration, and can also be altered in their order of appearance, or skipped altogether, or even revisited. Such diversity makes us wonder if it is even useful to think of a so-called process with regard to dying and/or grief.

Another result of the "death movement" is that organizations and materials that are aimed at the education and preparation of health-care specialists now abound. The hospice industry has found a broad, user-friendly base and earned a reputation for decency and compassion.

Yet, despite such arguably positive gains in the death and dying industry, death education of the nation's children remains singularly unformed, ad hoc, and generally chaotic. Two related reasons for the lag in education development can be

pinpointed. The first is what we have previously mentioned, i.e., that research suggests that large segments of American society are fearful that death education will actually create more anxiety among adolescents (and children in general). The second reason has also been previously mentioned. It is one that has been articulated by a number of leading researchers in the field: Thus far, the studies have been at odds in that they have been done somewhat haphazardly, overlapping at times but more problematically, each one unilaterally creating its own methods and procedures. The difficulties with both data collection and an analysis in this field of inquiry go a long way in explaining this situation. It is true that many of the studies use the same measuring tools, e.g., the Collett-Lester Anxiety Scale. But other points of methodology vary widely, such as the length of the study, or whether-or-not control groups are utilized. Many of the methodological problems arise as the researchers are forced to interface with various administrators and parents, etc., who bring with them their own issues and concerns, as we have already seen in brief.

All of this only makes the need to somehow create a more-or-less uniform method more obvious. One thing is clear from our survey of the existing research: a way must be found to include parents in the process, from development of classes, to both pre and post death education surveys. This would mean an educator-parent partnership. Such a relationship would help everyone avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding, and create an environment in which it becomes possible to give the adolescent the help she needs to find her own meaning of life (and death). Now, if one could only convince school staffs that the work would be worth it...

While we are here interested in fashioning this educational opportunity in secondary schools, it is not clear that psychologists are definitively correct in saying late adolescence, when the child is gaining emotional understanding, is necessarily the best time to start this education. If early adolescents (11-13 years) are busy with emotionally disengaging from their parents, might they not benefit from a study of the ultimate emotional (and material) disengagement? And, if middle adolescents (14-17 yrs) are working on a sense of control and personal mastery over themselves and life, might they not benefit from looking at whether-or-not one may gain control or mastery over death, or, at least, to one's response to death?

The psychologist would say that these adolescents are not yet emotionally mature enough to engage the subject, but it seems possible to develop a death education course that takes this into account. Dunning reasons that it is imperative to have cognitive strategies in place in order to avoid psychological regression or perversion (2006, 501). She also says that current trauma theory indicates that trauma may be avoided if one has cognitive understanding of the situation (2006). Besides which, one is hard-pressed not to wonder if ignoring death will somehow make it go away.

It is unrealistic to suppose that children, prior to late adolescence, do not think about death at all. Death may not seem real to them, but images of death are everywhere. It seems important that this is where death touches strongly upon the adolescent sense of control and mastery of his environment, and indeed his life (Cait 2004, 177); death, he knows is quite real, but he has yet to know what it means for him. No one wants to talk about it. He does not understand it or its place in his life. He can break away from his parents, but he cannot break away from the sense that death is all around him. He sees it everywhere, but thinks of it as something evil, malignant, and even devious. By not talking about death, and accepting its place in life, society has given it the power to confound and frighten her children. People have made it taboo, except as something that is unreal and entertaining. One hears stories of suicide, and of young children who play violent video games full of dying characters. LaGrand calls this death discussion avoidance a “silent curtain” that is drawn to defend the self, and when one is forced to face death with the loss of a loved one, one refuses to allow personal emotion, which leads to a denial of death’s “full meaning” (1988, 34). Perverted by culture as it may be, death will not be denied its place in life.

Ought society not attempt to counteract the perverted views of death offered by the media? If youths are struggling to find meaning in their lives, and therefore in death, and if they are striving to find their place in this world of meaning, all aspects of death and dying must be addressed in death education. “Those with a clear sense of their own values,” says LaGrand, “are much more likely to see death in realistic instead of fearful terms” (1988, 43). But, again, the adolescent is left to find her own understanding of death and how it relates to life, its meaning, and her identity.

This poses a personal threat to her identity (Lombardo 1986, 15) because she is aware of death's finality, but has yet to comprehend it intellectually and emotionally. We contend that when this is coupled with the adolescent's spiritual and religious doubts, it becomes all the more imperative to afford her with some information and a safe place in which to discuss all the issues that surround death as part of life, to include the religious. And while there must be no hidden agenda with regard to religion when developing and implementing death education courses, this study is interested in learning if it is true that religious ideas and questions are of interest to students. The number of students who indicated religion, afterlife, and the like as topics of interest for a death and dying class, might point to the suitability of this supposition, which we will discuss when we look at the statistics. We believe this to be the case, based on personal experience and anecdotal accounts, and are therefore interested in creating a death education course designed for seeing death and dying through a religious lens.

### **1. 7 Bibliographic resources**

Included is a representative list of books, and a mere beginning, of the available literature related to death education. One should be aware from the outset that there are very few books, dissertations, or journal articles that are aimed at the precise theme of this thesis. Eugenia Pfeiffer in her dissertation for Seton Hall in New Jersey looks at the idea of death and dying education, but she does not engage in much critical analysis of the issues surrounding the subject (2003). In her thesis for OISE, Vera Teschow is most concerned with the need to prepare teachers to guide students through the death and dying course (2006). Eleanor Gatcliffe, in her resource book for teachers, makes a good argument for the creation of death and dying education for young children (1988). These are the sources most related to the thesis of this work. Other works in the field are largely connected to health education and most of that is concerned with the education of professionals, who must occasionally, or often, deal with dying patients or their families and friends and, in the case of the latter, either before or after death. Some of the sources are dedicated to discussing death in various religious traditions. The closest example we were able to locate regarding a text for public school purposes is the one by Lewis R. Aiken, whose work is aimed at college students, but may be acceptable for secondary school students as

well. Yet even Aiken's text does not address the topic via a theological/religious viewpoint. This is not to say he fails to address it, but rather that his point-of-view is sociological. His chapter headings include such subjects as "Mortality and Thanatology," which covers everything from "Denial and Acceptance of Death" to "Age and Other Individual Differences." He touches on religion only in "Part III," where he devotes just one chapter to "Funerary Rituals and Religion." His subheadings in this chapter are "Traditional Funerary Rites and Customs," "Modern Funeral Practices" and "Religious Beliefs." Those texts that do approach death through a religious lens only look at religions and not other death-related topics as well. These were mostly developed for college students.

In May of 2004, *Death Studies* (Vol. 28) published "A Perspective on the Current State of Death Education," by Hannelore Wass, in which the author attempts to cover the field of death education since her understanding of its inception in the 1950s with the work of Herman Feifel, who presented a paper on "Death and Behavior" for the 1956 Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (Wass 2004). In 1959, Feifel published *The Meaning of Death*, in which he basically suggested that in broad terms the conversations surrounding death and dying (what would come to be called the "death awareness movement") had an educational tone. Wass says that his approach was "humanistic" since all humans could benefit from death education (Wass 2004, 290). Wass then indicates that by the mid-nineteen nineties, death education had come to permeate healthcare "end-of-life" programs, whose emphasis was on training professionals. She mentions here the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. The last organization mentioned here becomes especially important as much of the literature in the last decade is aimed at nurse training (Wass 2004, 295). She does briefly address the situation in both primary and secondary schools, indicating that "only a minority of primary and secondary school students are provided death education..." (Wass 2004, n. 297). In this matter she suggests that death education include three parts: 1. some form of culture-based death education, 2. the intentional objective of preventing suicide and violence of other sorts, and 3. the

use of death education to inform children of the facts in order to avoid as much unreasonable fear as possible (2004, 301).

Other journal articles most often revolve around training of medical professionals. Beyond this, the discussion continues unabated with regard to whether-or-not death education should take place in schools at all. There are a dozen or so journals that deal with the topic of death education.

The dissertations we have been able to locate, other than those listed above, are generally only obliquely related to death education, usually having to do with professional medical and/or psychological personnel.

There are a number of organizations dedicated to death education. Here it must be remembered that these are the organizations that are keeping the above conversations going. While there are a number of conversations around school-aged children and death education, the dialogue is usually concerned with grief counseling and education for those doing the counseling. Very little has actually been done to put in place educational programs that would act as preventive measures against trauma, confusion and ignorance, let alone meaning-making.

Not listed are courses offered in public institutions, mostly at the university level. For example, Marian College in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin has offered a Thanatology Program which consisted of a series of seminars held in 2001/2002. In 1974 the Duke University Religion Department offered "Aspects of Death and Dying." In 2000 Duke U. also founded Duke Institute on Care at the End of Life, dedicated to improving care for the suffering and dying. In New Zealand, the University of Canterbury offers a special topic "On Death & Dying" through the sociology department. Tampere University in Finland offers death education for nurses. Around the US, there are a number of death education courses offered on the university level, generally offered by medicine, sociology, and religion departments. One representative offer of a death and dying course comes from Aurora University in Illinois. Its description reads:

**HON 2100: Death and Dying. Dr. Paula Biedenbarn (Psychology), MWF 1:15-2:20, 4 semester hours, meets General Education "Knowing ourselves and others A" requirement.**

One of our last cultural taboos is the subject of death and dying. In this course we will explore attitudes toward death in the U.S., a culture described as having "invisible death". In addition, we will compare our current and historical death customs with those of other cultures, such as Mexico's *Dia de los Muertos* festival. Funerals, burials, cremation, and new "green" options will be examined. Current medical treatments for the dying, including hospice care and the controversial issue of physician-assisted suicide will be debated. Questions for discussion include: What are the experiences and needs of those who are dying? What happens to those of us left behind after the death of a loved one? How can the end-of-life experience be improved? Depictions of death in art, music, literature, television and film will also be studied. Facts and warning signs about suicidal behavior will be reviewed. The course ends with a discussion of religious views and depictions of the afterlife. Despite the course title, appreciation for life is a primary theme.<sup>12</sup>

The reader will note the final sentence in the above description. We would like to think this heralds a major change in the focus of currently offered death and dying curricula, and that this will be a trend that will soon filter down to the high schools.

Some of the offerings listed in the *References*, are those that it is hoped will add substance to the content of both the study and the text developed from the study. A few sources utilized are from government agencies, which provide necessary statistics regarding adolescent accidental death and suicide, etc.

## **1. 8 Chapter outline**

Following this introduction, the reader will find chapters that deal with relevant issues. Chapter Two is a look at the history, sociology, and psychology of death and dying, particularly as it has and continues to affect the adolescent, especially from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and on. Chapters Three and Four are devoted to a discussion of various world religions for the purpose of showing how religion will act as a model for youths to make meaning in their lives. Chapter Five is a detailed look at the methodological treatment used in this study of teenaged students and the faculty and staff that affect them. We will also do a point-by-point description of the surveys, their purpose and the rationale behind that purpose. Chapter Six constitutes a comprehensive and factual look at the research results and a discussion of the results from all angles, to include how the results mesh, or do not mesh, with our thesis. Educated guesses are identified as such, and every effort is made to be as objective as

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aurora.edu/academics/special-programs/honors/honors-seminars.html>



possible, as well as to expose presuppositions where they occur. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations regarding the research and the research results, to include specific recommendations regarding how death education should be designed, are made in Chapter Seven. Chapter Seven will include a partial syllabus for this purpose. Full *Resources* are included, and survey instruments used with students and faculty may be found in the attached appendices.

## **CHAPTER TWO – PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH AND DYING: HISTORY/PSYCHOLOGY/SOCIOLOGY**

### **2. 1 Introduction**

On July 21, 2008, the *World Net Daily*, an online, conservative paper, contained an article by Sterling Meyers titled “‘Death teaching’ found in schools” [sic]. Meyers is promoting *From Crayons to Condoms: The Ugly Truth about America’s Public Schools*, a book by Steve Baldwin and Karen Holgate which supposedly discloses the true state of the American public school system. The major concern about death education appears to be that it encourages suicide. This is an accusation that should be taken seriously if there is even a possibility of any truth to it. Yet, it is difficult to take such an indictment seriously when the reviewing author says things such as, some “...stories involve the public school system’s sometimes blatant push toward a homosexual agenda, and an Islamic education that moves “beyond ‘teaching’ about a religion” and teaches the religion in a pro-Islamic way.” It begins to sound like fear-induced hysteria and irrational bigotry. We have already discussed suicide in the previous chapter and are convinced that faculty/staff, school boards and parents, will all conclude, as did we, that suicide is not an issue when determining whether-or-not to provide death education in US high schools. Even so, all this apparent concern about traumatizing students with talk of death, says to this researcher that people in the US, and probably people in general, find death to be frightening and confusing. Inasmuch as death is arguably the final word in life as people understand it, and, inasmuch as one misses those they love when they die, sometimes to the point of distraction, death indeed wields great power over humanity.

However, if one's purpose is somehow to avoid death and prolong life, one is in effect saying that death is not only all-powerful, but a personal enemy to be defeated and avoided at all costs. If death is instead seen as the last part of the life cycle, and one concentrates on all of life, and on the relationships life and death bring, death may continue to sadden, but it will lose its power to cause irrational fear. Ignoring, or repressing the idea of inexorable death will not erase its inevitability. From whence did such attitudes concerning death arise?

This chapter is devoted to a survey and discussion of death from historical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. We will cover the history of death attitudes and death education as it shapes both the individual and the communal understandings of society's approach to death and death education, particularly as it affects the adolescent. We will only briefly touch on any history prior to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and will concentrate a bit more on death and dying history beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This treatment will provide all of us a good general overview of how society's attitude toward death developed over time.

As for the psychology of death, while we will make mention of the entire life-cycle, we will mostly be interested in the adolescent psyche, as this is the area of our argument. If we are to persuade school boards and faculty/staffs of US public high schools that a course on death and dying is in the best interest of the teenaged student, we will have to convince them that the adolescent mind is in need of a personal and social understanding of death. We will need to show how the course will have a positive influence on the way youth make meaning in their lives and communities.

Finally, this last aspect of communal meaning, and how it affects individual meaning, signifies the need for a look at how social perspectives toward death and dying have evolved over the course of the last 100 to 150 years, again, with special focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

These topics will be discussed in the order here named. The reason for this order is rooted in our belief that a historical overview shows how, first, the psychological, and second, the sociological, ideas of death and dying are directly responsible for how today's youths are left to find their own way through a morass of psychological and social issues surrounding what should be a natural part of their lives – an aspect of their lives, that like other aspects, they should be educated in, in

order to understand and integrate it into their life-meaning. We will not have the time or the wherewithal to do a thorough and detailed demonstration of how the psychological affects the sociological and vice versa, but we will endeavor to show how the adolescent mind develops (according to those who are considered experts) and how the individual youth then reacts and relates to his environment in the area of loss, here specifically to death and dying.

This is what we *will* be looking at. We also wish to mention what we *won't* be discussing for the reason mentioned above: If we are to convince parents, school boards, faculty and staffs of US high schools that a course in death and dying will benefit the teenager, it will be necessary to show clearly that certain topics are not destructive issues. Therefore, suicide will only occasionally and lightly enter the conversation.

Having looked at the history/psychology/sociology of death and dying, we are convinced that it is incumbent upon the older generations, and US society in general, to provide youths with the agency to make their own meaning in life and death, and that using a religious lens to approach the discussion gives the conversation a ground that is realistic by reason of the fact that religious questions are ever present. It is our contention that without this skill, young people are consigned, as were all of us in our own day, to scramble through life, racing from place to place, day to day, and idea to idea, looking for meaning that does not exist apart from the whole. They, like the generations before them, no longer know how to cope with death, or to put it into perspective. They do not know how to react to their own personal losses; nor do they know how to help others go through the usual losses that come with simply being alive.<sup>1</sup> It seems that people have come so far along this murky path that most people no longer even know they are on the road that leads to pointlessness, and that they are leading their precious children down the same gloomy trail. The fact that the older generations no longer know what to think of death, nor how to share the concept of death with the younger generations, makes it that much more imperative for society to provide death education in the schools. This is how the older generations may be

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<sup>1</sup> LaGrand (1988, 34), insists that this is the reason college students flock to death and dying courses. They have often had to deal with death, but their grief is yet unresolved because they do not know any coping strategies.

responsible for this education. The benefits of learning how to cope with personal loss, as well as how to help others cope with loss, are those that we believe will come with a base of knowledge and understanding that will naturally lead to a meaningful life, which includes death. For some, perhaps many, this will mean spiritual and/or religious connections.

## **2. 2 Introduction to our brief historical overview of death attitudes and death education**

Many commentators insist that death is so frightening to people that humanity has created religion and the afterlife only to answer the question “why death” that so frightens.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this cannot be completely true since some early religions had no spiritual concept of an afterlife. For example, the “afterlife” in ancient Mesopotamia was an existence “lived” in a hole beneath one’s home, where one’s corpse would be feared and cared-for by remaining relatives, particularly by one’s eldest son. The point is, the person is in a sense, still there amongst the living. Also, the early Hebrews thought of death in Sheol as silent, with no memory and no future – a place where angelic beings may live, but where life is undefined. Many permutations of what it means to be dead have been devised by various peoples throughout the ages, but not exclusively religious groups. In some cases, such as in Mesopotamia, the concern was more about taking care of the deceased so that the living would not have bad luck (Kramer 1988). Today, there are some Buddhists who build spirit houses for displaced spirits in order to avoid being haunted, and to avoid bad luck.<sup>3</sup> For the early Hebrews (Bowker 2001, Sigal 1999), and for many Jews today, the deceased continue in memory, and their memory enhances the life of the community.<sup>4</sup> It seems that for

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<sup>2</sup> Page 13 of Chapter One indicates that Bowker is one (2001, 8-9). Bowker also discusses that our knowledge of ancient reasons for the existence of religion cannot be unambiguously known. Therefore, he maintains, it is anybody’s educated guess, to include Freud’s (19). Elias (2001, 9) points to Freud, who connects fear of death with guilt, and maintains that this is psychologically viable (36-37).

<sup>3</sup> This understanding was taken from our trip to Northern Thailand, where our Buddhist guide informed us of the purposes of the spirit house (May – June 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.templebethelflint.org/lifecycle/funeral/> for an example of current use of this idea. The annual remembrance of “Yahrtzeit” is practiced because “We believe that one of the ways in which the dead live on is through memory, so it is important to call to mind the person who has died on a regular basis.” Yahrtzeit is the reading out of the deceased’s name in Temple, every year on the anniversary of a death. Kaddish, or praises to God, is also recited by the whole community.

these people and some others, anxiety was, and is, more about living than dying. So, what does it mean to live?

In some sense it is a given that all religions address the question of life's meaning, but it is most often viewed in relation to an eschatological hope. This is a linear view of time that is so real to all who live in the west that it is no wonder society sees everything in terms of time. Time is of the past, the present, and the future. When time is compartmentalized like this, one becomes acutely aware of the short duration of the life-span. This, in turn, can and has caused some people to focus on the eternal beyond. Thus, life and death become separated. Now, the actual occurrence of death is considered some sort of evil since it interrupts that which is considered life.

Elias (2001, 88) sees any death as an act of violence. Of course death does mean the cessation of biological life, but violence suggests an outside physical influence. He does not seem to refer to this idea, however. Rather, he seems to think cessation of life is an act of violence in itself. He is referring to the decay of the human body. It is possible to view decay as the result of activity perpetrated by microbes, viruses, and other assorted "bugs." Interesting concept, but we are left wondering why ceasing to exist is violence if, as Elias makes clear, there is nothing beyond this known world.

In opposition to this idea of death as act of violence, Ariès (1981, 609-10) maintains that with the advent of the modern age, and the growth of the importance of the family, death became simultaneously sad and beautiful. No doubt Elias would argue that this ideal never actually occurred in reality. Our suspicion is that the reality fell somewhere between the two poles. Whatever the case, Ariès's point is that the concept of evil itself disappeared and death became the beautiful departure for the great beyond. With this change, he says, the literal belief in Hell also died out. He does not, of course, suggest that no one believes in these ideas any longer, but that the change toward the acceptance of a beautiful beyond became more culturally prevalent. This development, he maintains, has necessitated the rise of understanding death as natural and "savage." In the beyond, one is reunited with those he loved in life. Both viewpoints lead to the strange personification of death. Death becomes the one who acts against humanity.

Kirby Godsey defines death not as the end of life, but “the end of time” (2005, 5). If one could prolong this life indefinitely, he would not have to worry about the afterlife, but he knows that death happens. Rationally considered, “The extension of days will not add life. It can only delay death” (Godsey 2005, 5). People see death as evil, or the enemy, for myriad reasons, mostly connected to sociological, psychological, and yes, religious, or traditional, aspects of one’s understanding of life. Of course, it could be argued that the religious falls under the rubric of the sociological. With the advent of the Renaissance, then the industrial revolution, and the subsequent arrival of the technological age, society has taken the dualism that arose in the early days of Christianity and combined it with a wish to extend life. This same dualistic way of thinking, i.e., good and evil, spirit and body, etc., imbues the idea of life with goodness, and the idea of death with evil.<sup>5</sup>

Not all peoples and religions have seen life and death in this dualistic manner. Some Native Americans, for instance, think of, or used to think of, time, life and death, in terms of the eternal now. Life is part of death and vice versa. In this schematic view everything is interconnected. People, animals, plants, the earth itself, time, space and place – all are part of one whole. This idea squares with Elias’ understanding that the meaning of an individual life comes from his social connections (Elias 2001). That is, it is only as people interact with each other that they become.

What affected the US, however, was not how its natives understood reality, but rather, the US understanding of life and death has mostly been determined by what historian William Hutchison has labeled the “Protestant Ethos” (Hutchison 2003). To keep it short, Hutchison’s thesis is that the US, since colonial days, was infused with Calvinistic Protestantism and Puritan sensibilities. This meant, for Hutchison, that salvation, as in, *what happens when one dies*, was of primary importance. Another way this idea might have gone is salvation as *what happens*

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<sup>5</sup> This appears to be an area whereby both the religious and the scientific have identical goals; i.e., the religious (if it is true) want to believe that physical death is followed by spiritual life, and the scientific want to believe that death can eventually be overcome. However, the strictly science-oriented mind is at a disadvantage in that until immortality via technology is achieved, those working toward such an end are failures. The religious, naturally, assume all must die, and failure does not enter into the equation.

*when one lives*. The latter might certainly include death, and this is precisely our view.

As to the elements of death education that actually, or possibly, cause an outcome of trauma and/or suicide, they are as yet difficult to pinpoint. The entire “problem” might essentially be a red herring, devised by those who either do not understand the purpose and intention of death education, or for their own reasons, find such education an affront and an intrusion into their seemingly independent lives. Be that as it may, there are indicators that death education does not actually breed fear or anxiety. As we have already mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, there are examples of quite an opposite effect to fear production in youth by death studies. The finest example is the one we there name – that of the high school program in northern New Jersey.

Questions that arise for us include: if the post-test is administered immediately after a short death and dying course, how much of the increased anxiety is rooted in the simple fact that death and dying thoughts and ideas are fresh on the minds of the students? Also, if fear is increased, does it make sense that the student fearful of death would go toward death rather than away from death? This means that we do not want to merely remove death from the realm of the evil and the fearful. It will be vital to imbue life with meaning even as death is placed squarely within the realm of the natural.<sup>6</sup> For if death is natural, and life has no meaning, what is it about life that makes it worth living? This is the meaning that youths need to find for themselves, with society’s assistance. Bringing our thesis full circle, then, is the impression that religion is preeminently part of the conversation and points to the human wish, or even need, to find such meaning in life.

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<sup>6</sup> Here we note that Elias contends this notion that death as a natural part of the life-cycle is consistent with his cultural “stage,” or “phase” theory, whereby human societies evolve in much the way individuals evolve over time. He connects the idea of the natural life-cycle to what is viewed as human progress in the form of science and technology. The suggestion is that eventually, humans believe, they will be able to find a cure (our word) for death. (2001, 46-47).



### **2. 2. 1 A brief historical overview**

Much is said in favor of the idea that death has been the life concern and motivator from the beginning of human time.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the point is moot, since a view in favor of or against this point does not change the broad interest the topic engenders in this day and age. There is evidence of burials that indicate a belief in an afterlife (Ancient Egypt, for one obvious example), where the corpse was accompanied to the tomb with paraphernalia for living. This is not an unusual practice, and many cultures and societies have engaged in similar activities throughout recorded history. On the other hand, there is also evidence of peoples who, again, did not concern themselves so much with the afterlife as the present life (the early Hebrews are one clear example).

By the time of Christ, death was of noticeable concern in the known world, even amongst the Jews, who, it is argued, at the time of the Babylonian exile, began to look to an afterlife where they would be free from poverty and oppression. The biblical record of the beginning of Christianity shows that the writers were very much interested in death and resurrection. We will not go into a complicated discussion of the various political and religious ideas of those days, but let it suffice to say that Saul/Paul the Pharisee stood in direct opposition to the Sadducees in insisting on both the resurrection of Jesus, and of all those who would follow him. It is not a stretch to note that the existing religious and philosophical ideas of the day made their marks upon nascent Christianity. This is as much a sociological as a religious/philosophical and even psychological argument. And so, the nature of life and death were thought about and discussed much, as substantiated by the various writings, and fragments of writings, from the second and third centuries, that survive to this day.

As the “world” grew in geographical girth, more ideas were added to the mix, and those concepts and models of life/death that were prominent in the Greco-Roman world changed (for better or worse, depending upon one’s point-of-view). One of the first major changes to take place with regard to the Christian understanding of life/death occurred with the legalization of Christianity. Once Christianity was the religion of the empire, the look of self-sacrifice altered. That is to say, those who had found their relationship to God in physical self-abasement and sacrifice in, for

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<sup>7</sup> See Gattliffe 1988, 54, for one.

example, martyrdom, now took self-denial to the extreme, moving into the desert, barely eating or drinking (in some cases), and spending their days on their knees or their faces. Again, to avoid a lengthy discussion, which is not really germane to our discussion of death education, we will not go into particulars, exceptions, and general details of this period. We also do not wish to contend that there was something inherently and definitely wrong with the way of the religious of that time, for surely the desert way had, and continues to have, much to recommend it. It is even arguable that there were those whose selflessness was remarkable and “saintly.” Yet we will simply state that death was seen as a better way, the sacrificial way of the few, and the most meaningful way to follow in the footsteps of Christ, being reunited with God in the eschatological future. It might be argued, then, that this was a period when death anxiety was not as much an issue as was life anxiety.

By the medieval period, the idea of being reunited with God on some other plain, continued to be the goal, and the means to that end was only slightly altered, as it continued the spiritual seeking, seeing visions, denial of self, and general mysticism heralding the idea of the fine-line between life and death. This still has a great influence on today’s ideas of death among the religious. It can also be said that not just in Christian circles is this the case, as mysticism of some sort developed rather universally. Each religious group had its own version, of course, but the broad idea of connective relationship to the transcendent is more-or-less the same. What is different from today, however, is that then death was never far away, and unless one feared some destination other than heaven, paradise, nirvana, and so on, it did not produce an untoward amount of anxiety. People often died at a young age, and losses of family and friends were both common and frequent. The known world was a religious world, and life and death were closely aligned. In a sense, then, one could say that death education could not be avoided; it was all around.

As previously mentioned, this is a point made by Ken Doka (Pfeiffer 2003, 87-88), in speaking about this present age. He wants to say that by not speaking about death, one in fact speaks volumes. He uses several examples of unintentional death education, to include both current events (the challenger explosion, which had a negative effect on a middle-school science class), and history studies (war and the holocaust). If education is not intentional, as with his experience when Kennedy was

assassinated and the students were simply sent home without any discussion, then “...somewhere along the line you are educating about death by omission” (Pfeiffer 2003, 88). It is important to speak intentionally about the reality of death, hopefully to avoid too much misunderstanding, and deleterious fantasizing. The Medieval understanding of death was no doubt fraught with superstition and unnecessary mystery, and this situation was not soon to fade. In fact, one cannot today say this situation is entirely defunct. But with the Renaissance and the Reformation, changes did occur.

In some ways being reunited with God (death) remained the force and the focus of religion, at least for Christians, and arguably for the many other religions as well. Great scientific theories had yet to be disseminated to the populace, but with the advent of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, seeds of knowledge were being transmitted to the lower classes, even as the middle, merchant class came into its own. More people had access to more healthful foods, and were living a bit longer as a result. Yet death was hardly viewed from a distance. Before, and even after the Industrial Revolution, death remained a common and accepted part of life.

This is not to say that somehow people wanted to die. Indeed, in some ways, earlier societies were much more inclined toward death than western societies were by the time of the Reformation. Even so, death was not, as it is today, hidden away in hospitals, or antiseptic. People died at home, surrounded by their family, friends, clergy, and community. As Elias points out, some of this death-bed activity may not have been friendly (2001, 75), but people were not yet usually shunted off to hospitals, to die amongst strangers, or even alone.

It is perhaps true that the romanticized picture of the family surrounding the bed of the dying patriarch is often exaggerated and even a sham, but the Victorian ideal of communal and family caring cannot have materialized in a vacuum. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that this idyllic image is not wholly without some basis in reality. Even if families were not always devoted to one another, they generally took care of each other, as was the social expectation of the time. Today, people like to think they take care of one another, but it might be argued that if society demands that the dying be silent, acquiescent patients who somehow also fight “the good fight” ‘til the very last, then society has abdicated its responsibilities. That is, if

people are not hearing what their loved-ones are saying about pain and loneliness (Moller 2000, 169-171), but leaving them out of embarrassment and powerlessness to die “alone,” then they have indeed abandoned their responsibility, and with it, those they say they love. In a recent visit with an elderly church member, the dying woman spoke of her regret that she was confined to her hospital bed, unable to teach as she had done all her life. Before one syllable of sympathy could be uttered, however, the octogenarian sheepishly said she shouldn’t be complaining and should be grateful for what she had. She was “putting on a brave face” and thought it unacceptable to admit to boredom and pain. We are not suggesting that people give in to constant self-indulgence or wallow in self pity, but we see nothing wrong with their receiving a few words of comfort and a little physical contact. We believe, along with Moller (2000) and even Elias (2001), amongst others, that such relationship and communal affection is not separable from life-meaning.

Moller’s contention is that people have forsaken, if inadvertently, the people they love and left them in the hands of cold science, in the form of medical advances. How did society get to this point? For our purposes, we are mostly interested in the earlier days of death and dying attitudes as they affected changes that were felt from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later. Elias goes to great length to say that these attitudes are mostly formed and driven by the so-called stage of social development of any given civilization (2001, 45, 84). He takes an evolutionary view of world civilizations as a whole. This suggests the idea popular in the Modern Age, that humanity is consistently moving in an upwardly evolutionary direction, on its way to the day when there will be no more war, and religion will die a necessary and kind death (or, perhaps, a violent one). This last opinion is manifestly his as seen in comments such as how the religions of the world are no longer able to instill a fear of hell in their adherents (Elias 2001, 16). His obvious assumption is, of course, that this is the general purpose of religious institutions. He also implies that following the Renaissance, humans have been less violent than they were previously, but that today they are returning to violent impulses (2001, 71). He mentions this in connection with death and dying and makes much of the point that while previous generations after the Renaissance have tended their dying in a public and familial way, they did not always attend the death bed with kindness. Still, he concedes that the dying were not alone,

though perhaps this was not always to their benefit, as Elias points out that since the family sometimes (he might say “often”) stood around the dying person’s bed taunting them as they died (2001, 15), the dying one might be better off alone. It seems ironic that Elias at once seems to both loathe and expect better things from humankind. In the end, his view is sociological, tinged with the psychological. We will look again at his assertions below, when we discuss the *Social implications of death and dying*.

### **2. 2. 2 Death and dying in the late, modern world**

We have previously looked at how the nearness of death amongst the living has changed as western society as a whole has moved off the farm and into the city or the suburban neighborhood. At the same time, medical advances continued to remove the community from the death-bed picture, so that family, friends, clergy, etc., have all become confined mostly to hospital visiting hours. Very little has taken the place of the comfort once found in community. Elias even says that medical personnel sometimes do all they can to keep friends and family away from the death bed as they get in the way of their care-giving (2001, 86). By this turn of events, both patient and loved-ones suffer. It is our assertion that this situation has created a vacuum for social, psychological and spiritual elements of the human psyche. Death education, we argue, could do much to fill the void and aid society in finding meaning in death as part of life.

In her 2004 article appearing in the May edition of *Death Studies*, Hannelore Wass shares her perspective on the state of death education, focusing mostly on healthcare professionals and “grief counselors.” She does, however, touch upon the state of affairs for school-aged children. She makes several salient points in her discussion. First, she duly notes that it was Herman Feifel who influenced the “multidisciplinary nature of death studies” (Wass 2004, 290). Feifel suggests that death education is for everyone. According to Kalish, even though there were a few sociologists and psychologists writing about the need to discuss death as early as the 1920s and 30s, it was not until Herman Feifel wrote a series of articles about death’s meaning in the late 1950s, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross discussed her stages of dying in the late 1960s, that the “death-awareness movement” gained momentum (Kalish 1985, 12-13). Kalish argues that the only reason this occurred was that young

activists were looking for a cause. He says that death and dying lost their taboo status in the late 1970s. This is not our experience. While it is true that journals dealing with the topic were being created and colleges and universities began to offer death education, to this day public school authorities tip-toe about the subject and mistakenly intertwine it with the 1st Amendment. We believe this situation to be directly related to some of the cases that have been in the news and/or gone to court, several of which we highlight later in the chapter.

Kalish complains that many of the studies of death education are “conducted with college students exclusively” (1985, 17). We do not rectify this situation, but the reasons for using college students for the survey, as outlined herein, also point to the fact that a very real trepidation remains in connection with the topic of death, its association with religion, and the concept of church and state separation.

However, as Wass also indicates via her survey of death education, growth along the lines of course offerings has mainly taken place amongst the professional sets (2004). There are programs for nurses, and programs for counselors, that mostly have their effects in the post-death area. Nurses, of course, will make some impression on the dying and their families, but this begs the question with regard to doctors and death education. We are not suggesting that no death education programs exist for doctors, but that they are certainly few and far between. This is evident from the plethora of reports coming from every quarter and discipline (the religious to the psychological to the sociological), that indicate the awkward, and sometimes cold nature of the dealings doctors have with dying patients and their families (Moller, 2000, is one obvious example).

As for the involvement of the school with death education, Wass indicates that most of what is seen in this area is along the lines of emergency response. Counselors are being trained to deal with suicide, terrorism, murder, and natural disasters, as they relate to the student, but they are not yet being trained in preventive counseling, beyond the occasional instance when a student appears to be suicidal. She also notes that grief counseling has become a specialized field. Even so, she somewhat bemoans its ineffectiveness (Wass 2004, 298).

This situation has solidified on the heels of the death awareness movement that followed the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and the explosion of interest her

work apparently produced in the 1970s. By the 1980s, Gatliffe indicates, death education courses were appearing in great numbers (1988). It is certainly true that college death and dying courses are not uncommon to this day. Wass has also noted how the shorter death education courses were not always helpful (2004, 298). We have elsewhere mentioned that the shorter courses can even be harmful. In harmony with Moller (2000), Wass notes that death education will become more and more important as technology becomes more and more sophisticated and prevalent (2004, 299).

### **2. 2. 3 Death and dying education today**

All of this has been to say that despite a few false beginnings, and hopeful burgeoning death education developments, death education has more-or-less stalled. There is no lack of scholarly interest, and the hospice movement, assisted suicide, and even the spirituality movement, continue to garner great interest among the general population. However, in the area of our interest, i.e. the public school system, the reality of providing death education has not kept pace with the supposed ideological belief in its merit. Both teacher and staff say they think it is a good idea, but they do not follow-up on implementation. They continue to use the time-worn excuses of an expected negative parental response, but they also note the very real problem of time and resources. As of 1990, one fifth of high schools, 15% of middle schools, and under one tenth of elementary schools nation-wide provided students with any sort of death education.<sup>8</sup> What factors have determined such a state of affairs?

The ongoing revolution in industry, science and technology has meant widespread and immense changes to both community and communications. This means that how people both individually, and in relation to family and community, view religion, and all of society, have been forever changed. The ways in which peoples, communities, and individuals have until now, and continue to, deal with all this change, varies widely. Everything from radical conservative reactions, to radical liberal, and even nihilist reactions have been stimulated by these changes. Change is not always easily accepted, and these momentous changes have been predictably

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<sup>8</sup> All of the statistics listed in this paragraph come from the *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (2003), quoted online at [www.deathreference.com/DA-Em/Death-Education.html](http://www.deathreference.com/DA-Em/Death-Education.html).

difficult for people. Psychology has become a serious academic discipline, and substantial change could most likely take much of the credit for its rise.<sup>9</sup> So, what did all this change mean for humanity from the psychological perspective?

### **2.3 Psychology and death education**

After a short introduction, we shall begin by looking at some of the understandings of what science and technology have meant for the advancement of psychological studies in the modern era. Next, we will briefly discuss how communications have altered the psychological landscape. Then, we will take a quick glance at Piaget's developmental stages, and give particular attention to adolescent development, rounding out the discussion with the most recent findings with regard to cognitive and emotional maturity. Finally, we will discuss what adolescent psychological issues mean for death education from a religious perspective.

The way parents communicate with their children, and in fact, the way they model communication in general, will have a major bearing on how the child develops both in terms of communicative abilities and how she comes to view her own identity. The latter point is made by Cait (Cait 2005, 90) who says that communication skills and self-esteem are highly dependent upon parent-child communications. Without the necessary communication skills, the child, then the adolescent, will be unable to express her thoughts and feelings about death, and will be unable to help herself, or others, to cope with loss. The silence is thick and is likely to result in fear and angst both before and when the adolescent is actually confronted with a dying or death situation. How is she to deal with feelings of disbelief, hurt and anger surrounding a topic that is largely taboo?<sup>10</sup> Peers are unlikely to be of help as they too are probably not prepared to talk about death, because parents fear broaching the subject. And parents fear the subject because they too have no understanding of its perceived complexities. So, in a time when the adolescent is experiencing a need to find independence, as well as to find relational

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<sup>9</sup> This statement is, of course, based on an intuitive gathering of all the facts through experience and we therefore concede that it may be erroneous.

<sup>10</sup> While there is a lot of death seen in the field of entertainment (computer games, movies and television shows), we maintain that speaking socially about real death and dying situations is still frowned upon, especially since "entertainment" death is both unreal and unrealistic.



intimacy, she will be shocked by an encounter with the finality of death, and not only have nowhere to turn, but also have no background on which she might ground her feelings and find the help she needs in order to cope.

*Science and technology* have greatly changed the way death-related issues are perceived in the world. Even those who see life from a standpoint of faith have been affected. In a way, religious people have had to grow up. That is, they have had to accept the idea that religious scriptures may not be entirely historically accurate. Thomas Long indicates that it was following the Civil War that,

...the quite literal views of many American Christians regarding heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the body and the second coming of Jesus began to ebb away. (Long 2009, 22)

But for some people, it was as though the rug had been pulled out from beneath their feet. No literal place called Heaven? No Hell? No material resurrection? We are not interested in making claims regarding these ideas. Instead, we wish to point out that those who find this difficult generally have one of two reactions: 1. they reject any idea which could mean having to adjust their mental picture of God and creation, or, 2. they embrace scientific ideas, such as evolution, and completely reject faith in a god of creation. The latter group may find life and death especially hard if they cannot fill the void with new meaning. If their new religion is science, which is often the case even when they do not realize that it takes faith to accept that science has, or will eventually find, all the answers, then it is easy to understand how death might be considered the enemy.<sup>11</sup> For, in this scenario, death simply means the end of existence. What is harder to understand in such a case, is how those of a scientific bent fear death...or non-existence, since one would not be aware of not existing. There is a third group which in a less literal, and more metaphysical way, accepts these Christian claims as valid, and is able to integrate such doctrine into their life-view, and/or life-meaning.

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<sup>11</sup> It is something of an irony that people who see faith as foolish, have faith that something as nebulous as “science” will one day solve all of humanity’s problems. There are those who even “believe,” without doubt it seems, that human beings will one day live forever. We had thought this was a rare conviction until reading Moller (2000). See his third chapter for an excellent discussion of this relatively new “faith.”

Adolescence is a time of searching for answers – trying to find one’s way in life, which includes death. Making meaning in the life of the adolescent is critically important. Some adolescents will determine that their meaning does not lie in any religious idea. Some will look for meaning in the “facts” of science, but others will say that meaning lies elsewhere. For instance, Godsey believes that “our sense of the meaning of life we must gain from our own choices” (2005, 21). By this, he refers to the way human beings treat one another. Meaning, then, is built through relationship. This idea is not uncommon. Both Moller (2000) and Elias (2001) share a similar view of life’s meaning; only the understanding of how this meaning is constituted for them varies. As for the prospect of what if anything, follows death, our survey of students indicates that even the atheists amongst the young are curious about death in terms of afterlife and what different religious groups subscribe to in this regard.

It would not be the purpose of our death and dying course to make any attempt to convert adolescents, but rather to help them understand the religious ideas they indicate an interest in and especially to help them find their own meaning of life that includes death. It would make little sense to brush these concerns aside if these are things teens think about, but that is exactly what people in the US have been doing. We maintain that much of this *communication* black hole exists for two basic reasons. The first one is that so few people seem to understand the law.

The First Amendment of the Constitution does not say religious ideas may not be discussed in schools, or that religious scripture may not be read in schools, but instead points to the fact that the government may not make an establishment of any religion, nor impede the free exercise of religion. This amendment to the Constitution seems quite clear in its intent, yet the courts are sometimes bogged down by cases that argue over this very point. Perhaps it is because the Supreme Court has yet to establish clear guidelines regarding its meaning, confusion continues to grow and has resulted in a lot of unnecessary arguments. In 2006, the high school valedictory address was to be given by Brittany McComb, who had earned the highest GPA at Foothill High School in Henderson, Nevada. She submitted her speech in advance, as required by the school and was informed that she would have to omit all uses of the word Christ and “the Lord,” as well as all biblical references. Because she felt that this was an infringement upon her free speech rights, she reverted to the original

speech on the day of the graduation in June of 2006. When the school authorities realized she was giving her original speech, they turned off the microphone. This action was met by extensive jeers, but she was still not allowed to continue. With the help of the civil liberties and human rights advocacy group, the Rutherford Institute, Brittany's case went to court in July of the same year. Nearly a year later, the court had rejected the school board's attempts to have the case dismissed – twice. However, in March of 2009, they succeeded in having the case thrown out of court, at which point the Rutherford Institute appealed to the Supreme Court of the US. The Supreme Court refused to hear the case, dismissing it in November of 2009 (*Brittany McComb v. Gretchen Crehan et al.*). One side of the argument said that it was her personal speech and she should be able to speak her mind and give her honest opinion, and that, in fact, the constitution guarantees freedom of speech. The other side of the argument said that since she was speaking for the entire graduating class, she ought not to risk alienating those whose beliefs and opinions varied from her own, and they called this separation of church and state.

There are similar cases. One in particular is of interest for its opposite outcome to that of the case of Brittany McComb. The Montana Supreme Court, in 2008, found in favor of Renee Griffiths, who had been denied her right as co-valedictorian of Butte High School in Butte Montana, to speak when she refused to change the word "Christ" to "my faith" along with some other changes.

Then there are cases like that of *Donna Kay Busch v. Marple Newton Sch. Dist. et al.* This case involves a kindergarten class, whose teacher invited one child each week to share his or her likes and dislikes with the class. Part of this sharing included the child's favorite book, a portion of which would be read to the class by one of the child's parents. Mrs. Busch's son, Wesley, chose the Bible, from which Mrs. Busch was to read an excerpt from Psalm 118. She was not allowed to read to the class from the Bible and was told it was against the law by the school principal (2004). This, we find, is precisely the problem. Even school authorities do not know the law. Another case involved a woodwind ensemble that planned to play an instrumental version only of Ave' Maria at their high school graduation in 2006. The school district superintendent did not allow the performance of the song because of its religious ties (*Kathryn Nurre v. Dr. Carol Whitehead*).

Brittany McComb's case is not at all easy, for reasons named above, but it is not common either. The other cases listed above are more common. This is so due to a lack of proper knowledge of the meaning of the First Amendment and it leads to a refusal to allow students the freedom to create Bible (or any scriptures) study clubs or to pray on a personal level on school grounds, or to allow teachers, coaches and administrators to engage in personal religious activity on school property. One such example involves the football coach of East Brunswick High School, who had been praying on bended knee, apart from the team as they prayed player-led prayers, since 1983. In 2005, school officials implemented a policy that forbade school district representatives from participating in student-instigated prayer.<sup>12</sup> The question here is one of civil rights, not separation of church and state.

This is the same misunderstanding that has arisen, and may again arise, when it is suggested that a course on death and dying from a religious perspective be offered in the nation's high schools. This seems to us to be a non-problem, but it gets in the way of providing death education in a form that is desired by students, and therefore most probably meets a psychological and spiritual need. It would be appropriate to note at this time, however, that we do not here suggest a required course in death education, but an elective.

It is our contention that requiring death education at this time would be counterproductive to its gaining acceptance nationally. Even a few of the students we surveyed did not see a need; this attitude was exemplified by such comments as "When I am old I will think about it." Some adolescents are unable to imagine a scenario in which they could possibly be affected by death. Of course, this particular narcissistic viewpoint often leads to risky behavior, which makes it even more important for those with such views to engage in meaning-making, and to be educated in the ways of life.

The other reason for the communications black hole has developed as a natural result of parental confusion, lack of knowledge, and fear that death talk might frighten their children. A recent phenomenon to hit the public square with regard to religion versus science is that more religionists, scientists, historians, and sociologists are

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<sup>12</sup> *Marcus A. Borden v. Sch. Dist. of the Township of East Brunswick, New Jersey, et al.*

suggesting that religion and science are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While this seems obvious to us, the general belief among the public in Anytown, USA has been that to follow scientific theory is to disallow religion – particularly the concept of creation.

This is not the place to argue creation/evolution/intelligent design, nor do we desire to do so. We only make note of this issue as it bears upon the adult's confusion surrounding death. For some adults, this is not a problem. If they do not have their own fears and misconceptions about religion and science, they will not be at a loss about what to say to their children. It is a simple matter of dead or alive. But many parents are loathe to make such absolute statements to their children, partly because they don't wish to frighten them, and partly because they are themselves unsure about death, afterlife, and existence in general. Those who now rely upon science and technology do not know how to comfort people touched by death. It has no meaning for life.

Lest one wonder what a death and dying course might have to offer the atheist, however, we would like to state here, categorically, that our purpose is to help all youths make meaning of life, whether this means for them a life continuous, or a life that ceases entirely once it ceases biologically. It is about living. This is why we are so insistent that death is a part of life. Meaning is to be found in the entire life-cycle. It may be that life's meaning will be found in relationship to others, whether one is religious or atheistic. It may be that life's meaning will be found in one's work, or in education, or in one's daily play. For some, life may only have meaning if it is seen from an existentially significant position. The entire point is to help the adolescent reflect upon the possibilities and make deep inner connections that give meaning to all facets of his life. How this idea is communicated will be of paramount importance.

If death education is to be offered at all, it must be designed with the child's biological age as well as his *cognitive and emotional* age in mind. While it is now generally acknowledged that Jean Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Stages (Piaget 1958) are not as time-fixed as he claimed, most psychologists still subscribe to his model in a broad way. The stages Piaget identified begin with the Sensorimotor stage in infancy, followed by the Preoperational stage of the toddler-kindergartener. At about the time the child begins grade school, generally around age 6, he enters the

Concrete Operational stage, which continues until he is 11 or 12, when he enters Piaget's final stage of Formal Operations. It is in this final stage that the child is able to think abstractly, and this is where, it is widely believed, the child becomes able to understand death and all its aspects. It may well be that the child should be exposed to intentional death education from his earliest days, but since our purpose is to show how death education will benefit teens, we will limit our discussion to that group. Piaget's idea has, since he developed his model, been nuanced by the proposal that variations in education can greatly change the aforementioned timing. On the other hand, it is also recognized that brain-growth cycles in fact do transpire at the times of movement from one stage to another.

During the final stage, it is believed, while one is yet an adolescent, she goes through several stages within the stage. Noppe and Noppe indicate that the youngest adolescents are engaged in separating themselves emotionally from their parents (Noppe and Noppe 1997, 253-275). In mid-adolescence, the emphasis is on finding a sense of control and personal mastery, while it is the late adolescent who seeks intimacy and commitment. It is in this final adolescent phase that it has been understood that a person makes sense of her social world, gaining emotional understanding and maturity and fitting her cognitive awareness into her experiential picture.

Some suggest that the adolescent experience of rapid physical and sexual change raises the specter of death in the adolescent sub-conscious (Corr, Nabe and Corr 2003). Without allowing a safe place in which youths may discuss this, its truth is not likely to be discovered. Piaget's model is not completely inaccurate, but it has been discovered since Piaget's time that the brain is not finished its maturation process until sometime in the middle twenties (Knapp 2006). Each new phase of growth is characterized by "waves" of gray matter overproduction (Cornell & Univ. of Rochester 2002). This new discovery causes one to wonder when exactly each stage begins and ends. Servaty and Hayslip (2001) assert that all adolescents need peer support when confronted with death and stipulate that they found no variances in the needs of adolescents between the three supposed stages.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Could it be that this is true for all people, regardless of age?

Edgar and Howard-Hamilton (1994, 2) suggest that the adolescent has, by age ten or eleven, “completed the cognitive developmental stages necessary to accept the elements of a mature definition of death.” This rather broad statement, encompassing both intellect and emotion, is based on the idea that the ability to think abstractly makes one ready to deal with death. Our contention is, more and more as we have researched the facts, that all people are capable of handling death on a psychological level, as long as it is communicated in an age-appropriate, and supportive manner. And, as stated in Chapter One, the so-called “work”<sup>14</sup> of the adolescent stages of development only suggests a need for death and dying communication if youths are to “accept” the definition of death.

Not only does the research point to the intellectual immaturity of the adolescent brain, but it also denotes the emotional immaturity connected to self-control and judgment. No doubt this discovery of adolescent brain immaturity explains a lot of the behavior patterns parents, teachers and other authorities have observed in young people. And, it points to the need to help adolescents get information and understand as much as is possible what happens to them and their loved ones at the time of dying and death.

So, while Piaget’s developmental stages have not been discarded or disproved with these more recent findings, they do need to be fine-tuned even more than they have up to this point. For example, while the adolescent is capable of abstract and logical thought, it has been noted above that he is also prone to emotional misunderstandings and a lack of self-control. This makes it all the more necessary to give young people the tools they need to cope with loss. An interesting point made by Cornell and Rochester researchers is that “Teens also differ from adults in their ability to read and understand emotions in the faces of others” (May, 2002). Thus, questions that are often asked with regard to dying, such as, “What do I say to someone who is dying?” take on even more urgency. The inability to “read” faces, makes it that much more difficult to intuit the needs of the grieving person. This may explain why teens tend to become isolated when they experience loss.

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<sup>14</sup> Neimeyer (2004) maintains that the variety of research and the concomitant results show that we cannot assume there is any one process of grief “work” or predictability of “stages.”

Sometimes, of course, it is the teen suffering the loss who isolates herself, but many times it is the teen's friends who shy away from contact with their bereaved friend. This phenomenon is widely reported. Elias (2001) contends that this tendency toward self-isolating behavior is socially born and applies to all people, whether dying or mourning. Servaty and Hayslip, in their survey of several studies, find the experience of social withdraw to be common among both bereaved adolescents and those who have divorced parents. Among the parentally bereaved they found the greatest withdrawal and general anxiety (2001). The emotionally immature brain of the adolescent, then, adds to the discomfort of the teen's experience as compared to the child or the adult. The child is also emotionally immature, but she is also not yet capable of the abstract and deeply reflective thought that might contribute to the serious nature of the death experience. Conversely, the adult has both the cognitive and the emotional maturity with which to cope with the experience of death, or so it is hoped.

In 1986, Corr and McNeil asked, "Are adolescents children or adults?" They contend that if children, then society is right to protect them from many of the issues and facts surrounding death,<sup>15</sup> but if they are adults, then it is a disservice to treat them as children who are incapable of facing the very real issues that are inherent in life and death meaning-making. Even if the brain does not fully develop before one's mid-twenties, death will come. These authors take a middle path, saying that adolescents are not children, with minds that can be swayed too easily by parents and other authority figures, but rather they are in a state that falls between childhood and adulthood, wherein they must find a way to make sense of their needs and problems, their feelings and wishes, as well as ways of integrating this transforming self into the perceived real world that surrounds them. The research on the brain discussed above supports this idea of a distinct adolescent time of life, with a distinct adolescent brain. For Robert Kastenbaum this intimates the need for adolescents to make sense of death itself (1959).

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<sup>15</sup> Even here, we are not inclined to agree. An attempt to hide the facts of death from our children seems pointless at best, and dangerously misleading at worst. How long can one continue to say to a child, for instance, "Grandma is on a long trip"?



Death educators are largely in agreement that death education is important for the adolescent. Psychologists are particularly concerned that adolescents have a need to individuate. This means it will be necessary for them to reflect deeply within, in order to find their outward connectivity. While such a statement may hint at contradiction, we maintain that such activity (deep inner reflection) is necessary to the emerging self for the purpose of finding one's place in life and society. In knowing one's self, one may come to know others. And it is in knowing others that a place is found among them. For many, this has spiritual and/or religious connotations that should not and even cannot, be avoided. Put simply, the adolescent wants to know the answers to such questions as "Who am I? Where do I fit in? Am I part of this group?"

It is really about making meaning for life...which includes death. How strange it is that for so many years now, society has imagined that gaps may be left in children's educations without producing negative effects. It is like planning to run a train from Virginia to Florida, but not wanting to go lay any track in any states but Virginia and Florida. One may lay thousands of miles of track in these two states, but it is hard to imagine the train leaving Virginia and arriving in Florida. Yet this is what has been expected of students. How are they to travel from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood when there are gaping holes left in their educations, to include such areas as sex, religion, and death education? Somehow people are surprised, and a little disturbed, that youths do not know how to get to their destination. A lot of educational track has been missing, yet everyone acts as though they should simply have known to take the bus, ride a bike, or rent a car to get where they are headed. In fact, it is quite remarkable that so many manage to arrive at all!

Children need guidance in meaning-making. In this technological age, this secularized society, where community rituals are no longer in existence for the large majority of the population, and where families no longer know what is expected of them in the face of death, this must be intentional. Elias and Moller address this issue from two different perspectives. We turn now to a sociological look at what it means to die today, and we use Elias and Moller as grounding points for our discussion.

## 2. 4 Death and sociology

After a short introduction, we will look at three main issues as they touch on death and dying from a sociological perspective. The work of Elias and Moller will provide us with pivotal starting points for looking at individualism/community, spirituality, and technology. We will follow this discussion with a brief mention of media violence, and its sociological effects in general.<sup>16</sup> Finally, we will wrap up the chapter with a summary that concentrates on those conditions we consider most significant to our thesis, that is, how do these conditions affect death education from a religious perspective as it relates to adolescents?

To what devices is the adolescent left when trying to form her understanding of life, the purposes of life, and the meanings of life? A number of researchers have asked this question, but not all have determined that religious understanding is important to the overall purpose of death education. We have already indicated that society in the US tends to neglect the adolescent with regard to philosophical meaning-making. We have only touched on a small part of the complexity and chaos that now faces American society in this regard. We have suggested that an agrarian past contained multiple opportunities for youths to be exposed to death, while the industrial age snatched some of those opportunities away, replacing them with an illusion of immortality, perpetual youth, and the denigration of the aged. This creates a tension in the developing mind of the adolescent that forces a dichotomy between young and old to be equated with a sort of good and evil dualism. Thus, death is scarier than ever because now, it is not only a case of ashes to ashes and Heaven vs. Hell, but a case of “what is the point?” Life and death have become an absurdity. If the adolescent is not aided in her ability to make sense of life, and to integrate death into her picture of life, society is simply crossing its metaphorical fingers, hoping to get lucky and that each youth will somehow find her way through the morass of social confusion, and will manage to find herself in a place of infinite meaning and hope.

Both Elias and Moller are fully aware of this situation. Each of them concludes, in part, that *community* is necessary for a life of meaning. However, they come at the problem from different perspectives. For Elias, there is no sense in even attempting to make meaning in any theological or spiritual mode. His viewpoint is

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<sup>16</sup> We will also revisit this notion in our concluding chapter.

entirely informed by scientific inquiry. He makes this unapologetically clear throughout the work, but especially when he says,

Meaningful death, meaningless dying – these concepts, too, open the door to problems that, one might think, receive too little public consideration. To some extent, this may well be because they are easily confused with another problem, almost identical in its formulation but totally different in its meaning. If we wish to say of someone that he occupies himself with something totally useless, we may be saying as an example that he is reflecting on the meaning of life. The uselessness in that case stems from the fact that he is seeking a metaphysical meaning for human life, a meaning that is, as it were, prescribed for the individual, whether by extra-human powers or by nature. But such a metaphysical meaning can at best be the subject of philosophical speculation; one may give one's wishes and fantasies free rein in seeking this kind of meaning – the answers can be no more than arbitrary inventions. Their content can be neither substantiated nor refuted. (Elias 2001, 62-63)

We are not here interested in conducting a survey of philosophical arguments, but only wish to point out that while Elias has much to say that is rationally “useful” to making a case for community, he completely eschews any idea of religion or spirituality because, simply put, he does not believe in continuation of life after life – in any form or fashion. In fact, he does not even allow for the possibility. It is not a mystery to Elias. He says,

Perhaps we ought to speak more openly and clearly about death, even if it is by ceasing to present it as a mystery. Death hides no secret. It opens no door. It is the end of a person...If humanity disappears, everything that any human being has ever done...becomes meaningless. (Elias 2001, 67)

In itself, this is not, in our view, necessarily a problem. For some people, what one does in life, and life relationships are enough in themselves to give life meaning. What is more, we do not think it helpful to pretend that people aren't really dead, yet alive ‘somewhere.’ It is an option to be considered, not a fact to be imparted. And it, that is, religion, provides an excellent model for meaning-making. However, we do wish to point out that Elias' point-of-view takes faith as much as any kind of religion and/or spirituality. If this is where young people determine meaning is found, we are

not interested in telling them they are wrong...nor do we claim to know if indeed they *would* be wrong. As for Elias' view, though, this is a presupposition – his starting-point for his entire sociological outlook. And, as for the partial quote above, it is our contention that the problem with Elias' position isn't that it makes death meaningless, but that it makes life meaningless. We would also like to point out, that contrary to Elias' claim that if "humanity disappears," so does any meaning that society engendered (2000, 33), is only true if all of the physical expressions, the ideas and beliefs, the give and take of daily life, the inventions, creations, and destruction of any thing or any part of life, also disappear. This seems to us an improbability, if not an impossibility. Society may not recall from whence or where its history and its ways emanate, but it is hard to believe that all is totally wiped out, even if humanity comes to an end. The only way we can imagine such a scenario, is if the world itself were to blow up and all the pieces of it were to disintegrate into thin air. Even then, it seems the energy such an event would create, would have an effect on whatever it is that exists beyond this world. Complete annihilation, say scientists, is not possible. This seems logical, but even here we are not so closed-minded as to say "never." Yet this is what Elias does on this point. Meaning, for Elias, is entirely material, or at the very least, meaning is only 'existent' in concrete action.

Conversely, Moller comes at meaning-making from a spiritual standpoint. That is, he couches his remarks about what is important to people in life (including death) in terms like "spiritual," "ritual," "soul," "religion," etc. Moller sets this picture of meaning-making against what he calls "technocratic death." This means that Moller sees death being more and more medicalized and less and less lived out in the comfort of communal care. He does not wish to say that medicine has no place in society, and he admits it may even provide some hope to patients who might wish to continue to live, but he does say that in conjunction with extreme individualism, dying people are now expected to "die with dignity," which here means to put up a good fight, cooperate, and die quietly. This situation means that in some sense, in a world of commodities, humans have been co-modified; humans have themselves become objects - things. One is a thin or fat "thing." One is a young or old "thing." One is a successful "thing," or a "thing," of failure. And, as the way people die is a reflection of how people live, social expectations mean that one dies alone, as one

lives alone. That is, people are individuals who strive to live independently. People are consumers, who live to be more beautiful, richer and more powerful than others. Relationships are only as deep as wallets. What does death have to do with materialism? It is meaningless both as it touches on death and on living in general. This is so because death erases looks, strips all people of any type of power, or sense of control, and laughs in the face of any idea of taking some accumulated belongings to the grave or beyond. Death, the enemy, defeats all eventually. And so, according to Moller, one is left all alone when he can least bear to be alone.

In the final analysis, both Elias and Moller endorse communal connection. For Elias it is a matter of this life being imbued with meaning through relationship. People are a reflection of friends and family. Individuals are what society says they are. What one does defines who one is. For Moller, people exist in a very real sense through interconnective relationship that not only connects them to those they know and love, but to a past rich in tradition, a present alive with ritual, and an eternity of spiritual meaning. For both Elias and Moller, without community, human beings do not have grounding. In being known, one becomes. Are they right? Which of them is “more-right?”

Have people become so individualized that tradition, ritual, religion in general, and communities of all kinds are no longer desirable or necessary in the growth, the education, of society’s children? Do people really want the new world of technology and media hype to determine what their children believe and how they live? LaGrand has made the observation that affluence and technology create “the illusion that interdependence is no longer important for mental health and adapting to change” (1988, 48). Technology is a broad topic, but as it touches on death education, can society not aid children in their making of meaning for life that includes death? Regarding this topic, there has been much discussion and a lot of disagreement with regard to the effects of media violence on how youth view death. While this is both a psychological and a social issue, we will deal with media and violence here, as it has its roots in the sociological.

Much of our discussion must remain speculative. This is because although there have been a number of studies of *media violence*, there is not at all a clear or

definitive answer to the question of its influence on children's emotions or behavior.<sup>17</sup> Both sides are vehemently certain of their stance.

James Potter (1999), who has studied the effects of violence in media on people, says that not only is violence pervasive over a wide variety of media, but this dissemination is both widespread and continuous, and as such has caused people to see violence as a normal social and cultural phenomenon. However, the question raised by other researchers is whether-or-not said media violence causes violence in the people who view it. In 2007, David Trend surveyed the research on media violence and found that both the methodologies used to study media violence and the resultant conclusions were far from convincing. The major problems occurring due to methodological weaknesses have mostly to do with the difficulty in isolating the cause of any behavior, and presuppositional approaches to these. That is, if one expects to find a certain outcome, one is likely to design (if subconsciously) a situation that will produce the desired results. We will visit this issue again in Chapter Five when we look at our research *Statistical Analysis*. This still leaves the question of media effects unanswered.

According to Louis LaGrand (1988, 46-47) "It is unfortunate but true that we are captive to the whims of the media." LaGrand points out the many misconceptions being perpetuated by entertainment media, like the way someone's parent dies and the remaining characters in a story quickly move on, or the rather romantic way people die from illness in films like *Love Story*, and *Steel Magnolias*, etcetera. His thesis is two-sided. First, he wishes to point out that death rituals have been lost as society has secularized, making mourning something that is mostly hidden away, and second, he says that due to the media idolization of youth, beauty and success, a situation has been created that is psychologically unhealthy. Surely he is not completely wrong. After-all, one could easily name commercials and products that court the interest of even the youngest of children. If someone were to say that children were not affected by fads, we all would be surprised indeed. However, since LaGrand wrote his thesis

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<sup>17</sup> Morgan (1998) is one researcher who has observed how media offerings promote an unrealistic image of death by making it appear reversible, reserved for the "bad guys," something that only happens to "others," and is not likely to produce deep grief. Hence, he says, [real] death is unusual and unnecessarily harsh.

in 1988, there has been a movement in entertainment that stands in strange opposition to the notion of media violence.

First, it is important to note the rise of the pornography metaphor as it relates to death and dying. Gorer posited (1965 and 1967) the notion that violent death has replaced natural death and he calls this pornographic. Second, with the social changes that came with first the industrial age, followed by the age of technology, Gabriel Weiman (2000, 167-189) points out that death and dying culture has entered a new phase. It is a pornography whereby the media appeals to the voyeur in people – death must be hidden, and peeked at, and death is more and more about good versus evil. Weiman describes this turn of events as plots that are all dualistic – the good guys vs. the bad guys, the white hats vs. the black hats, earthlings vs. aliens, etc... If he is right, this is unhealthy, unrealistic, and possibly bigot-producing. For, as Weiman also points out, the data shows that the victors are more often the so-called good guys, or they are white rather than black, young rather than old, and upper class rather than lower class (2000,173). Weiman also points to issues relating to who is victimized in a large majority of the shows. Women and young children top the list, as opposed to the elderly and young, non-white, inner-city males, who statistically are more likely to die in real life (Showalter et al. 1987, 4). One of Weiman's major concerns with this situation has to do with unrealistic expectations on the part of the viewing public. An example he uses is that Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) is often depicted as successful on television and in movies, when in the real world, it more often is not (Weiman 2000, 177). Another unrealistic idea put forth by such entertainment is that people very often commit suicide for economic or reasons of a romantic nature while in real life the reasons are usually related to mental problems, which are also underreported by the news media. Furthermore, he here indicates that media reports illustrate that married people commit suicide at a higher rate than do singles or those divorced, but the reality is the opposite (Weiman 186-7). Yet the story does not quite end here.

Rodney Clapp (2009, 45) conveys his belief that society has entered yet another phase of media influence – that of the forensic death. This is where violence takes an odd turn in entertainment outlets. He points to the many television shows like “CSI Miami” that take a scientific view of death. The camera, he says, rests both

on the living and the dead characters simultaneously, while the dialogue covers the cause of death in specific medical terms and the characters talk about the life of the deceased, thus humanizing him. Then, he says, there are scenes that show how the investigators of the crime that killed the deceased not only track down the killer(s), but also portray caring, sensitive investigators who seek justice on behalf of the deceased. The good news one can extrapolate from Clapp's report is that forensic death at least seems to be about justice, and the idea that people should care for one another is certainly a move in the right direction. But, are LaGrand, Weiman, and Clapp correct in supposing such a broad influence of media entertainment upon the populous?

For now, we will only further mention a paper that appeared in *Death Studies* in 2004 (Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes 2004, 459-474), which found that college students exposed to 10 hours of the television series *Six Feet Under*, a program about a mortuary family, resulted in a small increase in the students' fear of death. Having taught death and dying courses to undergraduates, we are surprised by these findings, as such a reaction was extremely rare from our students. Perhaps it is well to put things into context, however. For, as we have already mentioned, a number of researchers have suggested that short-term exposure to death ideas and death education tends to result in greater anxiety, whereas longer term exposure tends to do the opposite. Also, Schiappa, et al., make the suggestion that "young adults generally avoid thinking of death unless the subject and its various dimensions are made salient to them" (2004, 171), and this accounts for the heightened sense of fear. This means that "ignorance is bliss." We suspect this point is overstated. Still, Schiappa and his colleagues note that there was evidence, even in their very short study among college students, that meaning-making (or the desire to make meaning) was occurring. In the episode of the show the students viewed last, the undertaker is asked by a grieving relative why people have to die. The students were asked if they remembered the undertaker's response. They apparently replied in unison: "To make life important." It is interesting that this line stuck with them, and we maintain that this experience points to the need of youths to make meaning of life and death. Whether-or-not this particular response is a healthy one, we are not here prepared to tackle, yet it is clear that this meaning-making is a human need that ought to be addressed. Hence, we



make the assertion that death education should be uniformly developed for high schools in the United States.

So, while it is still unclear as to whether-or-not media violence causes people to become violent, it is clear that as long as it remains in the realm of possibility, such affective violence would mean much to both the individual and society. If one were to consider the power of suggestion, it seems likely that the watching of repetitive violence would take its toll on human behavior, whether for good or ill. Of one thing one may be certain – violence has stepped well beyond the bounds of fantasy in society, and youths must therefore come to terms with it.

Another area of confusion and contention is in regard to public violence, such as the 9/11 and Virginia School of Technology tragedies. Some commentators claim that these incidents, and others like them, have caused a great upswing of fear of death among adolescents (Brown University 2003). Phipps says it goes both ways. For example, he notes how WWII galvanized society in interpersonal support and hope for the future, imbuing many with a spirit of self-sacrifice, thus a society that fearlessly faces possible death, and compares this to the Viet Nam War, which, along with the possibility of nuclear annihilation, resulted in mass fear and anxiety (Phipps 1987). In fact, he says that the fear looms so large that some find the answer in suicide. It sounds like a contradiction, and is at best irrational, but most certainly creates a paradox. Elias takes the opposite view of greater fear in the face of violence by claiming that when violence is on the rise, the psychological reaction is desensitization (2001). He paints a picture of acceptance and practical self-defense and protectionism. When the study is specific to adolescents, the outcome may be different. For example, Tuicomepee and Romano, in their study of 400 Thai youths following the 2004 Tsunami, conclude that greater fear of death, engendered by the tragedy, is directly related to the youth's perception of risk, and his support system, with family being most important, followed by peers (Tuicomepee and Romano 2008). Some sociologists who assert that violence is today a basic part of the social fabric, is engendered by the apparent need for power, status and wealth in the material world. These, it is said, have replaced community, relationship and comfort (Moller 2000). Gorer agrees that violence is endemic to today's society, but sees the reason

for this in the denial of death. That is, violent death is a replacement for natural death, much like, for some people, pornography replaces natural sex (Gorer 1967).

Moller points out that people are today engaged in a desperate search for spiritual meaning. All of the self-help books and programs, and all of the new-age ideas, and all of the religious dabbling and denominational “jumping” that people are engaged in, point to the deep need to find meaning in life (and death). An interesting development wherein media violence meets spiritual yearning has to do with the latest entertainment attention to the vampire.

The vampire is dark, mysterious and violent...but sexy. The vampire, it seems, stands on the threshold of death, without dying...sort of. The vampire knows the mystery and lives forever. The vampire connects to humans in every imaginable way, and sometimes passes on his immortality to human beings. This may be interpreted as an attempt to reconnect life with death.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the obsession with vampires speaks volumes to the accuracy of Elias’ contention that a lack of communication on the subject of death lends itself to fantasizing. Never mind that he equates religious ideas with fantasy, for that is his prerogative. It really doesn’t matter if the point is (and it is) that death education will aid the adolescent in making meaning in life. This is also the point at which “pornography” and fantasy meet, for now, death pornography can also refer to the hidden nature of death in society. As Prohibition caused the rise of “underground” drinking and the culture that came with it, so does death denial and repression cause a culture of connection between death and violence, and life and violence. Somehow, though, the two ideas manage to teeter upon the threshold, the social and psychological limen, yet remain separate.

Life and death remain separate in most people’s minds, and it is our hope that death education will help to erase the need for this dichotomy. “Death is surrounded with life; life is surrounded by death” (LaGrand 1988, 35). People just need to become aware of the relationship. It is through education that there is the greatest hope of changing the social understanding of death, and it is through education that

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<sup>18</sup> Recently, we spoke with someone who adamantly claimed that the fascination with vampires has always been part of the social fabric. All of this person’s examples, however, came from the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even if we were to go back a bit farther to Bram Stoker’s “Dracula” concoction, or to some reports of the term “vampire” being used in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, we would still find known examples only in the modern era. Some have claimed that the idea of the vampire has been around since antiquity, but there is no evidence to back this assertion.

there is the greatest hope of helping young people build their life's meaning as they mature into full members of their communities and society as a whole.

#### **2. 4. 1 Summary remarks**

##### **2. 4. 1. 1 Society and death education**

Elias has aptly shown that if society drifts toward violence, so does its individuals, and if society should somehow become more compassionate, so will its individuals. This is wholly logical, and his point is well-taken. Yet, it is hard to determine which came first, the chicken or the egg, i.e. is it the society that determines the character of its individuals, or is it the individuals that determine the character of society? Our suspicion is that both are true, and that despite Elias' contention that individuals do not act alone, history is full of examples of both the "mob-mentality" (the Nazis?), and courageous individual behavior (Schindler?). Elias' thesis – that there is no meaning beyond this material world, and that to be an individual is an illusion – does not allow for the possibility of essence, or soul. His conclusions are not without merit, as it is indeed hard to imagine a lone individual who is not at least partly affected by her environment – "no man is an island" – but we are not yet ready to concede to the impossibility of individual decision. The logical conclusion of such a view as Elias' is that there is no God and that human beings are in fact alone, though socially connected. To follow such a view would entirely erase the purpose of this thesis, as we envision the necessity of approaching death education through a religious lens, even as a model of meaning-making. Elias' understanding would make such an idea pointless as religion would be completely useless in an entirely ideologically secular world. Even Philosophy becomes suspect within this scenario.

Despite Elias' view, there is evidence that religion is beginning to reappear in the public school system (Hecl and McClay 2003, 36). This does not mean that the separation between church and state is in danger of extinction, but hopefully, it means that the US population is beginning to understand its own First Amendment. It certainly means, by all accounts, that US citizens are painfully aware of a dearth of moral judgment within its population. This may, however, be overstated, or wishful thinking. Some scholars have pointed out that various court decisions regarding religious activities in public schools have amounted to religious oppression, which,

ironically, is precisely what the addition of the First Amendment to the US constitution was intended to prevent.

The point of education, say Heclo and McClay, should be to expose students to many sources and models of meaning (2003, 317). Students should learn how previous generations have made and kept meaning in their lives. This does not mean they are to accept all they learn about how others have done things, but rather, they can learn to use others' experiences to lay a plumb-line from which they may erect their own "life-building." From such a place, students may learn to live (and die) with confidence.

Of course, there is no guarantee that students will accept the lessons they are being proffered. Any parent understands the frustration of giving his child the benefit of his experience, only to find that his child rejects it in favor of "learning the hard way." That is, some students will feel the need to ignore what they are being taught in order to go out and experiment on their own. We are not interested in trying to force students to learn our way; we are only interested in giving them the options and the means with which they might find their own way, if they so desire. This means a way through life that includes death.

Through the Victorian era public death was the norm. The major change to this scene has been described rather well by Moller (2000). His chief argument revolves around the advent of technology, particularly in the medical field. Moller points to the facts of increased technological developments and how these have intertwined with increased individualism and materialism in modern and postmodern society. This, says Moller in a nutshell, has caused the privatization of dying as people have become convinced that they must die quietly and "heroically" or face social shame.

What happens when the normalcy of death and dying are lost? While people in the US no longer mostly live on farms where animals live with the family and are slaughtered or become diseased, or simply die, on a regular basis and death-bed vigils are no longer held in the home, as well wakes with all the neighbors in attendance, one must be careful not to overstate this. Even today, when most people die in hospitals or hospices, it is not uncommon for friends, relatives, neighbors, and/or church families, to come by with food and sympathy, to sit with the bereaved for a

time with hopes of helping to alleviate their grief by letting them know they are not alone. It should also be pointed out, however, that this well-meant visitation often results in the grief-stricken one, or the dying one, comforting the visitor, who is usually at a loss as to what to say, or not to say, and how to behave. This is just one of the issues created by the altered social view of the death process.

It was in the 1950s that Hermann Feifel started the conversation in earnest with regard to the lack of education and communication surrounding death and dying. He was soon joined by others, who saw the changes as a growing problem of humanity. Grollman and others have stated that death education course materials were beginning to appear in high schools, and especially colleges, all over the US by the 1970s. In 1981, Panos Bardis, pointed to a probable reason for the growth of interest in death.

It is obvious that in a parochial, ahistorical, materialistic, industrial, and hedonistic era, we must place great emphasis on spiritual ideals, the meaning of life, the nature of death..." (Bardis 1981, IX)

We are once more struck by the notion that there is a social failure that causes this search for meaning. His point is that when people are socially integrated into a society that unequivocally accepts certain values, even *awareness* of death is minimal. It is individualism, and social disorganization that cause people to become anxious about death (Bardis 1981, 1). This configuration, he claims, is clearly prevalent during the modern age (and the postmodern?). The other two ages of recorded history that saw a similar death anxiety, he says, were the Hellenistic age, and the early Renaissance period.

The history of death education is complicated by psychological, social and religious ideas and ideals. In the end, we must insist that to ignore the issue has not, and will never, make it go away. It is our conviction that society must finally take responsibility for the young and society must give them the resources they need to build a life of meaning. This will mean death education that helps youths learn how to cope with death and loss as well as how to help others cope with death and loss. Society has been woefully remiss in this area, despite all the literature that discusses the psychology of death and the grief "process."

It is our contention that we all have erred badly by insisting that the dying should remain superhumanly strong and the grieving should be resilient to the extreme, realizing that they will go through stages of grief. Society even goes so far as to suggest that continued grief is wrong, and signifies either a weak mind, or some form of insanity. After the socially accepted period of grief, one will tell others that he is fine, and everyone implicitly understands that he no longer grieves, or possibly even thinks about the one he so loved. This is not to say that we advocate unending, morbidly agonizing grief behavior, as such a thing will certainly do no one good, but we are saying that it is time to help young people understand how the character of grief changes over time, without ever completely going away. To say otherwise is to suggest one can (or should) somehow forget those one has known.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor emeritus at Yale University, in writing about the death of his son says,

...I have looked at how we in the West, both Christians and non-Christians, deal with grief. What has struck me is how prominent is the strategy of disowning grief, either by doing one's best to get over it or by denouncing it as sinful. I could not and cannot disown my grief; that for me would amount to disowning Eric. I loved him. If he was worth loving when alive, he is worth grieving over when dead. (Wolterstorff 2009, 30)

To deny his grief would be for Wolterstorff (and arguably, most others) like saying his son had never been. It would erase all meaning from his son's life. As always, it is not our intention to tell adolescents how to grieve or what meaning they should have for their lives, but we do think they are in great need of guidance in these matters. Just coming to understand that it is okay to grieve and to search for deep life-meaning would be a help to US youths.

For John Morgan (Doka with Morgan 1993, 288-289) the life of meaning is found by examining values, to include the religious. To Socrates' "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato *Dialogues, Apology 38a*), Morgan adds that "unexamined values are not worth having" (Doka with Morgan 1993, 289). This philosophical argument appears to concern a lot of people, not the least of them teenagers.

Society does not now make clear its values and expectations. Most of them are picked up via omission in communications, as with the avoidance of death discussions. Society has created a communication canyon. Along with a relatively recent move toward holistic medicine, it appears to be prime time to approach death education holistically. This can be done by teaching proper and helpful ways of communication, to include how one may communicate with one's own children effectively. This will mean the integration of all things historical, psychological, and social, under one roof. This will mean helping young people make the personal and social connections to values that they will find meaningful for all of life. This will mean death education that does not "fear" death as something apart from life, but rather places death back into the realm of the natural, where it belongs.

Such education does not occur by accident. It will be necessary to be intentional about designing death education that will not simply add to the confusion felt by teenagers. We propose that the best way to do this will be to develop a model upon which teens may build their own sense of meaning. We are, of course, referring to the religious model. Why is the religious model appropriate for the presentation of death and dying for the purpose of making meaning? To answer this question it will be necessary to spend some time reflecting upon the meanings of death that the various religions have developed. As Gatcliffe (1988, 54) has pointed out, the different meanings have arisen within religions because death is a universal experience. Knowing about these ideas, however, is not enough, because, as Gatcliffe further argues,

...both the emotional and spiritual aspects must also be explored in an attempt to help the pupils to find appropriate ways of expressing their own deepest convictions. (1988, 54)

Therefore, to come to one's own understanding of life's meaning, it will be important to see both how the model provided by religion is designed and how one may build one's own meaning and purpose upon that model. As we ponder together the significance of death amongst the world's religions, we will all come to appreciate the usefulness of the religious model for meaning-making.

The significance of death as determined by the various religions can be seen in their theologies, tenets, rituals, traditions, and communal relationships; and these are

useful for constituting the religious basis for meaning-making in the lives of young people. We now turn to peer into the variety of religions which are seen, for want of a better description, as belonging to either monotheistic or eastern traditions. We will begin in Chapter Three with the so-called monotheistic religions starting with Judaism and moving through Christianity, Islam and North American native religions. The latter will serve as a bridge between the monotheistic and eastern traditions for reasons that will become obvious as we progress. Chapter Three will end with something of the relationship of Native American traditions to those of the monotheistic group as identified herein. This approach gives us a segueway to our discussion of the relationship of Native American traditions to eastern religious ideas of Chapter Four. We then progress through Hinduism and Buddhism. These discussions will give just a small taste of what may be included in a high school death curriculum, and are not in any way intended to be exhaustive.



## **CHAPTER THREE – THE RELIGIOUS MODEL AND THE MONOTHEISTIC TRADITIONS**

### **3.1 Introduction**

With this chapter we will examine the ideas that shape several monotheistic religions as part of our look at the religious model that will undergird our presentation of death to youths for the purpose of helping them to make their own life-meaning.

Religion is a useful model for this purpose because it encompasses theology, tenets, tradition, and communal relations, among other features, which will lend form to the religious model. We might also add that, except perhaps for theology, this is true of all religions, not just those categorized as monotheistic. Even when a religion has no theology, per se, it will have a philosophy of sorts. This is an important point in the US, because of the pluralistic nature of religion in the nation. If death education is to be implemented in US high schools, the fact that commonalities exist in the various religions, both monotheistic and eastern, will be very helpful. To illustrate just how pluralistic the US is, it might be of interest to note that the Claremont School of Theology, a United Methodist Church funded seminary, became interfaith in the fall of 2010 (*Christian Century*, July 13, 2010). This did not happen without some protest, but its very inception points to the current nature of religion in the US and the way it permeates society in its myriad forms. In case this event should

appear isolated and unlikely to recur, the *Christian Century*, one week later, (July 27, 2010) reported that,

...Andover Newton Theological School outside Boston and Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago announced that they have agreed in principle to form an interreligious theological institution. (*Century* July 27, 2010, p. 14)

While it may be that the general population of the US believes the country began as a religiously monolithic collection of colonies, it would be more accurate to say that the colonies were separate, independent units of many different, mostly Protestant Christian, “stripes.” That is to say that within the largely Christian colonies, there were many varieties of Christianity. Yet, this was not the limit of the already pluralistic nature of religion in the part of North America that would eventually become the United States.

Long before Europeans landed on North American shores, the natives of that land practiced their own religions. These religions of the tribes that came to be called first Indians, then Native Americans, were both diverse and similar (Gill 1994). Christian missionary work and Christian influence over the years has greatly changed Native American spirituality. This situation has given Native American religions a monotheistic flavor, and sometimes a monotheistic association, but Native American religion also retains much in common with eastern religions, like the notion of reincarnation for example. Therefore, with this chapter, we will first look at Judaism and follow that up with the Christian religion which it birthed. After that, we will look at Islam, which incorporates some things that appear to mimic Christianity and Judaism. Next, we will spend some time working out what these religious traditions have meant to the way people view life, death and afterlife. It is then that we will move on to discuss Native American religion and how it exemplifies religion in the US as it has to some extent adapted to the changes taking place all around it. This story of religion in the US is in many ways the story of US history in general. Because the US claims so many religious traditions as its own, we wish to insist that the religious model of death education is therefore particularly useful in this context; and since Judaism is foundational to the monotheistic religions that followed it, we begin here with a broad discussion of the Jewish experience.

### **3. 2. Judaism**

Who is God? How do the people relate to God? What does it mean for the community, and hence the world, that the Jewish people follow this God? How do some of the tenets, Jewish tradition(s), and community rituals set the stage for Jewish action in the world and Jewish understanding of death as well as life beyond death? All religions are built on theology or philosophy. Judaism is no exception. Thus we begin our discussion of Judaism with a look at its theology.

#### **3. 2. 1. Jewish theology**

The Hebrew people are not only monotheistic, but their religion is among the very first religions to be recognized for this feature. The well-known Shema – “Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, The Lord is one” – points to this very fact. This is the fundamental and the foundational point to the Jewish view of God. Because God is transcendent, humans can know of God only that which God reveals of God’s self. Besides God being “one,” two other major characteristics of God are that God is holy and that God is sovereign. Accordingly, the name of God is so holy to Jews that those of the Orthodox school of Judaism, as well as many who belong to the Conservative school, will not write the word as we use it here. We have had a succession of students who did not write the name out, but instead listed it thusly: “G--,” or sometimes, “G-d.” Finally, God is sovereign. It is also true, however, that some Reform<sup>1</sup> Jews will now write the name of God out in full. For all, though, nothing happens outside of God’s knowledge and without God’s consent. Thus, God is One, God is Holy, and God is sovereign. In fact, God IS. When Moses asked God who he should say sent him to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, God said, “Tell them, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14, partial, NAS).

This is interesting for two reasons. First, “I AM” suggests, among other things, that God exists in some mysterious ‘am’ ness. God just is...uncreated, yet existent. God is eternal and transcendent, yet somehow involved with the people of the creation in doing God’s will on earth. I AM, coupled with Genesis 1:27, which says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male

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<sup>1</sup> Progressive Judaism has served as an umbrella term for Reform and Liberal, and Progressive Judaism since 1926, when the World Union for Progressive Judaism began around the ideas of pluralism, modernity, social justice and equality. Huston Smith (1995) understands these ideas to be the very foundation of Jewish thought.

and female He created them” (NAS), places humankind at the center of a great drama. It is a drama which points to the goodness of life (see Gen 1:31) as it was created. It is a drama which indicates, that despite human disobedience to the will of God, humans are somehow second only to God. Now, because humans are created in God’s image, and because they are second only to God, and because they (i.e., the Hebrew people, in Jewish thought) are in some way partners with God to affect the purposes of God in human history...because of all of this, humans also have, in some inexplicable way, an am “ness.” Humanity exists. Humanity is. What it does not cease to exist in the usual sense of annihilation, but remains in a more eternal sense.

Bowker (1991) elegantly argues that while the Hebrew people did not always believe in eternal life in the company of God (today, some still do not think this way), there developed at some point an idea of some sort of continuation as expressed in the “shadowy” nature of Sheol. Then later still, the notion that because God gives and takes life, the end of life is in some way a return to God’s company. Of course, then, the next logical step in this conception is that this self-aware soul would eventually be thought of as pre-existing (Bowker 1991, 53). This idea of continuation, whether in a self-conscious, or an unconscious state, is related to the science of energy, wherein everything material (and possibly also immaterial – like soul) is made of energy, and whereby there is only so much energy available. This means, says Bowker, that something must die to make room for change, newness, better things, etc. If we wish to take this idea to its logical conclusion, it will be necessary to consider the full nature of energy.

Science insists that energy cannot be destroyed; only changed. If energy does not cease to exist, and if there is a limited amount of it, then as people die, making room for new and better things and beings, the energy that was someone, is still that someone, but also not that someone. Hence, it is not surprising that some Kabbalists came to believe in a type of reincarnation (Bowker 1991). Only, their idea is that only those in need of punishment are reincarnated. Others who die are reunited with God. This, of course, presents obvious problems with regard to indestructible energy as it is connected to evolutionary thought.

Death, in this evolutionary way, is a sacrifice by living things to the benefit of the new, the better, the other. This is so for the Jews because of two things: 1. God

created life by breathing into it, and 2. The life of the creature is in the blood.

Therefore, blood sacrifice, as Bowker points out, is a way of giving back to God what is God's in the first place.

Even so, Judaism values life highly and those of the Jewish faith are not in a rush to die. Life is good as God created it. For ancient Jews of the biblical period, death meant separation from God in Sheol. Many scholars believe that this idea was only challenged by the hardships and oppression endured by the ancient Hebrews. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were dragged off to slavery in Babylon, the people were forced to reconsider their place in the world. How was it possible that God would choose them as God's own, then turn and abandon them to slavery and hardship? This, say some scholars, is why for some Jews life after death became part of their reality. For, if God did not redeem the people in life, certainly God would do so after life. After life the people would receive their reward and their enemies would be punished.

Between the time of the Babylonian exile and the Maccabean revolt, the people awaited a messiah. While this figure can stand for several meanings and have assorted purposes, "he" is mainly seen as a future king and warrior who will free the people from political oppression. With the Maccabean revolt there comes more of an idea of afterlife vindication (Bowker 1991, 60). The Maccabee books, much influenced by Greek philosophy, tell the tale of life after death and the importance of the soul over the body (Bowker 1991, 64). However, the rabbinic period finds Jewish thinkers returning to scriptural theses and insisting that resurrection is important because life as God created it is good. This means bodies as well as spirits.

Ancient Judaism maintained the significance of blood sacrifice because life is in the blood, and life is given by God. Therefore, it was deemed that blood sacrifice was the only way to effect reconciliation. The fact that life is in the blood would mean the necessity for the people to be bodily resurrected. As for reward and punishment, only God may seek vengeance, according to the Hebrew scripture, so it stood to reason that God would punish the offenders in the "hereafter." Closely, and even obviously related to the idea of reward and punishment are the tenets, or laws of Judaism.

### **3.2. 2. Major tenets of Judaism**

The Jewish law is extremely important to adherents. The reader has already had a taste of this truth with the Shema (see previous section). This is the first of the commandments, which states one must love the Lord with all one's heart, soul and mind, and then, one must love one's neighbor as one's self. It could be argued (as Jesus does in the Christian New Testament) that the Decalogue contains all of the laws. This means, say some, that if one were to keep all Ten Commandments, one would find one's self following the sundry and various laws listed in Deuteronomy. We would here suggest, however, that it was never imagined by the giver of the law that humans would be capable of such a feat. Instead, we maintain that the law was always about cultivating a state of being that is at heart compassionate and self-sacrificial. If we are right, then Jesus was really talking about the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

Whatever the case, it is true that the law is important in Jewish thought. It means a way of life which is obedient and which honors God. This is the people of God keeping their part of the covenant entered into with the creator. God's side of the covenant is to take care of the people, to make them a nation that grows, to give them a long, healthy, and prosperous life. So when they were conquered by the Babylonians, and again, much later, when six million of them were killed by Hitler and his minions during World War II, they were left to ask what had happened that they should lose God's favor.

Others, perhaps naturally, concluded that God would take revenge on the enemy in the afterlife. Still others concluded that they had somehow sinned and wronged God, thereby breaking the covenant, and so were abandoned by God. Then there were those who shook their fists at God and demanded an explanation that did not come. Finally, some reckoned that God did not really exist...that their ancestors had been wholly deluded by the stories begun in ages past and were handed down through each successive generation. God was dead, and for these people, death means non-existence.

### 3. 2. 3. Jewish tradition

Today there are three main schools of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.<sup>2</sup> There is some disagreement between the schools on a number of doctrinal issues. It could even be contended that there are serious doctrinal arguments between them. Nonetheless, adherents of all schools of Judaism are historically and communally connected.

The chief reason for this ability of the Jews to be a community despite their differences is that they are more concerned with actions than with beliefs. Chosen by God, the people are now responsible for carrying peace and justice to the world (Smith 1995). Being chosen carries some benefits: a good, long and pleasant life and a close relationship with God. Yet being chosen also carries great responsibility. The command to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbor as one's self means in a very real way that the people must do as God commands in all things. This is for the sake of both the Jewish community and the world at large, for in the latter case, the world is provided with a remarkable example when the chosen people are successful in closely following God.

To follow God closely means to keep mitzvot, that is, to do one's religious duties. Such duties include taking part in communal ritual and holidays as well as doing good deeds. Both individual and community are strengthened by this. Community is so important in Jewish life that it is in some sense quite impossible to separate the "deed" from the person and hence the person from his community. Community here means the community of all times and all places...yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's - globally. All Jews are of one community in God.

It is therefore important for individuals to practice their religion (religious duty) amongst the community. Children become Bar and, in some schools of Judaism, Bat Mitzvah at synagogue. The family and others of the community gather eight days following the birth of a son for the circumcision. There is a sense that at every rite of passage and at every synagogue gathering is the entire community of Jews through the ages and in every location.

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<sup>2</sup> In some parts of the world, the branch closest to the Reform movement in the US, is known as Liberal Judaism.

Another highly important form of mitzvot has to do with food and drink. One must keep kosher. This system, though not completely understood by those outside of the Hebrew tradition, is widely known of among the peoples of the world and gives yet another key example of obedience to God. We now turn to take a closer look at some of the rituals that comprise the many traditions of the Jews throughout their tenure on earth.

### **3. 2. 4. Jewish ritual and communal relations**

Rituals are an essential part of each individual's life as well as a vital component of Jewish communal life. Birth, coming-of-age, marriage, and death are the main life-cycle times of ritual gathering, but there are also a number of holy days that preserve the community, gathered and bound together.

The Sabbath is considered sacred. There are Reform Jews who no longer think holy days demand mandatory observance, but the majority of Jewish adherents still view devotion to the holy days as listed in Torah, obligatory. Together the people meet, pray, confess and recommit themselves to obedience to the law. It is an intimate and serious duty. Partly perhaps, because this is so intimate, it is difficult for others to become members of the community of Jews.

Most Jews are born into the community. This makes the people both a nation and a religion. It is a concept that is difficult for others to grasp and often results in debate. It is not impossible to convert to Judaism, but it is not easy, or even encouraged. Jews do not generally engage in proselytization, and when a person requests conversion to the faith, they are expected to study rigorously and even learn how to speak and read some biblical Hebrew. This procedure results on the one hand in smaller community numbers and on the other hand in the avoidance of less serious converts. To outsiders this, coupled with the idea of chosenness, sometimes seems arrogant.

Yet, it is most likely that the duties and expectations of the community over thousands of years of close community relations has given the Jews a sense of family and tradition that even connects them all as individuals and in community to all the Jews that have gone on before them. This is powerful stuff. It is the kind of thing that gives a person a sense of purpose and meaning. Now, when one adds the notion that God has created a good world, and that humans are a great part of that good,



material creation, one may just be able to glimpse how the individual life in community connects to God now and in the future in the communal imagination of the people. There is great respect for life. Life is holy; therefore people, to include their bodies, are holy. This is true both in life now, and in death. This is why there are so many rituals and obligations surrounding death.

There are a number of prescribed rituals to be followed surrounding the death of a member of the community. Respect is shown according to one's relationship to the deceased or the community standing of the deceased. Because there is an assumed connection of the living with the community's ancestral, or kinship trail, it is understood that the dead remain in some mysterious, spiritual way, with the living. Still, it is traditional for the body of the deceased to be buried as soon after death as is possible.<sup>3</sup>

The body of the dead is ritually washed in a purification rite known as Tahara(h). This generally means that several ritually clean people of the same gender as the deceased will wash and wrap the body for burial, all the while praying certain prayers and reciting psalms. Everything is kept very simple, from the cloth used to wrap the corpse, to the coffin that will be placed in the dirt. While there is no viewing, respect is the watchword, and the body is always accompanied, right up to the point of interment.

After the funeral and interment, the family sits Shivah (seven). Relatives, friends, etc., all come by to pay their respects at this time. The family will continue to mourn the dead for 30 days, or for a year if the deceased was a parent. Sons say Kaddish both morning and evening at synagogue for one year. The family will return to the gravesite at the one-year anniversary to say Kaddish and to leave a stone on the grave in remembrance.

The above events are the basic obligations, but like other things modern, this is not always taken to heart. There is much accommodation to cultural conventions of host countries, to changing times in general and to local laws. Also, it should be

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<sup>3</sup> Some modern Jewish schools have made concessions with regard to this point in that there is a little tolerance for awaiting those far off to fly in for the funeral. This is also true with other ideas, such as cremation vs. burial.

remembered that the many rituals and obligations have more to do with life than with death.

Times, places, events...all of these things have taken a toll on the Jewish understanding of life and death, but life appreciation remains a constant. Some scholars believe that the psalmist spoke of Heaven and Hell only when influenced by Zoroastrianism (Matthews 2007, 269). If they are correct in their assessment, it seems likely that such borrowing came about because of the Babylonian exile. Whatever the case, the idea of a material resurrection was very real to the Jews in the Hellenistic period. This point, in fact, connects Judaism to Christianity through Jesus and Paul, the latter being a self-proclaimed Pharisee, who even before his conversion believed in resurrection. We surmise from the reports of Jesus' parables, sayings, and aphorisms that he too believed in the resurrection of the body.

Truly, truly, I say to you, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal..."

(John 12: 24-25, NAS)

### **3. 2. 5. Brief summary. Life, death and afterlife connections**

The reader has seen how the early Hebrews did not necessarily concern themselves with afterlife, yet from the inception of Judaism they were very concerned with the meaning and goodness of life. It appears that it was not until the Jewish nation suffered destruction, oppression, and slavery that notions of a conscious afterlife in the presence of God began to take hold in any serious way. It was (and still is, in some quarters) supposed that there would come a royal messiah who would overthrow and destroy the enemies of Israel, restoring her to her rightful place as God's chosen people cum nation in the world. When this idea began to loosen its grip (it never quite disappears altogether, however), the resurrection of the body took firm hold in the imagination of the community, and remains to this day even though there is again a nation of Israel and the Jewish people are currently free, and globally, not generally oppressed.

The Jewish community is both highly supportive of its members and exceptionally strong, tied together as it is by ritual, tradition and history. Such shared meanings make it an excellent candidate for a model that will help teens make meaning in their lives. Because the communal connections continue through end-of-life rituals, teens may discover the elegant nature of the life-cycle.

Now we turn to look at Christianity and impress upon the reader that Judaism directly gave birth to the new religion at a time when the Jews suffered at the hands of the Romans. One might argue that Christianity was a melding of Judaism with Greco-Roman, Platonic ideas and as such, it allowed for the uniting of cultures and peoples in a way that neither idea was able to effect on its own. Yet, while Christianity certainly did not wholly demolish the goodness of life, it did strongly suggest that the greater good was to be found following this life in an afterlife that would be lived in the presence of God.

### **3. 3. Christianity**

Christianity was born into a world of violence and slavery. The Roman Empire kept a controlling and heavy hand on all parts of life in the empire. In some ways, the inception of Christianity into such a world was not at all surprising. The Hebrew people were greatly oppressed and heavily taxed by the Romans. They were forced to deal with a “puppet” Jewish ruler and unscrupulous tax collectors among their own people. While the Romans allowed the Jews to practice their religion quietly, the hope and expectation for the coming of messiah was stronger than ever. The hope for the appearance of messiah resulted in an emergence of a number of “messiahs.” Jesus entered into this harsh yet expectant environment and garnered a large following. A lot of misunderstanding regarding his mission and purpose surfaced and one might even make a good case for the claim that the debate continues to this day. When Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire there began deliberate and lengthy, and sometimes contentious discussions regarding every aspect of theology and doctrine. Disputes were many and often and the church split several times. The major rifts resulted in three main schools of Christianity. They are Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. We turn now to look at Christian theology as it is understood today, and in some cases, still disputed, and what this means for the Christian notion of life, death, and afterlife.

### **3.3.1. Christian theological elements**

Christians, who generally call the Hebrew Scriptures The Old Testament, are followers of the God of creation therein described. In this section, we will discuss three key theological elements of Christianity: 1. Soteriology, 2. Christology and 3. Trinity. While there are other doctrinal areas of interest in Christianity, these three inform most Christian tenets. We begin with Soteriology.

### **3.3.2. Soteriology – sinners in search of salvation**

The idea that humanity needs to, indeed must, be saved, permeates Christian thought. While it is a concept that is hardly unique to Christianity (one would be hard-pressed to find a religion that isn't concerned with salvation in one form or other), salvation is in fact at the heart of Christianity. Foundational to Christian views is that people are in dire straits, wallowing in sin, and headed for Hell, whatever one's definition of Hell may be.<sup>4</sup> Humans, it is supposed here, are separated from their creator by their own action, or sin. The human race has “fallen” from grace, and is on a downward spiral into evils of all kinds. In order to halt this downward motion and to lift humanity from the muck of its own making, something of a salvific nature must occur...something rather colossal and earth-shattering. It must be something that will affect real change in human beings and bring them back to right relationship with God. It must be impossible to ignore this “something.” It must be utterly momentous and entirely effectual.

Many religious traditions make the claim that the people themselves must find their own way of salvation. There are some who say that there are Christian threads that demand actions leading to salvation<sup>5</sup> but this is not quite the case. In fact, if it were the case, the death and resurrection of Jesus would have no meaning. People need salvation, and when Jesus walked amongst the Jews, the people were searching for that salvation, supposing that it would come in the form of a messiah – a king and deliverer who would be a military leader.

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<sup>4</sup> We will discuss a couple of the more prominent views about Hell in our section on tenets.

<sup>5</sup> Some Protestants, e.g., think that Roman Catholic sacraments and “works” are considered by adherents to be salvific, but this is not quite the case.

The Messiah would save the people from oppression and his kingdom would be just and righteous. The Messiah could do this because he would be “anointed” by God; hence, the term “messiah.”

### **3. 3. 3. Christology – waiting for deliverance**

Christians believe the Messiah of God arrived in the form of Jesus the Christ. Yet, while it is believed that many early Christians thought that Jesus would gather an army and defeat the Romans on behalf of the Jews, another interpretation necessarily followed the death and resurrection of Jesus.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the people began to question what sort of salvation they were looking at. Clearly, they could no longer expect Jesus to overthrow their oppressors. This made the resurrection pivotal to all ensuing arguments. For if, according to scripture, people died because of disobedience to God (read: sinned), the resurrection of Jesus from the dead pointed to a monumental change in that condition. Yet, why is it important that people be resurrected from the dead? The answer lies in the creation itself. God, say Christians, created all that is, whether by evolution, or fully developed as it is known today. There is a place for mystery here, because it is in God creating that relationship appears. Relationship refers to interconnection – interaction between everything. That is, God relates to humans, humans relate to God and each other, and etc. In the end, if Christians take their own thought to its logical conclusion, the purpose and meaning of life, or existence, and therefore also resurrection, is relationship with and in God.

When humanity supposed that they had become separated from God, there arose a need to reconnect them to God in such a way that it would be impossible to miss. This, of course, could take a number of forms as dictated by cultural and social ideas around the world, but in the case of Christianity it meant that God’s choice would be to send a savior, the Christ, or Messiah, the one who would give of himself freely that all may come back to God. This is what is known as grace – the gift God gives to humans to affect atonement.<sup>6</sup> There is very little here of God’s demand for payment from a sinful world that some know as substitutionary atonement. Rather, it sounds very much like a God of mercy and compassion, reaching out to a weeping

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<sup>6</sup> One often sees “at-one-ment” in arguments regarding salvation for this reason.

and pitiful world full of children who are lost and alone, and who are lashing out at any real or imagined threat. This is where Christians learn to trust. God has come down to save, they say. Take hold of God's hand and find salvation through the resurrected son of God.

### **3. 3. 4. Trinity – relationship is fundamental**

There is no charge for this or it would not be a gift...it would not be grace. Salvation as a gift for Christians means becoming a disciple of Jesus who has been both sent and resurrected by God. The New Testament makes these points quite clearly. Where there has been much disagreement, however, is at the point of the third person of the Trinity. The first person is God, the second person is Jesus the Christ and the third person is the Holy Spirit. After much squabbling, which was sometimes violent, the Holy Spirit was established as the third person of the Trinity of God. In order to avoid misunderstanding it should here be noted that there are also some ongoing arguments over whether or not Jesus is God. The majority of Christians, however, do believe Jesus is God. The same may today be said with regard to the Holy Spirit. This then is the doctrine of the Trinity. Adherents of other religious traditions do not follow the reasoning behind the Trinity.

One way this concept has been explained is by comparison to ice/water/steam. The three are of the same substance, but take different forms (Smith 1995). All three are made up of two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule – H<sub>2</sub>O. They are different, yet the same. If one so desired, the three could be blended together, becoming one. There would be no way to tell the one came from three, yet all three would still be contained by the one. Another way of saying this is that God is of one essence, three forms. It does not matter how Christians explain this concept to others; some remain convinced that Christianity is Polytheistic.<sup>7</sup>

#### **3. 3. 4. 1. Final remarks**

Salvation is foundational for Christianity, and this salvation is found in the free gift of God through Jesus the Christ. All life began in God who is the creator of all things. Furthermore, creation may be thought of as ongoing and interactive.

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<sup>7</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Allah and the Trinity*, in "Christian Century," March 2011, excerpted from Volf's book *Allah: A Christian Response*, published by HarperCollins, for an excellent treatment of this topic.

Human beings, as disciples of Christ, can work with God for the purpose of salvation for the entire world. This is not far removed from Judaism.

The work that humans join in with God to do, points to the interconnection of all creation. This is exemplified by the model of the Trinity. Thus, for Christians of all the schools (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant), redemption is found in restored relationship with God through Jesus the Christ. This is also what makes Christian fellowship in community and communal relationship central to Christian life and death.

### **3. 3. 5. Christian tenets**

Christian tenets are built off the commandment(s) noted by the New Testament gospel writers, the most prominent of which is the command to love God, one's neighbor as one's self, and "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven..." (Matt. 5: 44b-45a). John is replete with commands to "love one another." The gospels are generally filled with stories and admonitions with regard to how humans should treat one another. Matthew 7 is about relationships and treatment of others, and says in verse 12, "...therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." The latter has become known as "The Golden Rule." When surveying world religious traditions, one will find some version of this rule in each of them.

All the laws of Christianity are constructed around the above points and are meant to build and/or restore relationships. This means that the love of God, neighbor, and even enemy, naturally results in the performance of both doing good, and of not doing evil (wrong). All the laws are contained within the law of love. Separately, they are myriad. They include everything from do not desire your neighbor's wife or belongings, to do not commit murder. When viewed from the situation of The Golden Rule, the many laws are easy, but when viewed in the inverse, they seem draconian. This leads to the eminent importance of Christian fellowship.

Christians are charged to meet for worship, to confess to one another, to study together, and to serve each other in all ways. As the ancient Hebrews were to be a model for the world, so must Christian community be since the time of the

resurrection. However, in spite of the significance of community, Christian salvation became located in individual action and/or decision. Even so, community remained highly meaningful. Traditions surrounding this purpose emerged over time, many of which continue to this day.

### **3. 3. 6. Christian tradition**

Within each of the larger Christian traditions, are a variety of traditions. The larger traditions include mainly those mentioned above. That is, there is The Roman Catholic tradition, the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and the Protestant tradition. Some argue for the inclusion of Mormonism, but all Mormons are not in agreement over this point. We begin with the universal church – the Roman Catholic tradition.

### **3. 3. 7. The Roman Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church is called the universal church because that is the meaning of the word “catholic.” After the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers organized churches in various towns and cities of the Roman Empire. The churches were connected by visits and epistles, or letters. As a consequence the character and culture of the churches could be very different. After Constantine legalized Christianity within Roman society, and especially after Christianity became the religion of the empire around 380 CE (Smith 1994, 222), the necessity to organize the church as a whole and to establish tenets, and clarify doctrinal issues, became apparent. Thus began a number of debates. The debaters became known as the Church Fathers. In this way the churches became the church universal. Shortly after the resurrection, and continuing into the time of the Church Fathers, was a great movement out to the desert for contemplation and self-denial. With the debates there developed eventual schism between eastern (Greek) and western (Latin) churches. It is difficult to put a definitive date to the schism, but 1054 is generally accepted to be the year of the permanent gap, despite a couple later attempts at reconciliation. The year 1517, the same year in which Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany, is usually seen as the demarcation point that started the Protestant movement. Actually, however, dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church came in bursts of frustration and anger over a long period prior to 1517.



The Roman Catholic tradition has continued throughout, practicing its many rites and traditions. The most prominent of these are known as the sacraments. They are: 1. The Mass, or Communion, 2. Confession (penance and reconciliation), 3. Baptism, 4. Confirmation, 5. Holy Orders or Marriage, and 6. The Anointing of the Sick (previously called Last Rites). The church considers these rites necessary for salvation.

1. The Mass is also called the Eucharist. This is the idea of Holy Communion that for Roman Catholics means transubstantiation. That is, the host and the wine become the body and blood of Christ during the Mass.
2. Penance and reconciliation is what it sounds like. Adherents confess their sins to a priest, who is considered God's mediator, and they do penance in order to receive forgiveness.
3. Baptism and Confirmation (along with Communion) are considered initiation rites. Baptism in the Roman Church is by sprinkling shortly after live births. This has been and continues to be a point of some contention, as parents whose children are dead upon delivery, or die shortly after birth, are by some priests and/or diocese baptized after death. The church in Rome has full authority over the Roman diocese globally, but there is sometimes, usually quiet, dissent.
4. Confirmation generally occurs between the ages of 9 and 12 or 13, and follows religious instruction (catechism).
5. These two, Holy Orders and Marriage, are considered the only two possible options for Roman Catholic men and women. As of this writing, the Catholic Church in the US, while still the largest Christian denomination, has been losing adherents at an alarming rate. Many are leaving the church for various Protestant sects, while others are simply leaving church altogether. New members are usually added by birth, though there are a few who convert as they marry a Roman Catholic spouse.
6. The Anointing of the Sick has taken the place of Last Rites, which were prayers said over the dying or dead. Now priests will anoint and say

prayers for a hope of healing when one is ill, rather than simply waiting until it is supposed that the ailing person is about to die. The view of death in this setting has been a literal heaven vs. hell (with stops in Purgatory and in a state of limbo along the way) one in which the dying person must make a last confession, and receives forgiveness. Some of this is still in place today, but Purgatory is not taken as seriously as previously, and limbo is only an idea some hold but not doctrinal. Also, some are no longer sure they believe in a literal heaven or hell. In fact, there are those who believe everyone, Catholic or otherwise, goes to heaven – whatever heaven means. This last idea is not unique to Roman Catholics. It is also sometimes true of persons who practice other traditions.

These sacraments of the church are considered salvific, along with the obligation of good deeds. In the US, if one were to ask Roman Catholics, however, if they believe they must complete all the sacraments and do good deeds to be saved (read here: go to heaven), it is possible to receive different answers. This is because the Roman Church in the US and most probably worldwide, is greatly influenced by its surrounding culture. Of course, this is true of all religious traditions.

The Roman Church has a patristic form of government, with the Pope being the final arbiter of all doctrinal interpretation. In this respect, regarding faith and morals, the Pope is considered infallible. The Pope acts as a sort of monarch of a Catholic hierarchy.

This form of governance is very different from the Eastern Orthodox form. The Eastern Church does have a pope of sorts, called the Patriarch of Constantinople, as the Western Pope is called the Bishop of Rome, but governance is more by consensus than by top-down command, and while the Roman Church says that the Pope, then the College of Cardinals, then the Bishops, then the parish Priests are the only ones with the authority to interpret scripture by the Holy Spirit, the Eastern Church insists that the entire community of believers are competent to interpret scripture.

### **3. 3. 8. The Eastern Orthodox Church**

The obvious reason, then, for the consensus form of government in the Eastern Church is that all members of the church are believed to be mediators of the Holy Spirit. This is not an individual “gift” however. Rather, it is thought that all church members are interconnected in some mysterious way through the Holy Spirit. Also, unlike the Roman Church belief that people in this life may only on occasional receive special revelation from God, the Eastern Church understands the connection to God through the Holy Spirit to be accessible on an ongoing basis, and therefore urges all members to cultivate their spirituality.

It is not really surprising that the Eastern Church should be so devoted to spirituality when one considers how much of the dwelling in the desert shortly after the time of Jesus, through the days of the Byzantine Empire took place in the Eastern part of the Empire.

It is a picture of a church that is very interested in cultivating Christian spirituality whereby the people begin life with God in the here and now and continue this pattern into what lies beyond this known world, promoting interconnective Christian community that relies on every constituent to find the way forward in the Spirit of God.

There is one other area of great variance from the Roman Church and that is that priests may marry, and lay persons may lead in worship. The only area not open to lay people is in administering the sacraments, which are pretty much the same as those of the Roman Church. This means, among other things, that death rituals are very similar.

Both churches say Last Rites or engage in the Anointing of the Sick for final absolution of the dying or dead. In the US most are sent to a funeral home where they are embalmed and laid out for viewing by friends and family. There is sometimes a wake, which in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond has become more-or-less a party, rather than the older practice of keeping the corpse company as it awaited burial. The viewing also usually takes place at the funeral home rather than at the residence of the deceased as it used to do. This can vary, but it is usually the day after the viewing that the Funeral Mass is held. The priest leads the Mass where the Eucharist is held in the church, with the body of the deceased present in a closed casket. The Mass generally takes an hour. There are prayers for the soul of the deceased and others

who have died. When the Mass is over there is a funeral procession to the gravesite where the priest will say prayers before and/or as the coffin is being lowered into the grave, or placed in the mausoleum. Today, it is not uncommon for the coffin to be lowered once the people have placed a flower on the coffin and vacated the cemetery. As for what happens to the soul after death, the churches maintain the traditional views, but the younger generations do not necessarily follow the views that point to purgatory. The idea that souls must become perfect before entering some literal heaven is no longer plausible to most young people. They may not believe in heaven at all, and are more likely to imagine some mystical melting of the “soul” into a sort of Godhead. It is easy to see how the idea of interconnection and the spirituality movement in general could generate such a conclusion.

Even with this change of thinking amongst the people, the Eastern and Western branches, as well as the Protestant, follow a linear eschatology, whereby humanity is headed from creation, through the fall and reconciliation, to the end of the world when Christ will return to claim his kingdom and rule in justice and peace. They all have this in common, but Protestants, as the name implies, do not agree with either the Eastern Orthodox, or the Roman Catholic over a number of Christian dogma.

### **3. 3. 9. The Protestant Churches**

In 1517 Martin Luther, frustrated with nearly overwhelming corruption, hoped to reform the Roman Church from within. It was not to be. He attached his 95 Theses to the church door in an ecclesiastically frosty climate where the members were just waiting for an excuse to turn up the heat. This resulted in an immediate furor and upheaval that would change the face of Christianity forever.

The Catholic Church taught that because Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was efficacious for all, the holiness of one member of the church would be profitable for all. This idea was eventually used by profiteers willing to take advantage of the system in order to make themselves rich off the misery of followers. The good accumulated by Jesus and the saints gains “indulgence” for sinners, bringing them closer to entry into heaven. Wide-spread sale of indulgences became the norm in the time of Luther, and he (and many others) found this deplorable and abusive. It was often the case that people bought the indulgences for their relatives who had died as

an attempt to get them out of Purgatory, even though they might not have enough money to buy food for their families. Luther was also unhappy with the pervasive incidence of simony and nepotism.

Luther hoped to enlarge the debate that would lead to reform, but soon found that this would not be the case. His prayers, contemplation and Bible study led him to conclude that all these actions on the part of the people were useless for salvation, if still meaningful to the human-God relationship. A thorough and close reading of the book of Romans caused him to deduce that sacraments and good deeds, while necessary to authentic Christian life, were in fact powerless to affect salvation. Instead, the way of salvation was found in grace through faith alone. As with Christianity for many centuries before Luther, Protestant Christianity was understood to be more about afterlife than about life. Scripturally, this is interpretation only. This particular interpretation, widespread though it may be, is not the only, or necessarily even the most accurate interpretation of Christian scripture. Even so, it is probably the majority interpretation.

Church authorities considered Luther and other dissenters heretics. Heavy persecution pursued the dissenters to varying degrees. Some were merely warned to cease their activities, while others were exiled or even executed. John Calvin became the other most famous leader of what came to be known as Protestantism. His interpretation of salvific efficacy, however, was nuanced in a slightly different way from Luther's. They both preached a form of predestination, but as opposed to Luther, Calvin did not think people could be certain they are among the elect. Calvin also had much to say about how one should live his life, regardless of his eternal state of salvation.

Calvin's ideas regarding Christian behavior permeated the various sects that colonized the "new world." There was much in the way of a hard work, individually resourceful outlook on how life should be lived. There was also a deep-seated belief in living self-sacrificially. One must "pull one's self up by his bootstraps" and work almost constantly. Hutchison (2003) calls this the "luck and pluck" of the American way of life. This idea says that if one encounters the opportunity for advancement and works very hard, he will be able to cause his own success, or that God would reward him with success. This did not mean one should make money and then live in

great luxury. Rather, one should help others as God brought the needy into their orbits, live frugally, and save the rest of their earnings.

This parsimonious way of living was demanded, so it is said, by God. What was not foreseen by Calvin, unfortunately, was the way people would come to interpret his ideas. It is understandably difficult for people to find satisfaction in the notion that until they actually die they will not know whether or not they are among the elect of God. This, coupled with the Capitalist approach to economics (competitive innovation and hard work),<sup>8</sup> soon found the people comparing their lives with others. If they were relatively wealthy, this was seen as a sign of God's favor, and it was sometimes subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, lorded over the poor, and even the middle classes.

Much of this problem originated with the eschatological concept of the end times. Life had become, in Christianity, all about the afterlife, with a more negative regard for life as it is known on earth. This, of course, did not arise wholly out of Protestantism, but began in early Christian days with Platonic dualism, grew with the realization of the early Christians that Jesus may not return within their lifetimes, and ripened progressively with each successive age that followed.

Some of the new Protestant groups fled or were pushed from their native European homes to other areas of Europe long before there was movement toward North America for religious purposes. Also, before the Jamestown and Plymouth colonies were settled, Catholic missionaries could be found in North America. However, once Europeans found a way to survive in the mid-Atlantic region, colonization increased quickly.

With this escalation of colonization came a growing variety of Christian sects. The Anglican (which became the Episcopal Church shortly after the revolution) and other Reformed traditions were the first to arrive, but they were quickly followed by what are today other mainline churches, as well as evangelical traditions. Judaism and Catholicism had made previous appearances, though Judaism did not grow quickly until the 20<sup>th</sup> century with WWII.

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<sup>8</sup> Reference to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. See list of *Resources* (bibliography) for full citation.

Having now this brief background of early American church traditions, there remain one or two Protestant doctrinal issues that are important to any discussion of life, death and afterlife. The major area of difference beside the mode of salvation is in any case still related to it in the form of the sacraments. That is, with the Protestant Reformation, the new churches debated how salvation was affected, and with it, which sacraments were necessary to the practice of Christianity.

First, it was determined that no sacrament could affect salvation as salvation is only found in grace through faith. Now, as the sacraments were not efficacious for salvation, it seemed important to ascertain if any of them were necessary at all. This point was resolved with a reading of the scripture, which is how God's will is revealed, according to Protestants, to human kind. The gift of salvation is received via repentance and baptism. Therefore, baptism was retained as a sacrament; and, as Jesus instituted communion (called Eucharist by the Catholic Church) at what is called the last supper, it was also retained. For Protestants, there are no other necessary sacraments.

Two other critical points of departure of Protestantism from Roman Catholicism have to do with rituals. The reformed churches concluded that sainthood is shared by all believers and is not dependent upon being unusually good, or on how many good works one does, or on the attribution of miracles to followers of Christ. Therefore, it seemed to them that praying to the saints is a type of idol worship. Also, if one were to read Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, the import of which is that when a person dies she is "absent from the body and at home (or present) with the Lord," the problem with a concept like Purgatory is immediately plain. This is of great consequence because it means that people must find salvation before they die. Now the demarcation between life and death is even sharper than it had previously been.

This state of affairs opened the way for evangelical revivalism. Thus there occurred the Great Awakening of the 1730s, the Second Great Awakening of the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Third Great Awakening of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Evangelical churches are very concerned with the salvation of souls. They follow the mandate of Matthew, chapter 28 to go out and make disciples. Of course, that Jesus meant individual soul salvation is left to interpretation. Yet, this

is how many evangelicals do indeed interpret this mandate, and they are convinced that the time is short and that it is imperative that as many souls be saved as can be. It is like coming upon a man on a soaring bridge. As you near the bridge on foot, you see the man climb onto the railing and prepare to jump. Do you rush to stop him, or do you simply let him go? This is how very conservative evangelicals view their task.

More recently, perhaps within the last ten to twenty years, Christian eschatological thinking has been changing. Mainline churches, such as the Episcopal, the Presbyterian, and the Methodist, along with the traditionally evangelical Baptist church, are reading the scriptures less literally, and directing their ideas of evangelism in a more liberal direction. With this change has begun also a reconnection of life in the kingdom of God. Life, death, and afterlife are once again intertwined, fluidly melded together. This brings us to ritual and communal relations.

### **3. 3. 10. Christian ritual and communal relations**

Much of this area has already been covered in looking at the three major traditions of Christianity. The rituals and even the meanings of community relations vary between the traditions. In general, both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches value community to a greater extent than do their Protestant brothers and sisters. This is a broad statement and has many exceptions, but is still true in many ways. Individualism has taken its toll on Protestant community.

Both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy engage in all-of-life rites. There is, again, baptism shortly after a child is born. There is a first visit to the confessional, a first Holy Communion, Confirmation and marriage and/or Holy Orders, and finally Last Rites, or the Anointing of the Sick. As in the Protestant church, worship services are held on Sundays, but while both Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox celebrate the Eucharist every week, not all Protestant denominations do so. Christmas and Easter are shared by all branches of Christianity, though dates of the Easter celebration of the Eastern Orthodox sometimes differs from the others.

There are several other important holy days in the Roman and Eastern Churches, to include Lent, or the 40 days (excluding Sundays) prior to Easter, when adherents deny themselves and spend more time in prayer and contemplation. These two Christian branches also celebrate All Souls Day, called All Saints Day by



Anglicans. This is a time of prayer for and/or remembrance of the dead. These, then, are just the major holy days of the liturgical calendar, and there are certainly others.

As many rituals were rejected by the Protestant church and evangelism received greater emphasis, the worship service in some Protestant churches drastically changed character. Sacraments had been severely truncated and salvation became a matter of “belief.” This resulted, perhaps logically, in services wherein the sermon became central. For Protestants, the fellowship of believers defined relationships and for the Roman and Eastern Churches, there remained a sort of mystical union of the congregants, much like the union between the people and God. Again, much of the Roman and Eastern understandings, especially with regard to community, are currently in the process of being reclaimed by Protestants.

Immediately after someone dies, Protestants will generally rally round the family. They inundate them with food, and often sit for hours, sometimes saying nothing at all, but more often making small talk. The mere presence of people at such a time can be comforting. Sometimes, however, the family members find themselves comforting the mourners, whose honest intention was to console the family. The community will usually make sure that the bereaved are not left alone before the funeral. Again, this may, or may not be a good thing, but the intent is sincere.

Protestants made the funeral yet another opportunity to evangelize the unregenerate. As of this writing, this point is still causing a lot of commotion and confusion. Protestants are trying to clarify and establish just how much evangelical preaching and how much eulogizing of the deceased is appropriate. There are reasonable and compelling aspects to both sides of the argument.

On the side of the evangelists, one might say that Soteriology is what binds together the community of saints both in this life and in life beyond death. Perhaps evangelical sermons give the people present at the funeral a full and accurate picture of who the deceased was, after all. Those in favor of a mostly or all eulogizing funeral feel that the funeral is both a time to honor the one who has died, as well as a time to remember how that person touched their own lives. Funerals have become about the living, not the deceased. Oddly, this is a little contradictory, since the same people insist that the service be all about the deceased. It seems likely that people who think this way do not make the connection. One is also tempted to say that if this

is what people need, then it may be that the deceased, as friend or relative, would have wanted them to have it their way.

Other trends in death rituals include cremation – even for Conservative and Reform Jews – and so-called theme funerals. The theme funeral can be about almost anything. If the deceased was a racecar driver, for example, he or she may be laid out in a real car or a mock-up, and perhaps the pit crew will bear the “coffin” to the hearse, which might be a tow-truck. Had the deceased been a Broadway actor, a theatre could be rented for the funeral, the corpse arranged in a position reminiscent of a role he once played, and all the attendees may take roles or be extras. The possibilities for theme funerals are seemingly endless.

More popular than both the traditional and the theme funerals is cremation, later followed by some sort of memorial. The memorial may or may not have a religious character. A popular item for the memorial is a photo collage of the deceased’s life, and perhaps an enlarged individual portrait. Some memorials are formal in nature, held at some venue where a planned eulogy is given and others are allowed to share thoughts. Others are more casual, held at the home of the loved one who has passed, or at a close friend or relative’s home. These memorials are often held weeks or even months after the death, and are therefore generally parties where it is not unusual for no one to even mention the deceased.

### **3. 3. 11. Brief summary and life, death and afterlife connections**

All Christians are followers of Jesus. What this means precisely can vary in both small and large ways, but they are called Christian because they are disciples of Christ. The restoration of the relationship between God and people was effected through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is foundational to Christian thought, but is not understood in exactly the same way by all Christians. Yet, what is important here is that Jesus was resurrected by God, and that this makes the resurrection of all people possible. The relationship is restored and life and death are no longer of two different qualities. That is, they are connected in relationship that is loving and self-sacrificial.

### **3. 4. Islam**

#### **3. 4. 1. Introductory remarks**

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Muhammad began his campaign to pull the tribes together through religion. While meditating on one of his annual pilgrimages to Mount Hira, Muhammad first heard from God through Gabriel. Over the next two decades he received the Qur'an, but because he was illiterate, it was his followers who, following Muhammad's death, gathered together all the words God shared directly with Muhammad, the last Prophet. This happened under the third caliph, Uthmann, who realized that the words would be lost if they were not soon written down. Uthmann collected the sayings that Muhammad's followers had written down on scraps of parchment, whenever Muhammad would begin to receive revelation from God and start to recite. Qur'an means recitation, or "recite!"...the logical title for a book of words first given orally to the receiver. Many other sayings of Muhammad were also passed down through the years.

These other sayings of Muhammad did not come from God, but as they were uttered by the Prophet, they are considered authoritative. Each of the sayings is rated according to its line of transmission, and a level of authority is then assigned. The line of transmission takes into account who heard the Prophet speak the words, whether or not they were written down immediately, and to whom they were passed. It is quite a lengthy process. Once a decision is made, the saying may then be added to the accepted and official hadith of whichever transmission line the saying belongs. As alluded to above, some of the transmission lines are taken more seriously than are others because it is understood amongst Muslim scholars that some lines of transmission are more likely to be accurate than others. None of the hadith, however, will ever have the influence that the Qur'an holds. As the revealed will of Allah, the Qur'an is the final authority in every situation. It is also a book that gives quite detailed and explicit instructions.

The Qur'an is the last message, brought by the last messenger of God to the people. Muslims call both Jews and Christians "people of the book" and understand Moses, Jesus, and some other Jewish and Christian figures to be prophets of God, of which Muhammad is the last. The reason God sent one more prophet is that the Jews and the Christians not only failed to follow God's instructions, but even altered the

original contents of the books. Now, the word is perfect and complete and there is therefore no need for more prophecy, though this certainly does not preclude scholarly interpretation.

After Muhammad died there was some disagreement over who would take his place of leadership and there occurred a sort of schism over the issue. Those who thought Abu Bakr was the proper choice for caliph, due to his merits as a leader, became the ancestors of the Sunni school. Those who thought that Muhammad's cousin and close friend, Ali, should be named leader became known as the Shia. These are the divisions to this day, but there is little real difference between the sects, except that the Sunni believe in fate, and the Shia hold to a form of fate and free-will mix. Not a sect, but presenting very dissimilarly, is Sufism, whose adherents are the mystics of Islam.

### **3. 4. 2. The mystical Sufis**

Sufism, much like the mystic ideas of Judaism's Cabbala and Christian mysticism, is most concerned with joining with Allah in mystical bonds of love. While Sufis are aware of living in a material world, they spend much of their time in prayer and contemplation of the divine in order to sense the presence of Allah on a more and more regular basis. The end goal is to become continually aware of Allah's presence. Rumi was a 13<sup>th</sup> century poet, theologian and Sufi mystic. His work exemplifies the inner life of the mystic. Here is a taste of his mystic, reflective nature:

THE TRUE SUFI  
What makes the Sufi? Purity of heart;  
Not the patched mantle and the lust perverse  
Of those vile earth-bound men who steal his name.  
He in all dregs discerns the essence pure:  
In hardship ease, in tribulation joy.  
The phantom sentries, who with batons drawn  
Guard Beauty's place-gate and curtained bower,  
Give way before him, unafraid he passes,  
And showing the King's arrow, enters in.

Rumi is an example of the beauty and flexibility of Islam, but as for Muslim theology, the truth is that it is remarkably homogenous worldwide, despite the diverse cultures within which it thrives. Perhaps this is because Muslim theology is relatively unambiguous and clear.

### **3. 4. 3. Muslim theology**

Islam is a religion that is thoroughly monotheistic. It may strike the reader as unnecessary to note this point, but this idea is so vital to Muslims, that it cannot be overstressed. The Shahadah makes the Muslim perspective of God quite clear: *There is no other God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet*. Allah means roughly “The God.” There is but one God and he is worthy of all worship. This is the first, foremost, and most imperative belief of Islam.

Following this key conviction are the belief in the messengers of God, belief in angels, belief in the books of God, belief in the day-of-judgment and resurrection, and belief in destiny, or fate. This is quite straight-forward. These theological principles are inextricably tied to Muslim tenets, which we will now describe.

### **3. 4. 5. Muslim tenets**

As with the other monotheistic religions, Muslim tenets are tied to rituals and communal relations. However, while Christianity shares a great interest along with Islam in the afterlife, Islamic views of life, death and afterlife are far more afterlife-centric than are those of Christianity. Therefore, the tenets of Islam are all tied either directly or indirectly to life after death.

The major tenets of Islam are known as the Five Pillars. For the Sunni, these include the Shahadah (see section on theology, above), Salat- five prescribed times of prayer each day facing Mecca, Zakat- charity for the poor of the Islamic Ummah, Sawm- fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the Hajj- pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in the life of those who are able to make the trip. For the Shia, the pillars are somewhat more reflective than those of the Sunni. They are Tawhid, which is the principle of monotheism, Qiyamah- the day-of-judgment, Nubuwwah - that is, prophethood, or belief in the prophets, Imamah-being a proponent of the Twelve Imams, or leaders in Muhammad’s family line, and Adl-justice. The different pillars of the Shia, however, do not mean they do not follow the pillars of the Sunni described previously, as it is the duty of all Muslims to follow the pillars. The pillars are also meritorious for followers, i.e. performing the five pillars will aid persons in the quest to reach paradise, which is the major purpose of all things religious.

### **3. 4. 6. Communal relations of the Ummah**

At the time of Muhammad in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, his world was full of tribal violence in which raids were the norm and it was not unusual for women to be raped and/or carried off as captives. In fact, women were thought of as property, little more than chattel. This does not mean, however, that all men treated women in this way. Muhammad is the supreme example of this truth. When Muhammad began to “recite” the new religion, he was married to an older woman, fifteen years his senior. By all historical appearances, it was a marriage of great love and respect. His wife, Kadijah, was his business partner and life partner. His love and respect for her were such that he did not marry other women until after she died. While she lived, he made valiant attempts to raise the standing of women in the community, and by all accounts, it was Kadijah who encouraged Muhammad to share what he had heard from God with the people.

Yet, even though Muhammad was a remarkably egalitarian man for his time, he was unable to make much headway with the idea of equality in a patriarchal and violent society of individual tribes. This point is important to our discussion of what the lack of male/female equality means for Muslims and the afterlife.

The whole of a person’s life determines where he or she will spend eternity. At the judgment, good deeds will be weighed against evil ones to determine whether one goes to paradise or hell. According to Smith and Haddad (1975), westerners once thought that the Qur’an indicated that women do not have souls and are therefore not eligible for life in paradise. However, this is not accurate. It is more accurate to say that there is some Qur’anic suggestion that women are dependent upon their husbands for their place in the afterlife.

The attitude of Muslim men in the early days of Islam, beside the notion that women were “theirs,” i.e., property, was that they were the protectors of their women; it is therefore not difficult to appreciate the proposition of a woman’s dependence on her husband for her eternal existence. Yet, it remains unclear as to whether or not women are solely responsible for their own entrée into paradise, or dependent to some degree upon their male relatives. This is an example of an area of hot dispute among experts.

### 3. 4. 7. Ritual, life, death, and afterlife

#### **Gone to the Unseen (partial)<sup>9</sup>**

At last you have departed and gone to the Unseen.  
What marvelous route did you take from this world?  
Beating your wings and feathers,  
you broke free from this cage.  
Rising up to the sky  
you attained the world of the soul.  
You were a prized falcon trapped by an Old Woman.  
Then you heard the drummer's call  
and flew beyond space and time.  
As a lovesick nightingale, you flew among the owls.  
Then came the scent of the rose garden  
and you flew off to meet the Rose.  
The wine of this fleeting world  
caused your head to ache.  
Finally you joined the tavern of Eternity.  
Like an arrow, you sped from the bow  
and went straight for the bull's eye of bliss.  
This phantom world gave you false signs  
But you turned from the illusion  
and journeyed to the land of truth...

*-Rumi*

Bowker (1991) says that all of life is a type of rehearsal for the afterlife. Now is the time to do good in order to live with Allah in paradise forever. Death is not a punishment, but a release. This could give life negative connotations, but as Muslims are not averse to happiness and pleasure in its place, it would be overstepping the bounds of assumption to state that Muslims think of life itself as negative. Life has much goodness and many pleasures in which it is acceptable to find enjoyment, as long as one does not harm others in the doing and as long as one helps others (Matthews 2007, 347) of the community who are in need.

Punishment for unbelief occurs before death and in the afterlife (Bowker 1991, 107). The judgment itself does not take place until after the resurrection, though unbelievers are tormented in the grave while they await judgment.

In weighing the deeds of the resurrected, intention is always considered. In fact, intention is more important than the deed itself, whether the deed is good or bad.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Resources* for online address of Rumi's poems.

Furthermore, works are enabled by Allah and done through Allah's grace (Bowker 1991, 111). Martyrs receive special favor in the afterlife, though all men who go to paradise have access to many beautiful virgins. There is no mention of unsullied men being available to women who go to paradise, but it is believed that all are in some way rewarded in paradise.

### **3. 4. 7. 1. Funerary rites**

As with Judaism, the body of the deceased must be treated with respect, washed and buried as soon after death as is possible...in this case, within eight hours of death, says Bowker (1991, 124); but this point is not universally agreed upon. Twenty-four hours is most often mentioned as an acceptable period. The culture of the deceased will affect this situation, as well as the specific circumstances surrounding the death. For example, in most Muslim communities today it is acceptable to keep the body refrigerated while the people await the arrival of the next-of-kin from another part of the world. Furthermore, in some cultures there has been a movement toward the allowance of embalming, if the circumstances warrant waiting for family members to arrive.

Since the dead will eventually be resurrected, the body is to be handled carefully. It is also considered a meritorious act to accompany the body to the grave (Bowker 1991, 125). However, while it is acceptable to show emotion over someone's impending demise, mourners are expected to remain calm in the presence of a corpse. This is so because of the Muslim conception of a sort of consciousness in the grave as one awaits judgment (Bowker 1991). The notion of the indwelling spirit, whether in life or death, is a strong one. The presence of God, on both accounts, is taken very seriously. Somewhat poetically, many Muslims will whisper the name of God in the ear of both the newborn and the just-deceased. Weeping, however, is seen as a lack of faith in that if believers have gone on to the grave on their way to paradise, what has one to weep about? It is as though the weeper disapproves of God's will (Bowker 1991, 126). Anecdotally, of course, one sometimes sees Islamic funeral processions where mourners wail uncontrollably. Still, the death of each person must be God's will if everything that happens is fated.

Actual rites vary somewhat from one culture to another. Generally, the body is washed, wrapped in unused and clean cloth, often white linen, though white is not



prescribed, and is then placed into a plain wooden coffin and carried by men to the place of burial. However, in order not to simplify things too much, it should be noted that the ritual washing is done in both a careful and a respectful way. The body is always kept covered so as to preserve modesty. This means that the shroud is laid over the corpse even while the water is being poured over the body.

As it is meritorious to carry the coffin, it has developed in many places that just to touch the coffin brings merit. Women, however, are not included in this particular ritual, but may follow the casket from a greater distance. All mourners, especially close relatives, should be dressed simply and without adornment. Once the gravesite is reached, the body is lifted out of the coffin and placed in a shallow grave, still wrapped in the linen, and carefully positioned to face Mecca. The grave is covered with dirt so that it rises a few inches or more above ground, and a simple marker is placed on the grave, if any is used at all. A last prayer is recited by an Imam if one is available. As it is the duty of all Muslims to pray for the deceased of the entire Ummah, the graveside prayers are a suitable substitute for this impossibility. Again, it should be remembered that some of the traditions vary a little from culture to culture.

In the US, the ghusul (ritual preparation of the corpse) and burial are carefully documented by the cemetery, which is usually affiliated with a Mosque. The Mosque and cemetery are also often affiliated with a funeral home. If this is the case, the preference is then for the family to use the affiliated funeral home, but it is not usually required. However, cemetery administrators do insist that an official of the Mosque be present to finalize the details of the burial and for the actual burial. The headstone, which is uniform and standard, is engraved with the deceased's legal name, date of birth, date of death, and the cemetery plot number. It is not difficult to understand the intention of this simplicity. Muslim life is one of modesty. Individuals are not to draw attention to themselves and personal photographs and images are not generally allowed. One sees the perfect example of this modesty and equality at the annual Hajj in Saudi Arabia. All pilgrims at the Hajj dress the same way and no person's needs or desires takes precedence over any other. In death, then, all are equal as well.

All mourners are expected to remain in mourning for three days following burial. Widows are expected to observe a four-month and ten-day mourning period,

however, for two purposes. The first is that it gives the widow a chance to grieve properly, and the second is that it settles the question as to whether-or-not the widow is pregnant with the deceased's progeny. Inheritance laws make this a highly important issue. The widow is left one year's provision by law. After that time, she is expected to remarry, or to live on her own savings, live with family or go to work and earn a living.

Death rituals are understood very literally and it is therefore the duty of every Muslim to see that these things occur as commanded. Everything that happens after death is also taken quite literally since the Qur'an is the immediate given word of Allah. All of the rituals, commands and duties of Islam lead directly to the outcome of this life for the next. There is no reincarnation or second chance. There is no purgation of the soul in the grave or beyond. The afterlife is completely decided by the weight (which is not wholly dependent upon numbers) of one's deeds, both good and evil. Intention is crucial to the outcome.

There is some disagreement with regard to hell. Some commentators say that Muslims who go to hell will eventually be admitted to heaven, after a period of suffering that suggests a sort of Purgatory. Non-Muslims, however, would not be afforded the same possibility of ultimate redemption. Other commentators insist that every soul consigned to hell will find redemption at the last and hell will finally be empty. Still others maintain that the destination of the soul, once determined, will be an eternal condition. Whatever view one holds to, again, it is intention of thought and action that earns heaven or hell for each individual.

The significance of intention is not unique to Islam, but as Bowker points out, Islam's literal understanding of its death and afterlife claims is unusual in that its entire theology rests on its description of the afterlife (Bowker 1991, 128). So, while all of the monotheistic religions we have discussed to this point understand death as a door through which one may never return, the literal description of a hereafter is not quite as problematic for the other monotheistic religions, as it is for Islam, and it is certainly no problem for eastern traditions. As we will now see, literalism of any kind isn't at all an issue for Native American religions, some of which are both tribal and monotheistic.

### 3. 5. Native American Religions

For most of North American history since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, if not earlier, first visitors, missionaries and conquistadors, then colonizers, and finally “new world” citizens, have, despite much protest to the contrary, been greatly affected by the native religions they have encountered. Although there are still some who insist on denying this fact, there are far more people of a wide variety of traditions who have come to embrace the richness of Native American religions and all they have to offer. This major attitude shift may be traced to the 1960s and the “seeker” movement. This is not to say there was no previous interest, but rather that this is the period when broad acceptance began to replace widespread denial.

Lest one misunderstands the nature of this relatively new acceptance of Native American religions and the ideas thereof, it should also be noted that Native American religions have, in general, forever been altered by Christian mission. In fact, “Today Christianity is their most widely practiced religion” (Gill 2000). It is also true, however, that much of Native American Christianity has taken on the local color and character of the natives who adhere to it. Gill tells us that the most extensively practiced of this type of religion in the US is the peyote religion now called the Native American Church, which is a pan-tribal church. While there are very many differences between the native traditions, all of the native religions have some things in common, such as a strong spiritual connection to tribal land, and a personality that is spiritual in its quality.

Both of these features of native religions have made them appealing to the immigrants who call the US “home.” Gill puts it thusly:

Today people the world over, but especially Americans, look to Native Americans to find inspiration, a spiritual centeredness, a religious connection to the land and to nature. (2000, 9)

This is called Native American spirituality.<sup>10</sup> This interest in, and appropriation of, Native American spirituality shows that the sharing of religiousness and religious

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<sup>10</sup> While it is today politically correct to say “Native American” rather than “Indian,” Gill indicates that this new and/or re-emergent religiousness is known as “Indian” spirituality. We, however, in order not to offend, will refer to natives of North America and “Indian” spirituality as “Native Americans” and “Native American” spirituality.

ideas is a give and take proposition, and always has been, though the recognition of this on the part of the immigrants is a recent phenomenon.

We now turn to take a look at Native American spiritual and religious ideas as well as their development alongside monotheism. We will then direct our thoughts to the death traditions and beliefs of one or two of the tribes. Finally, we will reflect upon the ways that Native American spirituality/religion helps to shape the search for meaning in the US today and what this means for US youth.

### **3. 5. 1. Native American spiritual and religious ideas**

European Colonization of North America brought about a devastating decline of Native American tribes. From the hundreds of tribes that occupied North America when colonization began there are now just over 100 remaining (Gill 2000). Even so, among those who remain are many and varied religious traditions.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the tribal peoples today speak English, but some also retain their tribal languages. However, other than the Cherokee, these languages are oral only, and even the Cherokee make little use of their written tribal tongue. Along with different languages, the tribes have different modes of dress and house styles. Some of the tribes are patrilineal, while others are matrilineal, and each of the tribes maintains its own rules of marriage.

Because the tribal languages are unwritten, the religious traditions of the tribes take on a sense of imminence and force...a vitality that gives them great weight and value for the community. All the stories and traditions are passed to the people orally. This demands attention and responsibility and in its way helps to build cultural wisdom that connects the people to each other in a meaningful way.

Highly important to most, if not all, Native American religions is the idea that creation is an ongoing process. This is not a concept unheard of in other traditions as both Judaism and Christianity (and some eastern religions) contain some aspect of this notion. For the Native American, however, it is foundational to a conception of how the world works. The whole world is spiritually permeated with the creative process. This is true of all creation; i.e. everything from bugs to trees to rocks, and of course people, is animated by spirit.

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<sup>11</sup> If not otherwise noted, the details listed in section 3.5.1 come from Gill in Neusner, 2000.

The spiritual nature of all creation means, in a sense, that all activity is also spiritual in quality. Art has spiritual meaning, as has dance, music, and all that one does, to include the rites of passage. Engaging in the rites continues the creative process and involves the people in the making of their own history. Spiritual practice connects the community to each other and the land and imbues life with meaning. In this way, even time and space are spiritual in essence.

Many tribal religious beliefs formed around the challenges of life. A typical example of this is Shamanism. When members of the tribe become ill, they go to the Shaman, who knows which herbs and rituals will bring recovery. The Shaman also practices ecstatic rites in order to see the future, or to find lost people or articles, and even to guide the dead into the afterlife. The clout of the Shaman is great because the Shaman is believed to be the one who can thwart the powers of evil. Due to the tribal focus on the powers of evil that is held by so many of the tribes, evil is given more attention than are the powers of good (Matthews 2007). This does not mean, however, that there is no inherently good force.

Because of the rather ignominious experience in history of the Native Americans with the inception of colonization in North America, there remains to this day amongst some of the remaining tribes an intentional distancing from the European immigrant culture and society. This includes the concept of religion. Thus, most Native Americans prefer the term “spirituality” over the term religion. This does not mean, however, that tribal spirituality has not been affected by Christianity.

### **3. 5. 2. Native American spirituality and Christianity**

The early Christian missionaries used techniques that were not so much evangelical as onerously coercive. There are even documented cases of abusive use of forced labor whereby the “missionaries” demanded (rather ironically) that the natives build the missions and churches. They were very often forced to convert to Christianity by baptism and made to practice Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, there was much legitimate resistance to this conversion by constraint.

Some of the natives were beaten and/or killed for their refusal to convert. Others feigned conversion, but continued their native practices covertly. Over time,

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<sup>12</sup> See Gill (2000), pp. 16-17 for one example.

as the missionaries changed tactics and released their stranglehold on the natives, some tribes converted out of choice. Some simply integrated various Christian rites and beliefs into the native system already in place. A prime example of this situation comes from Gill (2000) who indicates that the Yaqui of Mexico, now Arizona residents, successfully rebuffed missionary advances, but then invited the missionaries to live among them in 1617. For about 100 years they enthusiastically integrated much of Christianity into their society. Then, around 1740, the Yaqui rebelled against the Spanish colonialists and the Jesuits, mainly over land incursions and missionary abuses (Pritzker 2000, 134). Finally, in 1767 the Yaqui expelled the Christian missionaries. This, however, did not expel the Christian ideas and forms from their religion. In fact, the Yaqui continued to expand on Christian traditions until the people were eventually conquered and scattered by the colonial powers. It was at this point that some of them gathered in Arizona and reformed into communities. Today they practice the old native traditions, infused with Christian influence.

Many Native American religious communities are today more Christian than native in character. These communities are intentionally Christian. Most of these church communities hold to fundamentalist theology, and are evangelistic and conservative in practice and outlook. There are one or two points-of-interest regarding some of these societies.

The first feature is that as they gained some autonomy from European Christian missionaries, they began raising and educating their own leaders. This, in fact, is today the ideal of mainline Christian missionary work in general. The second point-of-interest and unsurprising result of this independence is that in many cases, tribal traditions and spiritual ideas have crept back into the thought and liturgy of Native American Christian churches.

A final consequence of the colonization and missionary efforts foisted upon Native American tribes that we feel is important to note, is that unwelcome changes caused by European colonization, and the sometimes forced religious conversion, has had the unanticipated effect of creating new religious movements, to include cult-like movements, amongst the native peoples. The reason for this appears to be that tribal

traditions had been for the natives a way of creating meaning and purpose in the life of the tribe as it lived out the life-cycle.

One example of this occurrence developed among the Paiute in 1890. Wovoka received a vision of the end of the world and formed a group around what is known as the Ghost Dance. It was understood that if the people took part in the ritual of this circular dance, wherein they often fell into trances and had visions of the dead, they would be saved from the coming destruction. This story ends with the famous case of the massacre at Wounded Knee by US troops. We would like to say that such a thing could not occur today, but one might here recall the incredible situation at Waco, Texas in 1993 where David Koresh lived with his followers at the Branch Davidian complex. This sad event ended in the deaths of 76 people.

It has been a long time since such events have occurred with regard to the Native Americans, but this is no doubt partly because the tribes have effectively been decimated, dispersed, and generally transformed. However, despite the many years of suppression and oppression endured by the natives of the land, it is also true that much of what they had to bring to the culture and society of North America as it was altered by the immigrants is in the process of being reclaimed, to include those ideas and rituals that are related to death and afterlife.

### **3. 5. 3. Life, death, and afterlife among Native Americans**

We have already said that native ritual is concerned with the ongoing creative process. Rituals address themselves to the health and welfare of the people, and to solidifying the individual's place as part of the community. The rituals surrounding puberty are highly important to most native tribes. One exception to the rule is the Naskapi of northeast Canada (Matthews 2007).<sup>13</sup> However, for those tribes who do engage in puberty rites, they are critical to the life of the clan as they help the initiates understand their place in the tribe and their responsibility in the perpetuation of the communal traditions.

The traditions connect the people to the land and each other, and give form to the creative process of history itself. Integral to that history is the fluid nature of life as it entwines with death. The Shaman or the priest mediates the relations between

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the factual details in section 3.5.3 come from Matthews (2007).

the living and the dead, even showing the dead the way to their shadowy abode. The North American Shaman oft becomes a Shaman due to a sort of call via a dream wherein the person is stripped bare of flesh and blood, down to the bone, and reconstituted as a Shaman. Gill (2000, 16) says this is reminiscent of death and rebirth...symbolism which is employed by many of the world's religions.

Death and rebirth is something of a theme in tribal religious thought for most of the tribes. All of creation is ensouled and there is a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. The Naskapi have great respect for the animals that made their survival possible. The entire universe must be respected because everything has soul. Naskapi, like many, though not all, of the tribes, believe in reincarnation. Between bodily habitations, good souls live among the stars. Some other tribes image this in-between place as a "happy hunting ground," or a place where no one works, but instead inhabitants enjoy music and art, play and relax. Many natural wonders are thought by the Naskapi to be dwelled in (ensouled) by ancestors of the tribe. These include natural substances and events such as the wind and rainbows. Soul is the Naskapi (as well as some other tribal groups) idea of the absolute. It is no wonder that death holds a respected and revered position in the tribe.

The dead are usually buried, though occasionally, if the weather is bad (too cold to dig the hole, etc), the corpse is placed on a raised platform. The body is positioned in view of some fitting scene. Typically, when the time is right, the soul will enter the womb of a woman of the tribe for rebirth. Matthews points out that considering the Naskapi culture of hunting for survival, they have had a remarkable reverence for life.

For the Powhatans (Algonquin) of the Chesapeake Bay area, health and religion were closely related. Priests were the keepers of both curing herbs and tribal mythology. Like the Shaman, this ability made the priests very powerful. Occasionally, they performed minor surgery, and also made use of the "sweat lodge," to rid the patient of ailments. The purpose was both to relieve the victim of their suffering, and to prolong their life.

Powhatans, like the Naskapi revered life. They also believed in the afterlife. Most of the dead were buried, but commanders and petty chiefs were dried out, their bare bones preserved in temple displays. The deceased went on to "pleasant fields"



where they could enjoy peace while they danced and dined with those who arrived there before them. This was thought of as a type of living, and it was also thought that they would eventually die in the pleasant fields to be reincarnated back into the tribe. After years of immigrant territorial encroachment and long periods of abuse and slavery, there remain some small groups of Powhatan descendants in the Bay area, and many of the people of the area are of Native American and European mixed ancestry.

### **3. 5. 4. Brief summary, and how Native American spirituality shapes the search for meaning, and how this concerns US youth**

North American tribal religions were not monotheistic in the same sense as are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. On the other hand, they also were not polytheistic as many people have assumed, or even animistic in the strict sense of the word. Rather, they were henotheistic, whereby a good creator God, who often had an evil counterpart, imbued all of creation with soul. The creator God was the highest of the spirits. The tribes also had a human hierarchical arrangement much like this.

With the coming of Christian mission, characteristics of monotheism began to intertwine with tribal traditions, which were among the earliest or first forms of religion. Today, a majority of tribes claim Christianity as their own.

Along the way, tribal religions, who mostly thought of the human spirit as the greatest and most essential part of being human, were active through the community in the ongoing process of creation. These ideas of endless creative movement, time as a sort of eternal now, and a spiritual connection to this creation that includes place and nature in all its forms, have captured the imagination of the US population.

Tribal life-cycle rituals include the young people of the tribe in all of tribal life and trigger in them a desire to be of use to the tribe. This meaningful inclusion in the social and religious life-rituals of the tribe is a constructive model for filling a void experienced by youths today. For, it is true that the interest in Native American spirituality is continuing to grow in a climate where the variety of religions is broadening. In this environment, the meaning of life, and therefore also death, is taking on new and greater significance for both the individual and the community. It is especially of interest to us that North American tribes have successfully integrated Christian monotheism into their tribal traditions, particularly when one remembers

that the monotheistic religions described herein are eschatologically linear in their idea of afterlife, and tribal traditions are often permeated with the idea of an eternal now that includes continual reincarnations.

### **3. 5. 5. Final remarks**

Thus, we end this chapter by suggesting that Native American spirituality may provide one of the best models to aid the young in meaning-making. In fact, we are convinced that most or all of the world's religions have the capacity to provide a useful model. By seeing how monotheistic and tribal traditions together combine to supply so useful a model of meaning-making, we are inclined to confidently proceed to a discussion of eastern religions with great hopes of discovering similar beneficial relationships.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – THE RELIGIOUS MODEL: “EASTERN TRADITIONS”**

### **4. 1 Introduction**

Native American religions resemble the monotheistic traditions in the image of the interconnection of all creation as well as the notion that creation is something of an ongoing process. Perhaps you will argue that both the Jewish and Christian ideas of creation are more static as the biblical stories might make them appear. God created the earth, all creatures, and humankind in six days and rested on the seventh. However, many more scripture stories that tell of God’s purposes through interaction with the people of the earth, suggest the ongoing movement of God and the participation with this divine, creative movement by all the world’s nations, as well as both the need for and the movement toward redemption of a fallen world. The idea of interconnectivity is also present in various forms in both tribal religions and the monotheistic religions. Where native traditions see all that exists as tied together and ensouled, monotheistic traditions suppose (as can be seen by their laws and tenets) that human behavior not only affects other people, but also all of creation. For example, Paul, the Jewish Pharisee, declares in Romans 8 of the Christian New Testament that all of creation has been taken captive by evil and awaits a freedom for which it groans. All of creation then, for both native and monotheistic traditions, is united in its joy and its suffering.

These are ideas of deep, communal connections that give meaning to life and may serve as excellent models for teenagers. Now, what of eastern religious traditions? First, it may be profitable to note that Native American religions have much in common with eastern religions as well as the monotheistic religions.

One of the more obvious areas of agreement between the two is in the concept of reincarnation. While many of the tribes believe that their dead are at some point reincarnated into the tribal circle however, the so-called eastern religions generally propose that reincarnation is determined by behavior in life, as with the Hindu belief called karma. In this view, one may as easily be reincarnated as an insect as a human being and there is no guarantee with regard to location of the reincarnated form. Behind this minor difference in how reincarnation manifests is a great variance in the way in which time is pictured. The native understanding of the interconnection of all things means an on-going sense of creation as distinguished in time as a sort of “eternal now.” This same sense of interconnection means for eastern traditions a view of time that is more cyclical in nature. In a way, time is perceived as turning back in on itself, repeating over and over.

Hence we come to a discussion of Hinduism, whose adherents perceive time as a never-ending cycle. This cycle appears, or arises, in large segments of perhaps thousands of years, only to begin all over again. In view of this assertion, it is notable that the history of Hinduism is long and complex and very important to an appreciation of the continuing life, death, life, death, etc., of the Hindu devotee. Still, for the sake of space, and the fact that it is somewhat hidden in the mysterious past, as well as the mysterious future, our discourse regarding the history of this ancient religion will be brief. We then will move on to examine some of the more essential Hindu tenets, followed by an investigation of some of Hinduism’s principal rites. We will end the section on Hinduism by addressing what all the above means to communal relations and how this may serve as a model of meaning-making for US teens.

Following our discussion of Hinduism, we will look at Buddhism before concluding with a very brief reiteration of the need for a religious model in death education.

## 4.2 Hinduism

### 4.2.1 History of Hinduism – beginnings

Reminiscent of many of the world's religions is the fact that Hindu rites and traditions were originally passed along orally. As near as scholars and anthropologists can tell, it was around 1500 to 1000 BCE that Indo-European, nomadic peoples, calling themselves Aryans, or noble ones, traveled from the area of Persia, modern-day Iran, and entered the Indus Valley.<sup>1</sup> These lighter-skinned people joined the darker-skinned Dravidians of the area of what is now Pakistan to eventually form one society. This, of course, resulted in a hybrid mix of their religious traditions as they were also affected by the cultures of both groups. It is believed that the Aryans brought with them the idea of Brahmin, who later became the highest of the castes.

Long before the Aryans arrived, however, Hindu religion was thriving. This era, generally known as the Vedic Period, began around 2500 BCE and lasted through the arrival of the Aryans until about 600 BCE.<sup>2</sup> During this period, Hindu scriptures were developed from Vedas, to the Aranyakas and the Upanishads, the latter of which have great influence upon Hindu philosophy in the current age.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the development of Hindu scriptures that began with the Vedas, became mingled over time with other ideas from Aryans and other groups, and resulted in the production of a rather large number of scriptures. The Vedas, which not surprisingly hail from the Vedic Period, are mainly comprised of songs, prayers, praises, and pleas (Richter, et al. 2005). Of these, the Rig-Veda is the most prominent (Smith 1995). An example of a plea comes from the Rig Veda 10.16<sup>4</sup> and addresses the specific request that the man being cremated be transported to his forefathers and

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<sup>1</sup> Both Matthews (2007) and Wood (2007) agree on this point, though Wood agrees with Frawley (2008 Online article *Aryan Invasion Theory: Part I*. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/8489882/Myth-of-Aryan-Invasion-in-India-David-Frawley>. Retrieved May, 2011.) who says that Indian culture and religion have an unbroken history which, while affected by a number of invasions, is wholly Indian. Unless otherwise indicated, the factual material in section 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 is taken from Matthews, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Frawley says 100 BCE.

<sup>3</sup> *History and Development of Indian Philosophy*. (2010) Neria Harish Hebbar M.D. Taken from [www.boloji.com/hinduism/019.htm](http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/019.htm) and retrieved on 11 October.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from Van Voorst (2006, 49).

does not speak to the later broadly accepted idea of transmigration, or reincarnation. “With your gentle forms, O knower of creatures, carry this man to the world of those who have done good deeds.” There are four collections of the ancient Vedas. They are the Rig-Veda, the Sama-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda. All of these are Shruti, which means “that which has been heard.” It is supposed that Shruti were received in a similar way to the Qur’an, but scholars aren’t precisely sure what this means in this specific case or how it occurred. The next set of Shruti is known as the Brahmanas and the Aranyakas. These are followed by the Upanishads which, at the end of the Vedas, are considered authoritative and ancient. Also among the writings are “that which has been remembered,” or Smriti.

Smriti includes the laws of Manu, which can be quite explicit in designating how people are to live and worship in order to find salvation. These laws go a long way to providing legitimization of the caste system as well as rules of gender. Also regarded as Smriti are the Itihasa-Purana, of which the Mahabharata that includes the Bhagavad Gita is a part, and the Ramayana. Various gods, goddesses and theological ideas are attached to the different writings. These developed over time in specific cultural situations, which might also be said of the scriptures of most other religious traditions. This is just a taste of the rich and complex fare of Hinduism.

While ritual remains important for many strains of Hinduism today, the Vedic Period was exceptional for its adherence to ritualistic action and ideal. As one might expect, this probably most often took the shape of worship of gods and goddesses in the form of sacrifice to the gods. The liturgy used in the worship can be found in the Vedas. The Rig Veda contains hymns that were written by seers and poets who were thought to be inspired by the gods. During the worship, while sacrifices were being made, Rig Vedic chants were sung, and mantras recited in a chant-like manner. Sacrifices were made for a variety of reasons, from a wish for rain, to a desire for long life.

Although there was much god and goddess worship, and many gods and goddesses to be worshiped, the gods were not deemed to be omnipotent. Rather, the gods were and are seen as having a mutually beneficent relationship with humans. Agni was/is the god of the sacrificial fire and the messenger between humanity and the gods. Indra, the god of war, storms, and rainfall, is regarded as the king of the

gods. Also important to the Vedic pantheon is Varuna, the god of morality, guilt and forgiveness. The large number of corresponding feminine gods, or goddesses, personified things; one such goddess was Saraswati or the river, and Ushas – the dawn.

The next period in Hindu thought, the Epic Period, occurred between about 600 BCE and 200 CE. This is the period of philosophical advance and contemplative concern. Hinduism, along with the rest of the religious and philosophical world, made great theoretical strides during this period. The epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana were written during this period. The Bhagavad-Gita is probably the most famous and one of the most authoritative portions of the Mahabharata. Social and moral issues that arose around world events had an effect upon the writings of this period.

Finally, the Philosophical Period came into being and the writings took on more of the form of apologetics. Questions were addressed by these later writings. Many commentaries were written and explanations of the sutras given. Attention to more systematic religious order took place during this period that continued at least through the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This period is also often called the Scholastic Period.

#### **4.2.2 History of Hinduism - influence of other peoples and religions**

When the Aryans of Indo-European descent came into what is modern-day India, some distinction between the natives and the immigrants was maintained, which over time took the form of the caste system. The original inhabitants of the area, the Dravidians, lived in cities with underground plumbing before the Aryans arrived, according to archeological finds, but very little is known about their religious practices. Today it is difficult to tell which ideas and practices, other than those mentioned above, were in place when the Aryans “arrived.”

What is known, however, is that the Aryans worshiped deities of the forces of nature and made animal sacrifice to them. Aryan religion was concerned with maintaining good over evil. Thus, both Aryan and Dravidian social customs and religious rites and symbols, can be seen in today’s Hindu world. The “immigrants” may have taken a dominant role, but this is yet another case of influence that goes both ways, as has already discussed with regard to Native American traditions. Scholars generally believe that the Hinduism known today began to develop during

the early period. The rise of the caste system is attributed to more than one possible scenario, the most obvious being that the invaders were lighter-skinned and therefore held the power to say who was superior to whom. Others attribute the surfacing of the caste structure to the idea that the indigenous people were city-dwellers who were more interested in artistic and intellectual pursuits than they were in militant rule. Whatever the case, the caste system did occur, but later, as it was not firmly established or universally recognized in the earliest days.

While there are those who insist that the caste system arose purely as a way for some to rule over others, a case may be made for the seeds of class organization in the prose of the earliest writings. The Bhagavad Gita exemplifies this point. It is in the Gita that Krishna tells Arjuna that his feelings are irrelevant when it comes to his duty, which he is obligated to follow. This idea can be seen in the caste system, which says that one is not only tied to the caste into which one is born, but that one must do his or her duty as prescribed by that caste. We concede at this point that most, if not all scripture traditions can be interpreted to nearly any end, but we are not willing for that reason to endorse the assumption that the caste system was developed by the invaders to keep the people under their thumbs, especially when one remembers that the system only came into being over time. We will discuss the deep religious connections of the caste system in our section on Hindu tenets and rites, below. For now we simply name the four castes. We take our classifications from Smith (1994). They are: 1. Brahmin (intellectual and spiritual leaders). 2. Administrators or Organizers (politicians, government workers, teachers). 3. Producers (artisans, farmers, engineers). 4. Followers (unskilled laborers, factory workers). While the caste system was legally abolished in 1950, after a lengthy period of losing favor beginning with the British presence in India, it is still influential, especially in the rural parts of India. Change is slow in every way and in every society, but when a tradition is connected to both the social and the religious, change is very nearly glacial.



One other notion related to class will be mentioned here: There is to this day the unofficial class called Untouchables, or Dalits.<sup>5</sup> These are people on the outside of the system in that they are wholly shunned by society. It is of interest to us that this is the group that has perhaps made more upward movement than any other in more recent days. Perhaps it is because these people perceive that they have nothing to lose. For, even if one belongs to the lowest caste, i.e. that class named Followers by Smith (1994), one has hope of moving up in the next incarnation, and is in a way respected by society if they do the full duty of their class. This is not so for the outcasts, or Untouchables.

Perhaps the British ambiguity toward the Hindu caste system contains some irony. The denigration of this social arrangement was in some sense a part of their undoing. By encouraging a more equitable society, and by sending people like Mohandas Gandhi to school in the west, they were doing much to lay the groundwork for changing social, cultural, and religious thought. It was Gandhi's time at work in the law in South Africa that opened his young eyes to the bigotry that existed against both the South African blacks and the Indians that lived there in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Matthews, "Gandhi's spiritual approach was influential in moving the British government to grant independence to India in 1947" (2007, 84). Of course, British sentiment against caste did not develop overnight, but it surely had its affect on the status quo, if at first unintentional.

#### **4. 2. 3 Hindu tenets**

Talk of status quo has little to do with Hindu religious thought. For while the caste system is tied to individual karma – which means that one is set within one's caste for a lifetime – salvation is dependent upon doing one's duty only insofar as one may be reborn into a higher caste. The real issue at hand has to do with a grace that comes from trust. This sounds remarkably like Christian salvation, with one major difference. While Christian trust is wholly in God who is "other," Hindu trust is in Brahman (God) who is Atman (self). It is said that one must rise to the higher castes,

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<sup>5</sup> The meaning of the word Dalit appears to be somewhat open-ended. Generally it means broken, ground down, or suppressed, but there is some question in regard to its actual origins. For our purposes, suffice it to say it is a self-designation adopted by the so-called Untouchables, which implies the meaning "oppressed."

and even that one must be born a man, before one may find release, freedom, or, as it is known, Moksha.

Moksha is the state of freedom from Samsara, or continuous death and rebirth. In Moksha, the jiva (soul) that appears, or seems to appear in reality, becomes aware of its unity with Brahman. Atman, is that self that is Brahman. Because the absence of this realization is all that “separates” Atman from Brahman, it may be logically argued that anyone, Followers, women, even Untouchables, may find Moksha. Hindus would likely disagree with the last statement because it seems illogical to them to suppose that those groups previously named would be able to overcome their Karma in this lifetime.

All of life (and death) is directed toward reaching Moksha. While this sounds quite simple, it is clearly an elusive goal as millions of people have searched for Moksha over thousands of years. There are four stages of life through which the men of higher castes are expected to pass.<sup>6</sup> The first is the student stage that runs generally between the ages of 8 and 12 but can last until age 24. During this period, the young man studies the Vedas. When he turns 25, the young man marries and tries to live his life according to the ideals he learned under the tutelage of a teacher (guru) when he was in the student stage. It is not until the man has a son who can assume his duties that he is free to enter the next life-stage of forest-dweller, or renunciation. Traditionally, this meant that the man would move to the forest, taking his wife with him if he wished, and live the life of the ascetic. It is acceptable for modern “forest-dwellers” to remain in their homes, and keep to themselves, meditating and living simply as they move toward the final stage of Samadhi, which is the delivery of the soul from the body as it unites with Brahman. Society does not expect most people to reach this stage, no matter what their caste.

Women of higher castes are expected to observe three stages of life. The first is the student stage wherein they learn about their religious duties. The second stage is as a wife whose duties complement those of her husband. In the third stage she may or may not join her husband as a forest dweller. In India women are not

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<sup>6</sup> The life-stage information in section 4.2.3 comes from Matthews (2007) unless otherwise noted.

expected to become wandering ascetics. The laws of Manu prescribe the various stages of life and are quite clear about what is required of women.

Written about 200 BCE, the Laws of Manu<sup>7</sup> give rather specific instructions regarding social rules. Male relatives of women are expected to take good care of women, treating them with honor, for their roles within the household are honorable ones. Men also have complete say over a woman's life – who she will marry, even if this means she wed a less than virtuous man to whom she must be wholly obedient. If her husband should precede her in death, she is to remain unmarried for the rest of her life, or cause dishonor to herself, her dead husband, and her family. In contradiction to that stated previously, she must also live a life of asceticism out of respect for her husband, no matter what his character while he lived. It has been assumed that women are morally inferior to men and are thus not afforded the opportunity to study the Vedas.

Change in this area is slow, but change there has been. The Modern era and globalization have caused some reinterpretation of the ancient scriptures to take into account context. This is occurring in most traditions. As always, however, change comes slowly and does not come without opposition. When change comes upon the religious, or societies in general, there are people who feel threatened and frightened. For those of us living in western societies, changes have been occurring for so long, that change itself has become something of a way of life. However, for those societies who have until very recently continued in the patriarchal way of understanding social mores, global expectations for a world of equality is scary in the extreme. Still, Hindus around the world are not all dismayed by social modification.

In many countries, Hindu women are finding themselves in positions wherein their life-choices are now much broader than the traditional homemaker. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Hindu thought demands that every person, male or female, regardless of caste, do their duty according to Dharma. It is believed that all will eventually reach Moksha. To the Hindu mind, this is a fair and equitable means of salvation. For who is to say that a Brahmin has not been through thousands of incarnations, some of which were as insects, animals, and women? From a more

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<sup>7</sup> The information regarding women from here on comes from Richter, et al. 2005.

liberal and western perspective, this notion seems like pure rationalization – an excuse to wield power over others.

Before one accepts such a harsh judgment of Hindu Dharma, it should also be noted that every caste has its responsibilities; and the higher the caste one occupies, the greater one's responsibilities. Followers have very little responsibility to society, and when one of this caste breaks the rules, few are surprised as such behavior may in fact be expected. People are expected to live out their Dharma. If one oversteps their duty, they will be in danger of causing an adverse effect upon karma, with the result of “backward” movement, that is, moving further away from salvation rather than closer to it.

Male domination takes a secondary position in this schema. Scholars argue that scriptural interpretation is based on views of male superiority, and the superiority of the rich and powerful. While there is no way of knowing whether-or-not this is true,<sup>8</sup> it is known for certain that great numbers of Hindu worshipers (as well as other religious adherents) do not see things this way. So, the question arises that if a person is sincere in their understanding of their religious tenets, who may rightly say they are wrong? This issue is also in play in western societies, whereby conservatives of all religions are questioning the reinterpretation of scripture. These people are adamant in their contention that as God is unchanging; so is God's holy scripture.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. 2. 3. 1 The Hindu God(s) and the paths to Moksha**

Arguments continue unabated over the question of the Hindu understanding of God, or gods. It is certainly arguable that although there are many Hindu gods, they are all worshiped as the emanation of one reality. Brahman is the creator God, yet while Brahman is wholly separate from the various gods – Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, etc. – all of these emanations are also one with Brahman, as is also Atman. In other words, there is really only one reality. All emanations take material form. In this way they seem separate and autonomous, but this is maya, or illusion.

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<sup>8</sup> Myriad books and papers have been written on this topic with many thinkers insisting that scriptural analysis proves that power structures were purposely erected.

<sup>9</sup> This, of course, begs the question, “Is God unchanging?” But that is for another study.

Worshippers choose the emanation that will aid them in their move toward Moksha. They may also choose a path, or yoga, that will help them meditate or grow toward full awareness. It is understood that different people are at different places of spiritual maturity and have different personalities that demand different forms of meditation and worship. The most popular yogic path is Bhakti, the way of love. Bhakti yoga is exemplified by the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna tells Arjuna, who does not want to kill his relatives, that he must fulfill his Dharma, and that to question his duty in this way reveals his naiveté with regard to the workings of reality. It matters little that one passes from this life since there are hundreds, or even thousands, of emanations for each appearance of soul, or jiva. In fact, if Arjuna does his duty, and his enemies are doing their duty, each of them may find themselves that much closer to Moksha in the next emanation. As for love, Bhakti yoga takes something of a salvation by grace standpoint. It is really about trusting in the absolute love of reality, or Brahman, which is Atman.

Jnana yoga may serve as a more direct route of salvation for the soul that becomes aware of its oneness with Brahman through knowledge. It is ignorance that causes one to imagine that material reality is somehow separate from all reality. Knowledge then, in a very real way, sets the adherent free from the illusion that Atman was ever actually separate from Brahman.

A third way of salvation is through Karma, whereby the doing of one's duties may lead to the awareness of the oneness of all things. Should one go about doing good deeds, and putting others above the self, it may be that he will discover his connection to the other, and come eventually to see his connection to all of creation.

Finally, there is the royal road, or Raja yoga. The idea of Raja yoga is to discipline the body to perfection, thereby enabling the soul to find release from illusion. This includes both physical and mental activities, with the latter being perhaps the more difficult to control. One works to be detached from the world of illusion, and in control of the mind and body in order to approach the divine in purity. Now the practitioner sits in the lotus position and forgets he has a body. The breath is then steadily controlled until complete serenity is reached. All sensual stimulants are relegated to a place of unknowing in the next step, which is then followed by the filling of the entire mind with one single object. Finally, even the object disappears

and all consciousness of the illusory world ceases. This is an eight-step process and is likely to take the participant years to achieve.

There are six main philosophical schools of Hinduism.<sup>10</sup> It is believed that the earliest of the writings with regard to these schools come from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Advaita Vedanta is one of the more prominent philosophical schools and is mostly captured by our previous discussion, but also rests on the idea that the “Belief in the various gods of Hinduism demonstrates an ignorance of Brahman – Atman, the one reality” (Matthews 2007, 82). The other prominent Hindu philosophy is Sankhya. This system does not utilize gods in its explanations of life and existence, but instead takes a dualistic view of the world. Matter is not illusory and neither are spirits, or souls. The way to salvation is for one’s soul to escape from its attachment to matter.

While there are four other philosophical schools of Hinduism, we will mention just one more: Nyaya, which in the search for salvation, or release, emphasizes reason and logic. The idea is that with empirical examination of knowledge artificial understandings of life may be avoided and suffering cease. This system is said to have been developed by someone named Gautama, which strongly suggests that it came from the thought and practice of Siddhartha Gautama, of Buddhism fame. As the Buddha came from the Hindu world, it seems possible that he developed the system as part of Hinduism. However, since it is known that Siddhartha lived hundreds of years BCE and that the Hindu philosophies mentioned here can be traced only to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, it is hard to determine which came first – the chicken or the egg. Surely, though one may believe the Buddha was able to reach his own enlightenment, she might also conclude that he was also something of a product of his own culture and society.

#### **4. 2. 4 Hindu rites**

Hindu rites are designed to lead to balance, harmony, and awareness of the interconnection of all things. If Atman is Brahman, then all are part of the one whole. Many of the rites revolve around the emanations in the form of the gods, who are not to be taken, says Matthews (2007), in a literal way. Thus, the gods, who are seen to

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<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the facts surrounding the philosophical systems, as well as the rites that follow section 4.2.3.1, come from Matthews (2007).

embody more nearly ideals of eternal meaning than actual beings, are akin to rites in themselves. Such an interpretation prohibits the thought that Hinduism is polytheistic, pointing more toward henotheism. Communal rites are utilized for the binding of the person to her community, which in its way reflects the search for Moksha in the awareness of the fact that Atman is Brahman.

Community is immediately shown to be important via the sacraments, or Samskaras that connect the people to one another. A child's birth and naming are the first of the important rites of communal bonding. Boys are considered twice-born, i.e., they were female in a former incarnation and are now ready to be responsible for religious regulations, and are therefore set on a course of study – the student stage of life. The symbol of their move toward Moksha is a sacred thread known as janeu, which is to be worn all the time and valued along with their religion instructor, the guru.

The householder stage is entered with the rite of marriage, which is most commonly monogamous. In India today, civil marriages and divorce are both recognized as legitimate, and women may even be the party to ask for a divorce. The production of a male heir is no longer the only, or even most common, reason to wed.

As one might expect, the last rite is the funeral, which is usually by cremation, but occasionally by burial. When possible, it is the eldest son who performs the last rites. Because of its pleasant fragrance, sandalwood is preferred for use on the funeral pyre. This completes the round of obligatory rites, but there are other rites and symbols common to much of Hindu life. While it is incumbent upon the family and friends of the deceased to refrain from major grief that would ignore the movement to either reincarnation or Moksha of their loved one, it is also possible for the dying person to be their own guide to the release from Samsara. Remarkable concentration and discipline would be necessary. If one carefully and consistently practices yoga throughout the latest incarnation,<sup>11</sup> it is more likely that she will be able to perform the necessary concentration and see the interconnections that will lead to freedom.

It is believed that the soul leaves the body from the head in upward movement toward a higher "plane." On the other hand, if one has done evil in life, the soul will

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<sup>11</sup> See Bowker (1996, 143) for this discussion.

be expelled through the anus – quite a vivid image. The upward-moving soul, however, takes on a “subtle body,” which remains until the soul is either reborn or unites with Brahman (Bowker 1996). It is clear that one must do one’s duty as prescribed by one’s place, or caste, and religious Hindus will find that the rites in general will assist them in this endeavor.

While there are Hindu temples, worship very often takes place in the home, for worship may be individual or communal. At the temple there is often a pool for ritual bathing and purification, and a Hindu priest may lead the worship of the congregation. There is often lighting of candles and singing of hymns. Money will be given for the support of the religious and adherents will very often give food for the gods.

Deities are worshiped, sometimes in congress and sometimes individually. The latter may take place more in one’s home since the deity to be worshiped is a personal choice. This form of worship is known as puja, and the deity in question comes to be regarded almost as one of the family, i.e. a person who lives in the home and cared for tenderly and carefully. However, it may be that not every member of the family will choose to worship the same deity, or even to take the same yogic path.

Hindus are highly tolerant of different religions...probably because they respect the right of the individual to choose her own way to seek salvation, or Moksha. This is not to be taken lightly, however. For even though one may choose one’s own path, that path is taken as a serious duty and followed meticulously. Thus, people in the same family and the same household might attend different religious festivals and engage in different social missions for the sake of the needy. The choice of a deity, or pair of deities, to worship is based upon the preferred path, as the deity provides guidance for daily living.

There are many festivals, some of which are nationally celebrated. For example, the festival of Rakasbandhana serves as a reminder of the duty to make personal sacrifice for the sake of others, from one’s own family to the wider community, to the whole world. Signaling the remembrance of the victory of good over evil is the festival Vijayadasami. The highest good for the individual, of course, would be to reach Moksha.



#### **4. 2. 4. 1 Life after Life**

Following life, in Hinduism, is life. People die, but in a very real way, death is but the last rite of the current life; for, barring the attainment of Moksha, every death will be followed by new life. In fact, death must occur as part of the cycle of life and as a natural part of creation and process (Bowker 1996, 159). Thus, Hinduism entertains the seemingly opposite deities of creation and destruction. Both are necessary to the continuation of life. The self, or the essence of the being, is sacrosanct, but the self is also subject to the changes that come with the cycle of birth and death, and rebirth, known as Samsara. In this way then, the body and the personality are always changing, but Atman is ever part of Brahman, and only Brahman is changeless. To say this means, then, that Atman is also changeless, if Atman is part of Brahman...even if one is unaware of this reality. Atman, however, must endure death for as long as the awareness that Atman is Brahman is not realized. Brahman, however, is immune to death (Bowker 1996, 136).

#### **4. 2. 5 A model for meaning-making**

The fact that family members may follow different yogic paths and worship varying deities does not diminish the importance of family relationships. The reality of the sometimes community worship and the frequent home worship, does not devalue community relationships. There is a valid argument for the point that release from Samsara is an individual accomplishment, but there is also a very basic interconnectivity seen in the need for the guru, the deities or emanations of Brahman, the expectation of self-sacrificial giving to others of time, money and talent, and the very search for Moksha which is itself the purpose of the cyclical existence of the Hindu individual. One might say that Hinduism is all about individuals seeking community that already is, for as Atman is Brahman, Brahman is the full measure of all souls in a network of continual relationship (Bowker 1996, 141). This is “God” in process, or “God” as process. This God can only be intuited, or seen via a sixth sense (Bowker 1996).

Such a model may make perfect sense to the youth who is quite well-schooled in the responsibilities and duties of life as an individual yet finds that he wants something more. That something may very well be found in an awareness of his connection to all of life as it takes place all around him, and his connection to all those

who live and seek the same understanding as he seeks for himself. This (above) sounds very much like the Native American idea of ongoing creation; and in this case, one lives into the process of awareness, and in so doing comes to know both others and Brahman, for Brahman is all others, and Brahman is Atman. Therefore, though he dies, yet he lives.

#### **4.3 Buddhism**

It was suffering that caused Siddhartha Gautama to seek enlightenment. It was illness and old age and it was death that disturbed his happy world. Gautama sought a way to avoid the inevitable, but instead he found meaning. Life did not change. Death did not change. Gautama changed. As it turned out, great numbers of people were looking for what he found, and after a very brief stumbling-start, he quickly gained many followers.

The Buddha's story is not the typical story of a religious founder. Moses ran for his life, and later led the Israelites out of Egypt with the entire Egyptian army nipping like lap dogs at their heels. Lao Tzu, if he really existed, is said to have founded Taoism, then, having written the Tao Te Ching, ridden away on horseback. K'ung Fu Tzu had great aspirations of becoming a politician and of implementing great social reform, but he was rejected and became a teacher. It was after his death that Confucius' adoring pupils spread his political and social teachings and it was then that those principles came to be well-received. According to the New Testament, it was after three years of teaching that Jesus was killed by the Romans. His followers ran from the scene in terror, and his people did little or nothing to help him. Even so, two thousand years later his teachings continue to influence people all over the world. Siddhartha Gautama's story is very different.

Popular in his own time, today the Buddha's influence is growing. Though still a largely Christian nation, the US is changing in religious character. Numbers of Christians are diminishing while other religions gain enthusiasts. Along with other traditions, Buddhism is becoming more visible in American society, coast to coast. American Buddhists are immigrants, refugees, and American converts. It is a popular option among young people who have become disenchanted with the faith of their parents. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, it is probably also due to their parents, and grandparents that this interest in Buddhism grows. For it was in the 1960s that the

interest in all things spiritual gained intense momentum and that momentum continues unabated today.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism made small inroads into the nation in the very early days of the inception of the colonies, then the states. The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the arrival of Chinese Asians, but it was in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that large numbers arrived to build the trans-continental railway. With them, came Buddhism. The other major inroad made by a non-Christian religion came with the Spiritualism movement that took place largely in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Names like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson arise in connection with this movement, specifically with regard to Transcendentalism. These movements had a relationship to Hinduism – yoga and reincarnation.

These are just a couple of examples of how the search for meaning has taken shape. The search continues to escalate as the 21<sup>st</sup> century advances. In the US, Buddhism is just beginning to take a leading role despite the popularity of Zen Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s. For, it is only within the last thirty to forty years that large numbers of women of European ancestry have been welcomed into the Sangha. This change has had a marked effect upon Buddhism's stateside acceptance for two reasons. The first reason is that any religion that would not accept women into the priestly Sangha would be viewed as a step backward in a society wherein women have made and continue to make great strides toward equality with men. The second reason is that general tolerance has turned into general pluralism and pluralism demands not only acceptance, but encouragement of diversity in all respects, from gender neutrality, to choice of sexual orientation, to racial impartiality, to open religious preferential options. Would the Buddha have approved of these cultural phenomena? The discussion that follows may help the reader answer this question for himself.

We will now begin our discourse on the life of Siddhartha Gautama and the history of the thinking and values he espoused. It will not be an exhaustive history as such an undertaking would require a long chapter all its own, but we will attempt to cover the most salient points in order to build a framework for understanding how Buddhism constitutes an excellent model for meaning-making. After this glance at Buddhist history, we will spend some time with Buddhist philosophy and tenets, some

death rituals, and how all of this supplies a model and a base upon which teenagers may construct their own meaning.

#### **4. 3. 1 Buddhist history - the life of Siddhartha Gautama**

The early life of the boy who would grow up to be the Buddha, or the enlightened one, has become somewhat shrouded in mystery and hyperbole. This is hardly surprising since it is likely that he was born in ancient India somewhere around the year 566 BCE, and the records of his life and thought were not written down for long years following. This is, in fact, a comment that would fit with most or all of the ancient traditions. Having said that, however, we will now look at the basic outline of his early days, because even if the stories are not wholly accurate, they speak to the deep beliefs and strong convictions of the people for whom the stories mean a way of life...and death.

It is said that Gautama's mother, Maya,<sup>12</sup> dreamt that a white elephant entered into her abdomen through her side. It is likely that the elephant is a sign both of luck and great personal importance. The boy would become a political leader, or a great teacher. His mother dies shortly after his birth, but it is his father's intention that he become the former rather than the latter, since the former carries much prestige. The fact that he would choose to become a religious teacher when he could be an emperor is an indication of his great compassion, purity, and self-sacrifice. One may immediately see why the story would be written in this way. Even his name points to his future life and purpose, i.e., Siddhartha means "one who has achieved his aim" (Keown, 1996).

The story continues with Gautama's father protecting the young boy, then the grown man, from outside influences and from the sorrows and vicissitudes of life. He marries and has a son, but becomes bored and wants to travel outside the palace grounds. When he goes out on four successive days he sees the following sights in this order: 1. An old man. 2. A sick man. 3. A corpse and 4. A religious mendicant. Because he is worried that this could also happen to him, he leaves his family in the middle of the night (the hardest thing he ever had to do, it is said) to seek the meaning of it all.

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<sup>12</sup> We find it impossible not to wonder about this name. Can it be anything but a purposeful choice given its meaning, which is that the arising of appearance (the material world) is illusion?

Here the story becomes a bit more obscured by the mists of time. Several different versions have appeared over the ages, but the end result is pretty much the same. One story says that Gautama becomes an ascetic and nearly dies before he realizes that such a route is too extreme, and that it does not even lead to enlightenment. Another story says that after he attempts the unsuccessful ascetic route, he indulges his senses completely, eating, drinking, engaging in sexual relations – all in excess. Then, after both extremes, he realizes the middle way is best. Always, however, he finds his way to the bodhi tree, sits for days on end and reaches enlightenment.

The enlightened one, the Buddha, now has a choice. Does he slip away from this time and this reality to the ‘place’ of Nirvana, leaving behind him all the sorrows of life? Or, does he stay and help others find their way to enlightenment? In fact, is it right to leave when there are so many in need of guidance? Is it compassionate? The Buddha decides the compassionate thing to do is to stay in this world and help others. Since the time of the Buddha, hundreds have followed his example. They are known as Bodhisattva – enlightened beings.

It is said that after Siddhartha experienced enlightenment, he went to the royal deer park, where he explained the way to Nirvana to some of the ascetics he had previously known. One often hears that they were at first reluctant to listen, but before long, were convinced of the truth of the Buddha’s Dharma and began to follow him. They were known as Arhats, or saints, rather than Buddhas (Keown 1996, 26). After that, others joined the Sangha in quick succession, and soon the Buddha was sending out missionaries. He was reluctant to accept women into the Sangha, but did eventually found an order of nuns.

One often reads that the Buddha shied away from receiving women into the Sangha because there were so many complaints that his religious orders broke up families.<sup>13</sup> Matthews (2007) retells the story that indicates how Siddhartha’s Aunt Mahajapati wished to join the Sangha after most of her family had already done so. The Buddha turned her down several times. The story continues with the depiction of Mahajapati forming a group of women ascetics who traveled a long distance in bare

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<sup>13</sup> See Matthews (2007, 107) for one.

feet in order to plead with the Buddha. The happy ending is that... “he was impressed with their earnestness and relented” (Matthews 2007, 107). This, so it is told, is how he came to found a separate community for nuns.

It is generally believed that Siddhartha Gautama spent the remainder of his life teaching, and there are some who say his family also became followers of his Dharma. The community spent the dry months in missionary work, but did not travel during the rainy season. Cloistered during the rainy season, they meditated and prayed.

As for Siddhartha Gautama’s final days, the story is told, alternately, that he ate poisonous mushrooms, or bad pork, and died at the age of 80, or as some writers insist, he actually became well again after his illness and died of old age. Depending upon the source, his final words tend to vary widely, but they are always connected to his teaching. Scholars appear to simply choose those words, or that idea, that they most prefer. One of the more popular choices (Smith 1995) with regard to the Buddha’s final words sounds like something Paul says in his New Testament epistle of Philippians chapter 2, verse 12, which is that one ought to work out their own salvation. It is possible, of course, that if he lay dying for a little while he may have had time to say a number of things.

#### **4. 3. 1.1 Buddhism following Siddhartha Gautama’s death<sup>14</sup>**

The Buddha taught that each person should think for herself. So, while his Dharma and precepts defined the community, it was and is expected that individuals will interpret the teachings for themselves. As one might imagine, a lot of disagreements arose around his teachings, and about 100 years after the Buddha’s death schism occurred. As with so many disputes, the causes are variously reported depending upon the point-of-view held by each camp. The most likely cause is that one group wanted to add to the monastic rules left to the Sangha by the Buddha, while the other group, known as the Universal Assembly, did not want the rules changed. The former group became known as the Elders.

Many changes and divisions arose over time, and most of the resulting groups eventually disappeared, leaving one Elder group known today as Theravada. This

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the details in section 4.3.1.1 and the next three sections, come from Keown (1996).

group is wide-spread in Southeast Asia, and Sri Lanka. Both Theravada Buddhism, and what later became known as Mahayana Buddhism, are now practiced in the US. Meaning “Great Vehicle,” Mahayana Buddhism is made up of many different schools. Tibetan Buddhism, sometimes called Vajrayana, is one of these schools. This is the strain that boasts the Dalai Lama for its leader and includes Tantric Buddhism. As Mahayana Buddhism moved into China, Korea, and Japan, in that order, it took many forms as it was altered by the assorted local cultures and indigenous religions. Some of these forms have been imported to the US.

In the mid-nineteenth century, some Chinese people came to San Francisco, bringing Buddhism with them (Matthews 2007). Stateside, Pure Land Buddhism and Zen are probably the most widely-practiced form of the tradition amongst Euro-Americans and those of Japanese descent. A number of Chinese schools have arisen and found followers among both men and women (Ibid.). Much of the growth took place since the 1960s. The largest American Buddhist enclaves are in California, Vermont, and the Southeast, but there are certainly many smaller communities as well. A number of changes have taken place in American Buddhist practices as some accommodation to Christianity has occurred (Matthews 2007, 129).

#### **4. 3. 2 Philosophy and tenets of Buddhism - Commonalities between Buddhism and Christianity**

Mahayana Buddhism has more in common with Christianity than both Buddhists and Christians may be willing to admit. Perhaps this may be attributed to the fact that a lot of its development occurred shortly after the death of Christ (Keown 1996, 58). As Christ was a self-sacrificing savior, so did the Buddha sacrifice his personal life for the sake of others. Also, Mahayanist adherents follow the Buddha in that they postpone their entry into Nirvana to become Bodhisattvas, or enlightened beings. They spend their lives teaching and leading others down the path to Nirvana. Compassion and selfless love are ideals of both the Mahayana Buddhist and the Christian. The major difference is, of course, that to Christians Jesus is the redeemer, whereas the Buddhist Bodhisattva is thought of as a teacher, or guide.

In Mahayanist thought, the Buddha came to be seen as having three “bodies.” The human body, of course, took physical form; the heavenly body is thought of as existing in some heavenly realm, and the transcendent body is identical with ultimate

truth. One other resemblance between the two religions is the connection between the idea of the second coming of Jesus Christ that some believe will take place in the eschatological future, or at the end of days, and the Mahayana belief in the latter-day coming of a Buddha called Maitreya under whose leadership large numbers of people will become enlightened.

#### **4. 3. 2.1 General differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism**

In general, where Mahayanists are liberal and inclusive, Theravada Buddhists are more conservative and exclusive. The latter see themselves as following the original teachings of the Buddha more closely, and they do not allow women to become monks, like the Mahayanists do. Finally, Theravadans base their understanding of Buddhism on the Pali canon, while the Mahayanists also accept the authority of later scriptures which were likely produced around the time of, or just after Christ. The Mahayana explain the use of these later sutras by saying that the Buddha has existed forever and that therefore the writings could take place at any time, not just during his physical manifestation on earth. According to this line of thinking, the earlier writings, though good and true, were not yet complete.

#### **4. 3. 2.2 What the Buddha taught**

The Buddha is known for his sermonizing. Since the purpose of the teachings is to help others find enlightenment, it makes perfect sense that preaching is how he would spend much of his time. Of course, when people live in community, it becomes necessary, even imperative to design rules of behavior and interrelations. When the rules are based upon religious or philosophical reason, they take on conceptual form. The Buddha constructed precepts that would regulate both the Sangha and give the laity a framework for interacting with the Sangha which they support. While monks are expected to live the life of an ascetic, the laity are not. Therefore, of the ten precepts elaborated by the Buddha, only the monks were (and still are) required to follow all ten. The laity need to follow the first five only.

#### **4. 3. 2.3 The Ten Precepts (Matthews 2007)**

1. Not taking life (ahimsa)
2. Not stealing
3. Being chaste
4. Not lying



5. Not drinking intoxicants
6. Eating moderately and not after noon
7. Avoiding spectacles such as singing or dramas
8. Not using flowers, perfumes or jewelry
9. Using simple beds
10. Accepting no gold or silver

As one can see by the above list, the first five of the precepts might be kept by all Buddhist followers. The first of the precepts refers not only to murder, but more broadly to doing no harm to any living thing. It might easily be argued that the ‘no harm’ principle is not a suggestion, but a way of life that incorporates all of the first five precepts, something like the command to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Because monks are ascetics, the precepts then become very specific regarding the dos and don’ts of living.

#### **4. 3. 2.4 From individual salvation, to evangelism**

The individualistic nature of Buddhism as it was first created by the master is exemplified in Gautama’s deathbed words when he says that every person should work out his or her own salvation. While the Theravada tradition still basically follows this way of thinking, the Mahayana tradition has gone more in the direction of communal relations, first seen in the Sangha of monks and the Sangha of nuns. It might also be argued that the Buddha’s decision to remain in this realm for the sake of others points toward the importance of selflessness that is compassionate and evangelistic in nature. Therefore, while at first blush it seems as though Mahayanists have altered the Buddha’s teachings beyond his intention, no one would argue that he would be against compassion and/or against aiding others to find enlightenment. Ironically, we could say that both schools have overstressed their ideals, because it was Siddhartha Gautama that preached the “middle way.” We turn now to look at what the middle way means in practical terms, and to discuss what steps the Buddha taught to his disciples to help them find enlightenment.

#### **4. 3. 2.5 The prescription – the Four Noble Truths**

The famous analogy used by Siddhartha Gautama to describe the human problem known formally as the Four Noble Truths, is that of the person who goes to a

doctor with a serious illness. The doctor proceeds to diagnose the illness from the symptoms, and then prescribes a cure. The illness is *Dukha*, or suffering, perhaps best described as dissatisfaction. This is the first Noble Truth and it signifies the human tendency to grasp the trappings of life. Because all things are in a constant state of flux, humans suffer the loss of things, ideas, people...that they never really had, because they don't really exist as they imagine that they do. This grasping causes a continual arising of the appearances of reality. This, then is the second Noble Truth, i.e., that all things arise from the sense that they are real as they are grasped by human beings, themselves in a constant state of flux. The third Noble Truth is that there is a cure for *Dukha*, which is cessation, or liberation from all desire.

If one ceases to desire, the arising of all things (whether physical, mental, or spiritual) also ceases. This is so because arising only happens as a sort of cause and effect. Logically, if there is no cause, there is no effect, hence no-thing, or nothing. The cure for *Dukha*, says the doctor, is contained in the medicine called the Eightfold Path. Basically, this is the fourth Noble Truth, and is a call to disciplines that will enable one to become permanently aware of the true nature of all things. It is not really that the idea of no-thing is hard to understand, but rather that people have within them the habits of grasping, yet are incapable, without practice, of permanently grasping the truth.

The Buddha, as one who comes from a Hindu background, is here clearly shaped by his upbringing. *Jnana yoga*, or the royal road, can be detected in the method and purpose of the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is not a list of steps so much as a continuous way of living comprised of serious nurturing of wisdom, morality, and meditation. Thus it both exemplifies and adds necessary elements to Hindu yoga – or perhaps combines the yogas to create a more holistic process. Without the constancy and consistency of the Eightfold Path, one is unlikely to reach Nirvana in this lifetime. Here is what the path looks like. It is practiced in an integrated manner, not in a step-by-step fashion, with the idea being that one lives, day by day, into enlightenment.

#### **4. 3. 2.6 The Eightfold Path**

- |    |                     |            |
|----|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Right Understanding | Wisdom     |
| 2. | Right Resolve       | “          |
| 3. | Right Speech        | Morality   |
| 4. | Right Action        | “          |
| 5. | Right Livelihood    | “          |
| 6. | Right Effort        | Meditation |
| 7. | Right Mindfulness   | “          |
| 8. | Right Meditation    | “          |

#### **4. 3.3 Why enlightenment? Buddhist philosophy**

The short answer to the question, “Why enlightenment?” is, “Suffering.” The long answer is a good bit more complicated. All the world’s religions want to know why bad things happen to good people. This is the question Siddhartha sought to answer when he first went out as an ascetic. What he discovered, after much seeking and meditation is that suffering is caused by desire. We take an example:

A man meets a woman and they come to love one another. Both have found happiness. They decide to marry. Several months before the big day, the woman finds out she has breast cancer and must undergo chemotherapy. He is devastated, but she tells him that she will recover and that if she does not, he will find someone else to love. As she grows weak with the treatments, he spends his days in tears, and sullenly sits by her side nights. She tells him it will be alright, but he worries. They postpone the wedding and he is despondent. She insists that a fall or winter wedding will be far nicer than the original plan of a spring wedding, describing for him how beautiful it will be in the autumn with the changing leaves, or in the winter with the pure-white snow and the clear blue skies.

After several months of harsh reactions to the chemotherapy and the loss of her shining, wavy, auburn hair, she begins to make a remarkable and quick recovery.

They have removed the cancer and even saved her breast. He is overjoyed, singing, grinning without end. She smiles at him. They plan a winter wedding for the first part of the year, so that her hair has time to grow in and she can gain back some of her strength. He is delirious. She has fun with the plans, and enjoys her family and friends as so many of them come to help with the preparations. The wedding goes well and many tears of joy are shed, to include the groom's. The bride is calm and radiant as she walks the aisle on her father's arm.

Life takes on a gentle and quiet rhythm and there is much happiness for the newlyweds, until the day she discovers they are to be parents. He buys cigars and tells everyone, beside himself with joy. She steadily prepares for the child's arrival. When she goes in for the first ultrasound, he goes along, excited, expectant. But when the doctor says she sees something possibly amiss, his heart feels as though it will stop. He can barely breathe, running his hands through his hair and pacing back and forth. He cannot sit still, but she takes his hand and looks into his eyes calmly. The doctor returns with a good prognosis and his joy returns as suddenly as it disappeared. Over the next months, he buys stuffed animals and, when they find out they are having a son, he picks up a bat and glove for baseball, and a football for the boy with whom he will play, and upon whom all his dreams now rest. She smiles tolerantly.

At seven months into the pregnancy she has a miscarriage and the young bride lies on her bed dying from complications related to the spontaneous abortion of the baby. The young would-be father is devastated. As he sits by his wife's bed crying, she does her best to comfort him in her weakened state. She tells him it is okay. She tells him he must go on. She tells him he will love again. She dies, and he falls into a deep depression.

We could continue along this line, of course, but we have gone far enough to give the idea of both a life of *Dukha* and a more enlightened life, one that is present and aware, yet detached from the outcome of "outrageous fortune." The man in this scenario desires happiness and grasps the things he loves, shocked by their loss. The woman in the story is seemingly calm and accepting, enjoying the good things that come her way, but allowing for the change and loss that life brings. This is a picture of grasping and a picture of detachment, but what does it mean to be enlightened?

There is no way of knowing what it is like to be enlightened, unless one is in fact enlightened. This is why the Buddha refused to enter into discussions or arguments centered around this theme. Still, what happens to those who do not realize enlightenment in this lifetime?

#### **4.3.3.1 Samsara**

As in Hindu thought, death, life, death... happens in cyclical fashion. It is for Buddhists a cycle of suffering, or *Dukha*. The cycle of death and 'again-becoming' is itself known as Samsara. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are many symbols that point to this constant movement signifying the "wheel of time" and the "wheel of life" (Levenson 2003). The wheel of time refers to everyday life, while the wheel of life refers to individual spirituality. As one goes through life, one is continually changing, and in a sense is not the same person from one instant to the next.

Acting upon Samsara is Karma, which is roughly akin to the accumulation of "good" and "evil." Karma is conditioned by intention and "clings" to the form of the individual as he appears at the time of death. That is, Karma follows one from this life to the next. As it is connected to the intentions, or the thought processes, Karma determines how "distant" one is from reaching enlightenment. To call the amalgamation that is the person "one," however, is a little misleading, for a person is really a group of parts, or skandhas, that are constantly morphing in a manner that is much like the flow of a river, or a single wave upon the ocean. These skandhas, which are matter, sensation, mind, perception, and consciousness, only appear to be a composite whole, but also are in a state of perpetual fluctuation. Therefore, the notion of an ego or a "self," whether eternal in nature or only existent for as long as one lives their life on earth, is *maya*, or illusion.

The liberation from this illusion is enlightenment, a 'place' of no-self, or nothing. This is not to say that one ceases to exist, as such, because that would be impossible. This idea has been previously discussed as it is described in Bowker (1991). Briefly, he points to the idea that all of life is energy. As scientists indicate, energy cannot be destroyed, but is ever changing in its form. Yet, the you that continues on beyond death is certainly not the you that was formerly born into the world. Still, this concept of no-self confuses and disturbs many people. Far more

interesting to us than whether-or-not there is a soul imbued with an “I” or self, is the idea that comes to a logical head at this point.

This idea has to do with Nirvana. If one reaches enlightenment via detachment from desire and/or grasping of what one is and has, then to desire Nirvana is to forfeit enlightenment. So, if one must let go of the desire for enlightenment, then it follows that one is already enlightened. That is, not to desire is Nirvana, but to desire not to desire is to continue in a state of Dukha. Said a bit differently, it matters not whether-or-not one seeks enlightenment, because all states are actually Nirvana. Not to seek Nirvana is Nirvana, if only one is aware of it! This is the awareness one seeks, yet misses in the act of seeking.

#### **4. 3. 3.2 Buddhist ‘afterlife’**

Because one “wants” to find Nirvana, there are rituals of Buddhism surrounding the idea of liberation – enlightenment. This means that as one lies dying and after the body has expired, both the dying person and all those around him are expected to remain calm and detached. This is necessary for the sake of the one who is dying. The hope is that this attitude will help the dying one to remain lucid enough to realize Nirvana, even in the last moment of the dying process.

As the skandhas break apart, their material form dies. That is, the person dies. What continues from this point is the reformation of the energy, most prominently, the consciousness or contemplation (*citta*) (Bowker 1991<sup>15</sup>). Any remaining karma clings to the continuing consciousness, unless Nirvana is reached. This remainder, however, is not a self or an I in any sense. Perhaps it may be described as pure thought, but certainly not as soul or essence, because this consciousness is in a state of constant flux, as was the aggregation of skandhas. What continues is karmic consequence as it acts upon the remaining consciousness. Thus, death is the occasion of the arising of a number of possibilities.

Should the remaining consciousness not realize Nirvana, it will flow, if you will, into a new form, a reincarnation. The new form will carry with it all of the karma still clinging to the consciousness that is one part of the new aggregate of skandhas. This is the basis some people have for remembering past lives. At the very

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<sup>15</sup> All details in section 4.3.3.2 are from Bowker unless otherwise noted.

moment of death, Buddhist practice is most likely to pay off. That is, death is just one blink of an eye in the flow of change and hardly allows for consideration of reality. However, if one has spent a lifetime in meditation and reached many instants of understanding or enlightenment, then the habits formed in this meditation practice may enable the dying one to achieve permanent enlightenment, or Nirvana. This is why monks and others chant scripture as a person dies and in the presence of the corpse. It is thought that there is still a chance the deceased will find enlightenment, but the window of opportunity will eventually close.

Most will be reincarnated, and even in this case, there are nearly endless possibilities. For the Buddhist, there are hells into which one may be reincarnated if one's karma causes the appearance to the re-aggregate of skandhas. This is also true at the other end of the spectrum, i.e. there are heavens that appear due to karmic causes. In other words, it is the good and evil karma that remains and clings to the reconstituted form that makes for hell or heaven, or perhaps a newborn baby on planet earth. Because all is in a state of constant change, hell and heaven are no more permanent conditions than is life on earth. Obviously, this is especially fortunate in cases where karma causes the arising of a hell.

A well-known aid of the migrating Buddhist is what is known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Bardo Thodol*, which, according to Bardis (1981), provides advice for the dying regarding all the "worlds" that stand before them which they might enter upon their exit of this one.

For those who reach Nirvana, reincarnations have ended. Karmic causation ceases and suffering is over. What follows, however, is uncertain. In fact, it may be somewhat academic, since Nirvana is cessation itself (yet not cessation, because it is no-thing). Buddhists are not nihilists, nor do they believe in an everlasting soul. Still, just what all this means, is unclear. The Buddha, it is said, made a habit of sidestepping the question, and considered such discussions foolishness. This seems a little curious since he was supposed to have reached Nirvana, but perhaps the nature of Nirvana is such that unless one reaches it, it cannot be imagined, even with careful exposition. How, indeed, may one describe no-thing? Still, we are enjoined to believe that this does not mean annihilation or nihilism. Even more curious, is that one may reach Nirvana in this life, yet continue in this life, as did the Buddha.

#### 4. 3. 4 Some death rituals<sup>16</sup>

As the dying person awaits his passing, it is quite common for relatives, and especially monks, to chant and pray for him to find Nirvana. Because the friends and relatives wish to help their loved one reach Nirvana, they are careful to maintain a sense of calm composure in his presence and even when they are in the vicinity of the corpse. There is also a rather widespread belief that to upset the deceased may result in his confusion over his intermediate state which will cause him to stay near his loved ones, and possibly miss his golden opportunity to find Nirvana. When this occurs, the corpse may crave a return to his former state, or simply not be able to release his grasp on his friends and family. In such a case, he becomes a “hungry ghost.”

There is a Southeast Asian practice among the Theravadans whereby they build “spirit houses” for displaced spirits that may be clinging to a piece of land where they once lived as human beings. The larger the house one builds for these hungry ghosts, the more likely the ghosts are to leave the residents alone, or even to bring them luck. The householders of such properties place food and drink on a raised platform connected to the front of the spirit house. It is not unusual for peoples of eastern cultures to respect, honor and maintain a connection to their ancestors, or to *the* ancestors. That is, family ancestry is important, but there is also an understanding that all of a culture’s people are connected and responsible to one another. This connection does not cease with death.

Related to the idea that the living and the dead are connected, is the prevalent notion that one can have an effect upon the movement of those who die, i.e. that it matters how one behaves in the presence of the corpse, or that the chanting of prayers can be of help to the dead in their attempt to enter Nirvana. That the living may also produce negative effects for the dead is crucial, here. For, it is thought that if one continually bawls, making her grief at the loss of her loved-one public, she will hinder the progress of the dead toward a better incarnation, or Nirvana itself. The point is that one must not give the dead reason to think that by leaving their loved ones behind they are causing suffering, though this is almost certainly the case. Still, it could well be argued that one causes one’s own suffering when we grieving over those who die.

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<sup>16</sup> Many of the details in section 4.3.4 come from Bowker (1991).



This understanding of the affect the living have on the dead makes the rituals that surround death and funerals easy to understand. Chanting may be helpful to the deceased, and it might added that such chanting may also bring comfort to the living, especially if they believe it will help the one they have loved to move on to a better, or higher, place. Perhaps the deceased will “become” again in a life that is richer, and more pleasant. Perhaps the dead will move on to a life that is in a heavenly place, as there are many heavens just as there are many hells. Perhaps, and best yet, the deceased will find liberation in Nirvana.

As with other traditions that have changed and evolved over time, the funerals of Buddhists often vary by both school and cultural influence. The following is a broad account of common funeral rites, but is neither specific nor exhaustive.

Generally, cremation is the most popular form of body disposition, but this is often preceded by a communal funeral with the corpse present. Monks chant and recite many prayers, which are, again, designed to aid the deceased to attain Nirvana. Depending on the country and the situation in general, there may also be a Buddhist sermon and a eulogy. Family and friends are invited to bring offerings of food and drink, and there are some funerals where flowers are supplied for people to place upon the corpse before the coffin is closed. This is a meritorious act, like the gifts of food and drink, as flowers are aesthetically pleasing, and may therefore help the deceased in the quest to remain calm and aware so that he may seek a better place.

After the funeral has ended, cremation will take place, with all those attending the funeral invited to follow the coffin and the family to the crematorium. Final prayers will be said before and as the corpse is being reduced to ashes. In most countries, this rite is followed by a meal to which either family and friends only, or all funeral attendees are invited.

Six days after the funeral, a monk will visit with the family to make further remarks, and the next day alms are offered to the Sangha, and more meritorious remarks and prayers are given. Three months after the death as well as six months following, meritorious remarks and prayers are again offered. Almsgiving is likely to take place all along the way. This is sometimes repeated at the end of one year since the passing of the deceased. Bowker (1991) points out that although Theravada and

Mahayana Buddhism sometimes disagree in regard to the path to Nirvana, they absolutely agree that all of life is transitory, passing into new life at every instant.

The Tibetan tradition of Buddhism that grew out of the Mahayana branch practices a ritual that is rather unusual, though Zoroastrians can surely relate to it. While they prefer to cremate the bodies of those who die, with the idea being a return to the elements of earth, water, air, and fire, another method is often employed due to a shortage of firewood. Though their reasons are dissimilar, the Zoroastrian community also uses a comparable method to dispose of the body. With the nearest of family and friends present, Tibetan Buddhists dismember the body in ritual fashion and the limbs are tossed to the birds. This is done as an act of unity with the animal kingdom as well as a witness to the fact that all of life is ephemeral in nature (Levenson 2003).

#### **4. 3.5 Buddhist meaning-making and US teens**

The concept of no-self, the idea that from one moment to the next all things are new things, is a concept that is pregnant with possibilities for meaning-making. If one were to honestly consider the typical US teenager, he would be obliged to allow that US adolescents are so self-absorbed they are very nearly incapable of detached self-reflection. They are highly insecure and generally inconsiderate. Conversely, American youth are also generous, fun-loving, and intelligent (despite some appearances to the contrary). They are looking for answers that make sense in a world that seemingly makes no sense at all. They are products of their culture and the times and they are seeking real grounding – something that will capture their hearts and their minds, and that fits into the mold of their postmodern world.

This postmodern world of theirs is a world that necessarily overlaps with the modern world which preceded it. While the definitions of “truth,” “reason,” and “logic” have been modified by the use of theoretical alterations, mostly in terms of seeing all ideas as relative in nature, the modern concepts of science and empirical knowledge still very much influence these terms and even the way in which young Americans think. For this reason, Buddhism is an excellent candidate for a model of

meaning-making for teenagers. As Keown (1996) points out in connection with Buddhism:

The dominant cultural influences in the West since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century have been science and secular liberalism. Buddhism *qua* rational philosophy seems compatible with both of these...Scientific discoveries, and theories such as evolution, have challenged many traditional Christian teachings, and the long rearguard action fought by established religion in defence of revealed 'truths' has made it seem dogmatic, irrational, and backward-looking [sic].

What is more, says Keown (1996, 120), the cosmological view of the universe espoused by Buddhists for thousands of years, has come to be largely supported by current scientific knowledge, and reincarnation is not only globally popular, but now finds empirical support in the psychiatric community. This last claim seems weak to us, as it has yet to garner wide scientific backing. However, this misgiving does not in itself prove that teenagers will be put off by the notion of reincarnation. We find much in the philosophy and in modern/postmodern thought (see bottom of page 140, top of 141 for brief explication of postmodern thought<sup>17</sup>) to signify that Buddhism will serve as a marvelous model of meaning-making for US teens.

#### **4. 4 Final thoughts about the religious model**

We wish to point out once again that in the world of meaning-making, religion is not to be scorned, but in fact, is so prevalent that it would be foolish to ignore it, or to pretend in any way that it will not rise up on its own, even where atheists are concerned. We are interested in the way that all religions have something to say about death, what it means, how it follows life; how in fact, it connects life-events and death-events. Some religions connect these events in a manner that suggests a transcendent plan with an eschatological ending. Others connect these events in a cycle of repetitious death and re-birth, or re-becoming. Some connect these events in a manner that must be described as the eternal now.

Bowker (1991) concludes that all religions address this connection between life and death, that all religions regard death as necessary to the continuance of life,

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<sup>17</sup> Keep in mind that Postmodernism, like Modernism, is most likely to complete its definition as it begins to wane and morph into some other "ism."

and that the notion of a transcendent God, or energy force, elicits the thought that humans may also become transcendent. Such a view is congruent with our thesis. We have been espousing the idea that the religious model would be the best model by which teachers might assist students in their search for meaning. Bowker's viewpoint certainly bolsters our thesis.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

### **5. 1 Chapter Five organization**

We begin our discussion of the method used in this study with a look at the students surveyed as well as the faculty and staff surveyed. Following this section, we will discuss what we hope to learn from the results and our reasons for choosing qualitative research. Part of this discussion will revolve around some of the rationale and need for death education. Next, we will describe each of the research instruments point-by-point, looking at the purpose of the questions, as deemed necessary. Finally, we will briefly mention some presuppositions that inform how we analyze the survey results, before moving on to said analysis.

### **5. 2 The Method**

A number of methods were considered for answering the question of whether-or-not it is feasible to provide a death and dying elective in high school. Some of the questions that arise in considering how best to approach this problem are, 1. Is there a need for a death and dying elective in secondary schools? 2. If there is a need, why is there a need? 3. What should such an elective look like? (How long should the course run? What topics should be covered?) 4. What should be avoided in such a

class? 5. What obstacles might we expect to encounter over the offering of such a course? 6. Which students might be most interested in taking the course?<sup>1</sup>

One of the major differences between this study and many other studies that have been done over the last 40 – 50 years is that our study is not only interested in helping students to overcome fear of death, and to give them coping strategies, but we are most interested in helping young people make meaning in their lives, as opposed to simply looking at death anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Because we are interested in developing a course for high school students, it will also be important to try to discern which ideas and topics will be of greatest interest and hold the most meaning for teenagers. Shoemaker et al., point out that the reason death education seems to have been received inconsistently is that specific course objectives have not been matched to the proper measurements (1981). I.e., appropriate measures of interest, anxiety, etc., have not been used in determining actual student reaction. Testing the test is at issue. It is our contention that we cannot know if the application chosen is the right one with just one survey, or even several. We believe that two things have to occur if we are to make headway in this regard. First, a consensus must be built about which instruments will best measure student interest and anxiety. We say “instruments” because we now believe that a more in-depth method must be applied if we all are to avoid misunderstanding. Second, are of the considered opinion that longevity studies must be entered into in order to get a more accurate picture of cause and effect.<sup>3</sup>

As it is unrealistic for us to attempt a longevity study at this time, we can only add our findings to the many independent studies that have been done to date. Ours is, of course, a basic, pure, or exploratory research study. While we seriously considered giving a death anxiety survey to respondents, it was determined that the

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for the survey given to students and Appendix B for the survey given to faculty and staff.

<sup>2</sup> While meaning has been a concern of a few studies (Corr & Balk (1996, 24) and Kalish (1985, 41-42), among others) most are more interested in psychological and behavioral *reactions* to death by our youths. The only other work that stands out as meaning-making, is directed more generally, mainly at adults. The work here referred to is Viktor Frankl's *Logotherapy*, which he developed as a tool to counter the destructive effects of concentration-camp imprisonment and genocidal behavior that he personally witnessed and survived during WWII.

<sup>3</sup> One idea we can take away here, while seemingly obvious, is that it will be imperative to clearly define course objectives. Shoemaker and colleagues (1981) have shown that it is easier to test objectives results if those objectives are made evident.

area has been covered more than adequately in an independent manner, and that this study should limit itself to finding out if there are grounds for providing a death and dying elective for high school students, as seen through a religious lens.

Thus, death anxiety surveys were discarded in favor of surveys designed specifically to answer the above question. Various ideas evolved over the course of the research. One of our original expectations was that the research survey would be given to current high school students. To that end, a dialogue was begun with the student counselor of a local high school.<sup>4</sup> The school principal became involved and was both interested in the idea and supportive of the research, to the extent that she provided a slice of time during a faculty meeting for the taking of the survey. This was extremely helpful as it made it possible to collect 100% of the surveys. Other methods of collection had been considered, but an inspection of the available literature on research surveys revealed a generally low return rate when respondents are asked to send their surveys by mail, or to drop them at a convenient location. This probable outcome was avoided through the kindness of the school principal. However, the expectation of giving a survey to the student population came to an end early in the dialogue as it was pointed out that a complicated process of gaining permission would have to take place.

This process would have entailed first approaching the school board at one of their monthly meetings. If the school board had been convinced that the survey was a good idea (and it was not at all clear that this would have been the case as school boards are notoriously sensitive to concerns that have anything to do with taboo topics and/or parental rights – like sex or death education), then there would have had to be flyers and permission slips developed and sent home with the students for parent signatures. Assuming that the return rate of signatures had been large enough to take a sample, it would then have been necessary to allow individual students to determine whether-or-not they wished to take part in the survey. Assuming that a large enough sampling would have remained, the survey would have had to be administered with counselors and teachers present. As we understand it, the reason for this is that

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of anonymity, the high school will not be identified here, but specific information is available.

teachers and administrators think parents of students will be concerned, or alarmed by the survey topic.<sup>5</sup> All of this could have been done, but as we have been collecting surveys for several years from college students, and there were enough to make a sampling, it was decided to use surveys of the college students between the ages of 17 to 19 only.<sup>6</sup>

This method, while a bit haphazard, worked out well, with 46 completed surveys from faculty/staff, and 36 completed surveys from students less than twenty years of age. For the outcome to be statistically meaningful, it is widely accepted that there must be 30 or more respondents. For both samples, random choice was applied, as subjects were not specifically chosen for certain characteristics, other than that, for the students, they were under age 20, and for the faculty/staff, they were in fact faculty/staff of a high school. It is a non-comparative study to the extent that it does not compare itself to other studies, except in a general way.

There is a possibility that some bias on the group level may apply to this study as it may not be applicable to the general population, although this is more likely for the faculty/staff sample than for the student sample. The faculty/staff sample was taken entirely from one high school, wherein virtually no racial diversity exists. Ages for faculty ranged from the 20s through the 60s. The student sample was taken from a wider group of students over a period of several years. The survey was given to entire classes and those taken by students under twenty were separated for use in the sample, which makes it a disproportionate stratified sampling. Race is not listed on the student survey, but it is highly likely that a variety of ethnic backgrounds are represented, as the classes were diverse. Since the survey was anonymous, there is no way of knowing what the ethnic composition of the sample is. The survey used with the students is a social survey and there may be a built-in bias in that the sample was

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that the large majority of death education researchers see school death education programs as a great need, still largely unfilled (See Corr & Balk (1996) for their discussion regarding the school's role in death and dying education), and despite the suggestion some have made that death as a topic is no longer taboo (Kalish 1985), at least one high school and one school board in south New Jersey believe the parents of their students will disagree. This was also mentioned by some college students over the longer period of survey taking.

<sup>6</sup> As indicated by Chapters One and Two, there is now reason to suppose that surveys completed by students as old as 24 or 25 years would also be appropriate. However, since our thesis regards a high school course, we believe the best course of action is to limit the respondents to the years in question, keeping the survey respondents within the technically "teen" years.



taken from religion classes: Religion in America, Religions of the World, and Introduction to Buddhism.

This last point is hard to determine because we have no way of knowing why each of the respondents took the course. Some have been known to take religion courses because they thought it would be easy, or because it was the only course that fit into their schedule. Naturally, there are also students who take the course because they are interested, and these would be the students that may be cause to consider bias.

The program used for the analysis of the statistics was the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The SPSS program allows for multiple analyses without the prospect of mathematical error. This, obviously, does not remove the possibility of human error when keying or analyzing the data. Because of this possibility, the data was checked and rechecked several times.

### 5.3 Respondent demographics

#### 5.3.1 Students

Students took the survey on a voluntary basis but were not informed that their age would determine their survey's usefulness to the study. Just over 100 completed surveys were received. Anonymity was maintained so that students did not have to fear any consequence to their course grades, and so that researcher bias either in favor of, or against, any student would not be an issue to consider. This anonymity also, along with the educational purpose of the survey, makes it exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight.

Of the thirty-six student respondents under the age of 20, one was 17, eight were 18, and 27 were 19 years of age.

Table 5.1 Respondent's Age- Students

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	17	1	2.8	2.8
	18	8	22.2	25.0
	19	27	75.0	100.0
Total	36	100.0	100.0	

Twenty-six of the students were female (just over 72%) and ten were male (almost 28%). This raised the concern that there may be some statistical bias with regard to gender. However, with gender as a variable, there are just two cases where the difference between male and female response is statistically significant. The first refers to whether or not the course should be offered in high schools, and the second has to do with topics that should be avoided in a death and dying elective. We will discuss these points in Chapter Six when results of the research are fully covered.

The make-up of the student population with regard to social class was not surveyed. However, nearly all of the students come from Philadelphia and the southern New Jersey area, and will mostly be in the middle to lower-middle classes. The South Jersey area has changed over the years with regard to religious affiliation, moving from a mainline and conservative Protestant make-up, to one that is more diverse, to include Jews, Buddhists and Muslims. The latter populations remain relatively small however, with the major change coming from within Christianity. That is, the area is now heavily Catholic, with these being of mixed leanings from conservative to liberal. This may account for the marital status of the student's parents (see table 5. 2) with those who remain in a first marriage being 10% above the statewide average.<sup>7</sup>

Table 5.2 Marital Status of Students' Parents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married	22	61	61	61
Separated	1	2.8	2.8	63.8
Divorced	11	30.6	30.6	94.4
Widowed	2	5.6	5.6	100
Totals	36	100	100	

Twenty-two of the thirty-six respondents are from families where their original parents are still together. Some of them made remarks such as “My parents will be married *forever!*” The emphasis is the student's, and speaks for itself with regard to

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<sup>7</sup> Based on cumulative figures. National Vital Statistics System. NCHS, National Center for Health Statistics. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs> (2000-2002).

attitude. This sort of comment was not uncommon. Twelve of the thirty-six students were from families of divorce, and two had lost a parent to death (one father and one mother).

### 5.3.2 Faculty/Staff

As previously stated, the faculty/staff survey was given in a short time as supplied by the principal of the high school during a faculty meeting. This resulted in 46 usable surveys. Of the forty-six, twenty-one are female and twenty-five are male.

Table 5.3 Faculty/Staff Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	25	54.3	54.3	54.3
Female	21	45.7	45.7	100
Totals	36	100	100	

The question of ethnicity was included in the survey, but since forty-five of the forty-six respondents identified themselves as white/Caucasian, and one did not answer the question, this was not an area that was explored. It is possible that this lack of diversity creates a bias in the findings, or at the very least, means that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population.

There is another possible bias-producing aspect of the survey, which is that the school itself is located in a close-knit, somewhat exclusionary environment. The town began as a camp-meeting town (summer retreat for conservative Christian revival) and thus far continues to maintain its own social systems. The schools are not part of a wider school region and they have their own board. The town also preserves and sustains its own police, fire, and utility systems. Taxes are high due to this situation, but the town remains middle-class and connected to its roots, and is even seen by “outsiders” as rather pretentious. A position as teacher or staff member of the schools is highly coveted and not easily abandoned.

One occurrence at this high school should here be mentioned as it may have some bearing on the outcome of the survey.

When we first spoke to the school counselor about the survey and its purpose of a death and dying elective for high school students, she shared the story of how several years earlier, the school had suffered the death of one of its most popular

students. She did not say how the boy died. Following his death, the counselor spoke to many of the students in an effort to help them through their grief, but was eventually forced to bring in professional psychiatric assistance. The reason professional assistance was required was that there were about ten students who could not emotionally deal with the loss.

Somewhat serendipitously, one of the college students who took our survey was among those students most affected by this same incident. The upshot is that the boy had committed suicide. She even mentioned in her narrative of the event, that we might know of the incident as it took place in a particular nearby town, and she named the town wherein our survey high school is located. There is just one high school in this town. When reviewing her survey, two points arose. The first has to do with the counselor at the school; why, specifically, did the counselor not mention that the boy had committed suicide? There seemed to be some sort of understanding that this should not be mentioned. Speculation causes us to wonder if the reason is that the school administration and faculty were worried about some stigma that continues to cling to suicide, and/or if the staff had silently banded together in some sort of effort to protect the deceased student, his family, the other students, and the school in general. Secondly, would the school's traumatic event affect the outcome of the teacher/staff survey? The young lady's questionnaire did not end up among the final 36 surveys, but her specific answers to questions regarding loss were both detailed and instructive. There was also an overwhelmingly positive response from the school's faculty in favor of a death and dying elective. It is not a stretch to say that the suicide experienced by both faculty and students could cause them to look for ways to avoid such trauma in the future.

This incident and the overall responses to the survey suggest to us that we are on the right track with regard to developing a course for high school students that will help them to make meaning in their lives. These are the students who will one day be parents and teachers, counselors and medical personnel. How will they handle tragic situations when they arise? Will they have their own meaning of being (life and death) and coping skills to pass along to the next generation? It is not enough, in our view, to apply a "BAND-AID"<sup>TM</sup> to the wound once it has been inflicted. If it is possible to help young people to make meaning in their lives now, and if it is possible

to help them learn coping skills for now and the future, they will very naturally pass these abilities along to the next generation. How differently might the traumatic and tragic loss of the young man who committed suicide have been received and addressed had the staff of the surveyed high school been prepared by making meaning for themselves when they were youths? If they had their own coping skills, and their own personal understandings of the deep richness of life that includes death, how differently might the sad days that followed the boy's death have proceeded? Also, how might such reflective learning have affected the young man who committed suicide? It would be overstepping the bounds of reasonable speculation to suggest that he would not have taken his own life, but it seems clear that there could not have been a sadder outcome for him and those who loved him. People in the age of technology are as much in need of finding meaning in life as were people of any other age. All that has changed is the perspective. Educators are charged with both the responsibility and the privilege of helping this new generation find and live their meaning throughout the life-cycle.

#### **5. 4. 1 Results and research style**

This research was undertaken to show the need to offer an elective course on death and dying through a religious lens to high school students in the US in order to aid the students in finding/making meaning in their lives. While such a course is not unheard of in the US, it is not yet common, nor is it as yet unaccompanied by controversy. Other reasons for such a course have garnered more interest among both school faculties and researchers. Those reasons are generally attached to the assumption that people are fearful and/or anxious about death. Such an assumption results in an attempt to provide post-event coping strategies and support.

We maintain that prevention should be implemented as postvention falls far short of its intended mark of reducing fear and grief. It has been pointed out and repeated that "death cannot be discussed objectively when children are grieving" (Bowie and Lang 2000, 25). Because the purpose of death education is focused on postvention, death education usually takes the form of special topics or modules within larger disciplines, like health, literature, or social studies. Rarely is a full course offered, or one that might be considered proactive, or preventive, i.e., rarely is death and dying presented in such a manner as to provide tools for coping before the

event occurs, and even more rarely are students given the option of seeing death as something other than the scary, evil end to life. Finally, meaning in life is almost never intentionally approached in the schools.

We here argue that young people are in desperate need of guidance regarding the final life-rite of passage that people call death. Hulbert points out what psychologists say about grief left unresolved: It often has a deleterious and enduring effect on mental wellbeing (1998). She insists that schools (even primary schools) should teach about loss and death as both preventive medicine and to encourage young people to become grownups with a healthy outlook on life. What is more, she claims that death education supports education in general in its purpose of developing spiritually, morally, socially, and culturally mature persons (Hulbert 1998, 84). By studying death within a religious model, says Hulbert, students will learn about community responsibility and interaction, and develop a [grounded] personal identity (1998, 87, 88).

While there are some cultures more open to, and less afraid of, death as a life event,<sup>8</sup> as well as a variety of views on death between the religions, it has been suggested that eastern societies are less likely to see death as a communication taboo than are western societies. This assessment, while a little simplistic and riddled with exceptions (Theravada Buddhists, for instance, deem any show of grief as harmful to the deceased, who may take the negative emotion into his next life with him), does carry some truth. It is also important to acknowledge, however, that in the US, issues perceived as infringing upon parental rights create an added obstacle.

Yet, what is curious is that death has become categorized with sex and politics.<sup>9</sup> One explanation may be that in the minds of the large majority, death cannot be extracted from religion. Elsewhere, we discuss the possibility of how the hidden nature of death in today's society makes it "obscene," like non-sanctioned

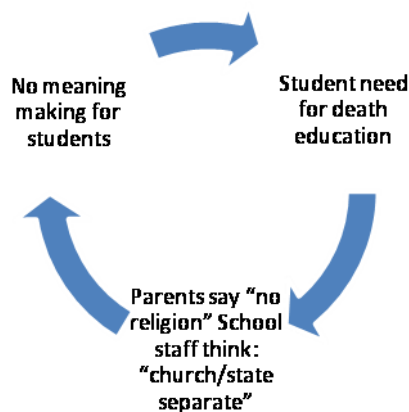
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<sup>8</sup> See Parry and Ryan (1995) for a look at death and dying through the eyes of a number of the world's cultures and religions. Also see our concluding chapter (7).

<sup>9</sup> Ariès connects this to a rejection of both sex and death "as crude facts of nature" (1981, 604). Also see Corr and Balk (1996, 237). The two are also equated by what we would term to be "fringe" persons, or groups, such as Chiusano (1996 in *National Review*).

sexual relations.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, religion is one of those topics upon which the public school must tread lightly, if at all. It is a catch 22. For, as it has been frequently observed: religion as a topic will arise in any discussion about death. And so, to attempt to avoid religion when talking about death, or to avoid death education itself, is akin to diving into the sand head first, while assuming that no one else is on the beach. The better route is to educate parents and school personnel on the meaning of the first amendment to the constitution of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In this way it may be possible to begin to erode the vicious circle that looks something like this:



Students need to make meaning in life and death as part of life's cycle, but parents are worried that teachers will advance their own personal religious agendas, or so school personnel think. While some studies do point to this misunderstanding, others have found that parents are not as concerned about this issue as teachers and administrators suppose (Jones and Hodges 1995). Schools then try to provide value and religion-free death education because they think they are complying with the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment, so students either receive a purely factual and biological look at death for short periods within some discipline, or they get nothing at all. Hence the contention, that if death as a subject is approached on its own terms, students will raise the religious question. Hulbert explains that not only may death studies from a religious perspective enrich students' lives, but such reflection may help them define

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<sup>10</sup> See Geoffrey Gorer (1965 and 1967). To see death as it is one must sneak peeks into the shadows – metaphorically, that is.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter Two for several examples of misunderstanding and controversy surrounding the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the constitution.

their own meaning of life as well as give them a way to understand others (1998, 85, 86).

The framers of the constitution did not intend for religion to be expunged from education. In fact, it is far more likely, given the nature of the society at the time (protestant/puritan Calvinism) that even had they wished for wholly secular public education, they would have considered the idea foolish and naïve. These were men (women generally not having a say at that point) who were clear-eyed realists. If they were themselves not religious, they were well aware that they were surrounded by religious people in every colony-turn-state, and that to suggest that religion be kept out of public education would surely have resulted in something close to chaos.

It is our recommendation that the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment be explained more clearly to staff and faculty of all schools, beginning with their college educations, and that this is followed-up with educating the parent and student population on the meaning and intent of the amendment. Students learning the amendment's meaning now, will one day be teachers who won't need to be re-taught, and once this non-problem of religion and public education is removed from the psyche, the way for talking about religious ideas in a non-evangelistic manner will be opened. This will pave the way for helping young people find their own meanings and understandings.

Does the above vicious circle of "logic" represent the problem accurately? Clearly, such issues will vary from region to region, state to state, district to district, and even from school to school, but if this weren't generally true, with a given variety of modifications between schools, there would certainly be many more death education programs than there are at this time. And given the fact that since the death and dying awareness movement became large and widespread, and very popular in the 1970s, one might expect to see death education programs in more middle, or even elementary schools by now.

This is why we decided to ascertain whether-or-not students felt a need, either consciously or subconsciously, for such a course as death and dying. In addition to the questions listed above, what level of interest in a death and dying elective would we find? Should the course be offered at the high school level? What would faculty say?



A lot of thanatologists and sociologists say that death and dying topics should be integrated into the existing curriculum rather than be made into a separate course.<sup>12</sup> The main rationale for this counsel appears to be based on the assertion, to which we also subscribe, that death is a natural part of life and should therefore be presented in small doses as part of that life. However, we hold that this argument may also be made with regard to sociology, science, physical education, biology, and even mathematics. Yet, we would be surprised indeed should anyone suggest that all these interweaving subjects be integrated.

More questions to be answered with regard to the presentation of a death and dying course might include religion and what students and faculty say about it. What other interests would they have? What questions would they want answered or explored? Why do they feel this way? Have students experienced difficult losses, and did those losses have any bearing on whether a course should be offered or on what topics should be broached? Would family background have any bearing on the course offering or topics for the course? Would serious life-events, like divorce, affect a desire either to, or not to, discuss issues surrounding death?<sup>13</sup>

Because of the qualitative nature of these issues, we wanted to avoid questions that would put ideas into the student's heads with regard to any answers. This is one of the reasons why the student questionnaire was open-ended. Another reason was that we didn't wish to limit their gut reactions or imaginations by giving a series of possible answers that could easily cut off reflection. Naturally, this resulted in multiple answers to some questions, which in effect made it difficult to assess how many students might have answered A, B, C, or D, if given those choices. On the other hand, had we used multiple choice, we may indeed have seen what appeared to be statistically significant numbers, but those numbers might only have been significant because other choices weren't available. E.g., perhaps some large percentage of the students would have indicated near-death experience as a topic of interest, but would not have even thought of it if it had not been presented to them.

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<sup>12</sup> See Corless, Germino and Pittman (2003), Grollman (1974), Bowie and Lang (Mar 2000), Homedes and Ahmed summer (1987), for starters.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Stevenson, in his interview with Eugenia Pfeiffer, indicates that his personal experiences greatly influenced his life-long work with the topic of death and dying (Pfeiffer 2003).

There are obviously advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, but we are convinced that by making the student questionnaire open-ended, we have avoided any purposeful or subconscious manufacture of answers that prove our thesis.

The outcome with regard to resources students would like to see in a death and dying class is most instructive. Two items were mentioned at a statistically significant level – documentaries and religious ideas in general. This tells us that the instructor may be highly creative when selecting resources for the class. Popular books and movies, documentaries, guest speakers, and religious texts were all mentioned. We will take a closer look at frequency when we discuss the results in the next chapter.

#### **5. 4. 2. Survey Instruments**

Our discussion will now proceed with a detailed look at the research survey instruments. See Appendices A and B for copies of the questionnaires. Here we will confine the conversation mostly to the questions themselves and the point of including them in the questionnaire. A full discussion of results will take place in Chapter Six. The student survey consists of two pages and is mostly made up of open-ended questions with a number of lines following each question, which were to be used for response. The directions located at the top of the first page also instruct the students to feel free to use the back of the survey if they have more to add.

##### **5. 4. 2. 1. Student survey**

###### **5. 4. 2. 1. 1. Personal information**

Following the personal information section of the survey (Questions 1-5), questions regarding personal experience with death were asked (Questions 6-10). 72% of the respondent group is female, and 28% is male. The mean age is 18.72 and all the respondents are single (see Table 5.1). Parental marital status is 61.1% married, 30.6% divorced, 5.6% widowed, and 2.8% separated (see Table 5.2). In keeping with the large percentage of parents who remain married to their original spouses, the rate of biological siblings is also high, at 66.7 percent. 8.3% are only children and 25% have either mixed siblings (some full and some half), half siblings/step siblings (see Table 5.4).

Table 5.4 Student Siblings

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Only child	3	8.3	8.3	8.3
Natural siblings	24	66.7	66.7	75.0
½ or step-siblings	1	2.8	2.8	77.8
Mixed siblings	8	22.2	22.2	100.0
Totals	36	100	100	

#### 5. 4. 2. 1. 2. Death and dying experience

Questions 6, 7, and 8 were specifically designed to discover not only experience of death, but feelings of loss that surrounded the deaths. Question 6 asks the student to indicate if an immediate family member had died, who it was, the cause of their death and age of their demise, and the respondent's age at the time. Question 7 asks about death among friends, and Question 8 asks about deaths that affected the respondent. Question 8 was set against Questions 6 and 7 to ascertain whether-or-not the death of the person(s) mentioned in Questions 6 and 7 was particularly difficult for the student. The last part of Question 8 asks "why" this particular death made a big impression upon the respondent, but we leave the question open-ended purposely, with the hope of ascertaining what sort of coping-skills the student has or does not have.

Question 9 asks the student to relate any experience with near-death or premonitions. While a number of students related "close-calls" in the form of auto accidents and such, there was very little information shared with regard to near-death, and little more with regard to premonitions. For the sake of the survey, Question 9 is of no interest.

#### 5. 4. 2. 1. 3. Death and dying education

Question 10 asks the students to relate any instruction they have received in the areas of death and dying. The purpose of this question is two-fold. First, have our respondent's schools done much or anything to approach the topic of death? Second, what effect, if any, has this education had on our respondents with regard to coping or other skills?

Some of the students said that they experienced some discussion surrounding death as it related to their religious training. A few students mentioned short discussions about death from within another discipline such as health education and social studies. Attitudes toward this education are discussed in the next chapter.

Table 5.5 Student Experience of Death Education

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
None	<b>19</b>	<b>52.8</b>	52.8	<b>52.8</b>
With church	<b>11</b>	<b>30.6</b>	30.6	<b>83.3</b>
Small units within a discipline	<b>6</b>	<b>16.7</b>	16.7	<b>100.00</b>
Total	<b>36</b>	<b>100.00</b>	100.00	

Question 11 asks the respondent to indicate how they might or might not have benefitted from a course on death and dying, if they have never had the opportunity to take one thus far. This question was designed to gain further insight into the students' attitudes toward the topic.

Question 12 asks the student to consider topics of interest to them with regard to death and dying. This question is very close to Question 13, which follows. 13 asks the student to suggest appropriate topics for a death and dying class. The reason for the two questions was first, Question 12, it was hoped, would elicit an instinctive reaction from the students as to their personal interests, while Question 13 was meant to elicit ideas based on more philosophical reflection. While there were some students who answered Question 13 by saying "see Question 12," there were many more who indicated different materials for the two questions. Some said the same things, but then added more to the classroom-appropriate topics. We wanted to discover whether the topics that interested the students personally would be different from the ones the students thought appropriate for youths in general.

Question 13 asks the students to share concepts/topics they believe should be used in a death and dying class and why. Again, this is much like Question 12, but students typically listed many more items and ideas here. Perhaps this indicates that while they are personally only interested in certain topics, they surmise that others might find other things of interest. It would be a stretch to say that they thought

others needed to know the topics they name here, but it is possible. One student listed many different areas to be covered, then wrote, “to get an overall picture & understanding” [sic].

Question 14 takes the opposite view of Question 13 and asks the students to consider what should not be talked about, or covered in a death and dying course. We were hoping to get some insight regarding what ideas or subjects the students might find difficult.

Question 15 was asked with the hope of getting some useful information for developing an actual course – it asks what method is best for actual presentation of the materials.

Question 16 then asks for specifics with regard to books, videos, etcetera, that the student might wish to see presented. If there were a lot of overlap between student’s suggestions, either here or for Question 15, we would have a good indication of actual interests.

Question 17, now that the student has said what to present and what not to present, asks the student if the course should be presented at the high school level and why or why not. This was followed by a request that the student share what should or should not be covered at the high school level (Question 18). We asked Question 18 because we did not want to assume that students who thought the course should be offered to them (who were at the time in college), also thought it should be offered to high school students.

As stated previously, there were some students who said no to the high school class, but then also indicated what should be offered at that level. Perhaps they were thinking that the course should not be offered, but if it is going to be offered, then don’t do this...it is impossible to know since none of the students stated such. The other possibility is that some students did not note the contradiction.

#### **5. 4. 2. 2. Faculty/Staff survey**

##### **5. 4. 2. 2. 1. Personal information section**

The female respondent population is 45.7%, and the male respondent population is 54.3%. The mean age of the respondents is just over forty-two and three quarters years. The youngest faculty member is twenty-three and the oldest staff

member is sixty-four. Grouped into two age brackets, the staff/faculty fall between eighteen and thirty at a rate of 19.6%, and thirty-one to seventy-five at a rate of 80.4%.

Moving on to Question 4, it seems that a large majority of the staff/faculty have education degrees at the rate of 48.8%. This is hardly surprising. The humanities and the sciences are evenly split at 18.6% each, Health/Physical Education (PE) degrees stand at 7% and “other” at 7%. The mean rate for holding their current position (Question 7) is 12.33 years, and the mean rate for any public school position is 16.7 years. These questions seemed to us to be important for noting whether or not numbers of years of teaching at a high school would make a difference in death education attitudes. There was no discernable correlation.

Question 10 asks which grades faculty are currently teaching. There were a large variety of answers to this question, from one grade only, to all four grades (9-12), to a mix of the four. While there were a few who indicated that it might be better to reserve death education for the higher grades, there appears to be no correlation between this opinion and which grades respondents are actually teaching.

#### **5. 4. 2. 2. 2. Personal experience section**

Questions 11-19 have to do with the respondent’s experience with death. Very similar questions were asked of the faculty/staff as were asked of the students, and for the same reasons.

Questions 20-23 ask the respondents to indicate what, if any, death and dying education they have had and, if so, what its purpose was. Question 23 also ascertains whether-or-not the staff member has had occasion to use this training in the classroom. Because there were very few trained in death education, and because even those who were had no opportunity to use this expertise, there is little to report in this area, except to say that it aligns with our research that says death education remains largely uncommon.

#### **5. 4. 2. 2. 3. Personal opinion section**

Questions 24-27 ask the respondent to say whether-or-not s/he thinks death and dying should be offered to high school students, which students specifically, and what some of the reasons for not offering it might be. There is an instructional note that tells them the separation of church and state is not an issue, and that we are

interested in finding out if it is feasible to provide a death and dying elective in high school.

To repeat for the sake of clarity, the reason for adding this instructional paragraph was that in talking with students, and in reading some of their survey answers, it was discovered that there is some confusion about the meaning of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the US. The confusion arises out of the simple fact that many people do not know what it says, and more people do not know what it means. There are a remarkable number of people who think that to merely mention religion in any form in a high school, or other public setting, is unconstitutional. We realize this point is based largely on anecdotal information and the fact that some of the 100 students surveyed mentioned it, but it so often occurred that it seemed wise to preclude any misunderstanding which might have nullified the survey results.

#### **5. 4. 3. Final Remarks: what do students need, and how do we interpret those needs?**

Now that we have looked at the mechanics of the method, it is time to designate and scrutinize the findings. The questions have been designed to tell us what death and dying education interests the young students have and to determine whether-or-not it will be feasible to offer a carefully planned course in US high schools. As stated in our introduction, the purpose of the course is three-fold. Our first aim is to give youths the means to cope when loss inevitably occurs. The second purpose is to help them learn the skills to comfort others when they, too, find themselves in a place of loss and pain. Finally, our greatest hope is to give young people the facility to find their own meaning in life...and death.

Before we begin to look at the numbers, we would like to pause here to enumerate a few presuppositions that have informed this study. Experience with teaching a college-level death and dying course has led us to develop several hypotheses.

1. From the fact that in every college term, 11 death and dying sections of 35 students would fill up quickly and students would petition professors to take their already full classes, young people have a great and unfulfilled curiosity (or need) to talk about and/or learn about death and dying.

2. Because a number of these students indicated past losses, and generally wanted to talk to the class about their loss, we surmise the likelihood that society does not provide a sufficient outlet for the grief caused by loss. In fact, this seems rather obvious. Without this outlet, people have been left to struggle through their grief alone.
3. This situation, we believe, has caused many people, young and old alike, to conclude that life is an absurdity – pointless and without meaning. Therefore, we believe the time for death education has long since come and is now imperative to the mental health of both individuals and the society as a whole.

We now turn to Chapter Six wherein we will fully discuss the results of our surveys. Broadly speaking, outcomes generally mirrored previous studies. However, several interesting points arose.



## **CHAPTER SIX – SURVEY RESULTS: DEATH IN THE DETAILS**

### **6. 1 Introduction**

We perceive a great social need for death education. Since beginning this study, the need has shown itself to be even more imperative. This is so both because of all the reasons named in previous chapters, and because the results of our survey point to this conclusion. In order to effect forward movement in this area, conclusions must take the shape of concrete action. We believe, along with Edgar and Howard-Hamilton (1994) that students need to learn about death before they are confronted with a mortal situation. We believe that without death education, children are likely to replace the realities of the natural world with things they imagine – things they build from what they learn from the media and entertainment industry. It is time to take a hard look at the survey results. We begin with an in-depth discussion of the student survey results, followed by a close inspection of faculty/staff survey results. We will complete the chapter with a summary of the significance of both student and faculty/staff responses.

While we will try to look at each question in the order it is included in the survey instrument, this is not always the optimal way to discuss the results as they pertain to issues either raised by survey answers, or issues inherent in the thesis. For example, Question number 2 of the Student Survey is both early in the survey, and related to other questions in the survey. Here, we begin by looking at how gender may have an effect on certain other questions. Therefore, we will make every effort

to list and discuss the questions in order, yet beg the reader's indulgence where this is neither feasible nor desirable.

## 6.2 Student responses

### 6.2.1 Gender

Twenty-six of the students were female (just over 72%) and ten were male (almost 28%). For most survey questions, the gender difference had no statistical significance. Where statistical disparity did exist, however, the reader is cautioned to remember throughout that the female respondents outnumbered the male respondents by nearly three to one. The answers to one question stood out with regard to which topics should be presented in a death education class (Question 13), and the answers to another question stood out with regard to which topics should be avoided in a death education class (Question 14). We will again return to this topic after we have looked at Questions 9, 10, 11, and 12.

### 6.2.2 Questions 9

It has already been mentioned that for our purposes, the question that asked about student experience with "near-death" (Question 9) was of no interest as respondents sometimes mentioned near-accidents, but not near-death, usually defined as some sort of post-living, or out-of-body experience.

### 6.2.3 Question 10

Question 10 has been discussed in Chapter Five, but the table is reproduced below, for the sake of ease and clarity. The reader will note that the majority of the respondents have had no death education at all.

Table 6.1 Student Experience of Death Education (Question 10)

	<b>Frequen cy</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
None	<b>19</b>	<b>52.8</b>	52.8	<b>52.8</b>
With church	<b>11</b>	<b>30.6</b>	30.6	<b>83.3</b>
Small units within a discipline	<b>6</b>	<b>16.7</b>	16.7	<b>100.00</b>
Total	<b>36</b>	<b>100.00</b>	100.00	

### 6.2.4 Question 11

Table 6.2 Could You Have Benefitted From Death Education (Why?) -

Yes (Question 11)

		Male	Female	Combined total
So you don't	Count	0	6	6
fear death	%	0.0%	23%	16.6%
Learn to cope	Count	3	4	7
	%	30%	15.38%	19.4%
Controversial	Count	1	3	4
and/or	%	10%	11.5%	11.1%
interesting				
Making	Count	1	2	3
meaning of life	%	10%	7.6%	8.3%
Learn about the	Count	2	1	3
afterlife	%	20%	3.8%	8.3%
Other	Count	1	4	5
	%	10%	15.3%	13.88%
Totals	Count	8	20	28
	%	80%	76.9%	77.77%

The outcome to the answer of the question, “If you have never had the opportunity to take such a course [on death and dying], do you think you could have benefitted from one? (why, why not?) (Question 11) relates to the question of whether-or-not death education ought to be offered to high school students in that one would expect the numbers to more-or-less line up. This is not how the numbers turned out. While one person said “maybe” and two did not answer the question at all, almost 77.7% said they could or would have benefitted from the course and 25% said they would not have benefitted. The “yes” answers to this question are fully 27% more than the “yes” answers to the question of offering high school students a death and dying elective. The inverse is true for the “no” answers (Table 6.3). 25% of our respondents said they would not have benefitted from the course, but 44% said it should not be offered to high school students. This disparity signifies that at least our students think themselves more mature than others their age, as maturity seems to be the issue in question.

Perhaps we should have expected this outcome, knowing that the research points to intellectual and emotional adolescent immaturity. A decade of teaching undergraduates, and even graduate students, has taught us that teenagers in the US are not educated to think self-reflectively. In fact, we find it helpful to begin every semester with class exercises that are designed to facilitate more self-reflective reasoning, and we use discussions about presuppositional thinking that helps them to learn how to identify their own presuppositions, as well as to become more aware of their world and others in it. What is more, we believe that this lack of self awareness is ironically, closely related to the extreme individualism that is deeply rooted in the society. The lack of self-awareness is part of the personal and social problem that becomes manifest in disconnection from others – even alienation. It seems to us that this situation makes it even more imperative for young people to find meaning in life that incorporates death. Death does come to all humanity: a number of our respondents pointed out its inevitability. But death also comes *at* humanity. That is, death is all around, yet when it inevitably occurs people are somehow surprised by it, even shocked. Death is common and natural, yet people behave as though it were foreign, strange, or weird. People are not prepared.

Another detail of interest at this point is that the students who said they would not have benefitted from a course on death and dying rarely agreed on the reason (see Table 6.3). For example, just two respondents said they thought it would be depressing, which may be interpreted as a wish to avoid the subject. One student said she didn't need such a course because she had not yet experienced any losses. On the other hand, a student who had already experienced a number of losses also said she would not have benefitted from such a course. Regarding the former, we can only surmise that she had never reflected upon how difficult it would be to lose someone she loves. As for the latter, it may be a bit of a leap, but we wish to propose that this unfortunate young woman's losses were so emotionally hard for her that she could not imagine any amount of preparation making a difference. Ironically, this would mean that she, of all people, would have been likely to benefit from such a course.

Table 6.3 Could Have Benefitted From Death Education (Why?) – No (Question 11)

		Male	Female	Combined total
Depressing	Count	0	2	2
	%	0.0%	7.7%	5.5%
Not interested	Count	1	1	2
	%	10%	3.8%	5.5%
Other	Count	1	3	5
	%	20%	11.5%	13.88%
Totals	Count	2	6	9
	%	20%	23%	25%

One “no” answer came from a student who said it was an individual issue. A reading of the student’s entire survey revealed that her meaning was related to the question of an afterlife. She is particularly interested in the concept of reincarnation. Also related to the afterlife was the answer from the student who said he would not have benefitted from death education because he had a strong faith, and knows that those he loves go to a better place. If, however, belief in an afterlife was our considered purpose for death education, we would be inclined to maintain that students ought to seek death education from some religious institution. As a lot of the respondents affirmed by their answers an interest in the variety of cultural and religious ideas about afterlife, we are confident that death education through a religious lens will both satisfy their curiosity and meet our criterion of meaning-making.

With regard to meaning-making, several (3 each) of our respondents who said “yes” to the question of benefitting from death education, brought up this very point. More people gave overcoming fear of death (23%) as a reason to take the course than any other answer. When considered in conjunction with the interest in afterlife, this is not surprising. Also interesting about this answer is the fact that only females cited fear-reduction as a hoped-for benefit of the course.<sup>1</sup> Learning to cope with the loss came in at almost 14%. There were some who simply thought it would be interesting (11%), and one of these who even liked the idea of the controversy surrounding death.

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<sup>1</sup> One might here speculate that in a society where men are implicitly expected to be strong, and where men showing emotion is sneered at, it may not be surprising that they do not name fear reduction as a looked-for benefit of death education.

Learning how people in other cultures cope and what different peoples say about afterlife were also referred to several times.

Table 6.4 Topics That Would be of Interest (Question 12)

	Male	Female	Combined total
How people cope	5 50%	9 34.61%	14 38.88%
Afterlife	4 40%	9 34.61%	13 36.11%
Religious/cultural beliefs	3 30%	10 38.46%	13 36.11%

### 6.2.5 Question 12

How to cope with loss was named by the largest number of respondents in answer to Question 12 – What topics would interest you regarding death & dying? Fully half of the male respondents and almost 39% of the female respondents wrote in this answer. This makes the necessity of death education, before a loss, of paramount importance. The large numbers of respondents naming afterlife and religion/culture as topics of interest (see Table 6.4) points to the high likelihood that religion will indeed arise as a topic. We are satisfied, therefore, that our presupposition to this effect is correct. Question 12 produced, as one might expect, produced similar results to Question 13.

### 6.2.6 Question 13-What concepts/topics should be presented in such a class?

Like the interest in religious beliefs, the interest in coping strategies between male and female were closely aligned with 46% for females and 40% for males. At first glance, it seems strange that there is a large gender disparity with regard to afterlife for Question 13 (see Table 6.5). However, as the actual difference in the number of males who chose “afterlife” for Question 12 is just two greater than the number for Question 13, this may mean nothing at all. Without a larger sample of male respondents, or follow-up interviews, it will be impossible to know. Worth noting with regard to Question 12 is that there was some interest in the biological workings of death. Ten respondents mentioned this idea in one form or another (How do we die? What happens to the [corpse]? What is it like to die?). Other areas of

interest mentioned at far less significant rates are comas, that it is okay to talk about death, the meaning of life/death, reasons people die, and statistics surrounding death.

While many students mentioned religion, culture, and afterlife as topics of personal interest that might also be covered in a death and dying class, just three of them indicated the use of religious texts for the class. We are wary of proposing that this is highly significant. The reader should be reminded that the questions were open-ended. Even so, while three students mentioned religious books in general, and three students mentioned religious videos in general as sources to be used, it is of some interest that so many of the surveyed students did not choose to mention religious scriptures and books about religions here, in spite of the frequent choices of religion, culture and afterlife as class topics of interest. With so many interested in religion and afterlife, but so few mentioning religious writings, we are convinced that the situation merits some consideration. If one takes into account the great interest in all things spiritual amongst young people and the population of the US in general, and if one remembers the saying “spiritual but not religious” that has become a cliché, one may make the reasonable claim that religious scriptures are seen more as “our parents’” religion.<sup>2</sup> It is common knowledge that organized religion in the US is currently suffering the loss of large numbers from the general population, and more so among the younger generations. Gallup reports<sup>3</sup> that church/temple membership is down. That our respondents note religion in a general way may be taken to mean they wish to know about many religions insofar as the knowledge may help them learn about religion and spirituality all over the world, but are not interested in being part of some static, old religious institution which they view as being self-righteous and violent (We remind the reader of the Muslim conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Christian Crusades, for starters).

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<sup>2</sup> While teaching undergraduates in various topics of religion, it is quite common to hear students talk about being “spiritual, but not religious.”

<sup>3</sup> Church and synagogue membership has coasted downward steadily since the 1930s. 61% of Americans report being a church or synagogue member. This is not only the lowest percentage reporting membership since the 1930s, but it is also widely believed that Americans tend to lie about church membership and church attendance. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145409/near-record-high-religion-losing-influence-america.aspx>, and <http://www.gallup.com/poll/128276/increasing-number-no-religious-identity.aspx>, for statistics regarding membership, attendance, and religious identity in the US.

Yet another issue related to this disinterest in organized religion has to do with the social reality of the highly individualistic society in the US, where religion is thought of as a very personal matter. So, while religious beliefs and afterlife garner much interest, it would be wise to see this interest in a general way. This causes no problems for us as our interest is not in teaching religion as religion, but rather, using religion as a model to help the student build life-meaning that, as always, includes death.

Table 6.5 Should be Presented in Such a Class (Question 13)

	Male	Female	Combined total
Afterlife	2 20%	15 57.6%	17 47.2%
How people cope	4 40%	12 46%	14 44.4%
Religious beliefs	3 30%	9 34.6%	12 33.3%

Other areas of interest mentioned at far less significant rates for Question 13 are feelings, the decaying body, documentaries, fear of death, and the circle of life. Suicide was mentioned as a topic for discussion just once, while two respondents thought it should not be “agreed with.” That is, the instructor should not present suicide as a viable and/or legitimate option. We suspect that this is the very reason for any concern that exists among parents with regard to death education. We also suspect that it is the fringe groups mentioned elsewhere (such as Phyllis Shlafly and the Eagle Forum) that foment fear of this sort.

#### **6.2.7 Question 14-What concepts/topics should be avoided in such a class?**

Fully 23% of females said that graphic physical details of death should be avoided, but only one male (10%) said the same. Highly interesting to us is that almost 27% of the females indicated that nothing should be avoided, while again, just one male said this (10%). Three males left this question unanswered. We cannot definitively say why they left this question unanswered, but it seems logical to surmise two main reasons: First, the young men could not think of anything that should be avoided. If this is true, they would raise the percentage of males who consider all topics acceptable for the class to 40%. The second possibility, however,



is that they were simply not interested in answering the question. We have included both possibilities in Table 6.6 (below). That 7 women and 1 man mentioned this idea specifically, is rather telling. It at the very least implies that youths are very curious about the many topics surrounding death. If we accept that the students who did not list any topics as off-limits are in favor of approaching every topic, then we have one third of our survey respondents in agreement over this point.

Table 6.6 Concepts/Topics to be Avoided (Why?) (Question 14)

	Male	Female	Totals
None	1(4)	7	8 (12)
	10% (40%)	26.92%	22.22% (33.33%)
Graphic details	1	6	7
	10%	23%	26.82%
Evangelism/right beliefs	0	8	8
	0%	30.77%	22.22%
Personal information	0	2	2
	0%	7.7%	5.5%
Agreement with suicide	0	2	2
	0%	7.7%	5.5%

Also, worth noting with regard to Question 14 is eight of the female respondents are concerned that no evangelism goes on in the class. When looking at this response next to the female responses that indicate being against the sharing of too personal information, as well as a concern that suicide could be encouraged, it seems as though the concern is not actually about religion, but rather, the concern is that ideas that are personal and individualist in nature will be foisted upon students.

### 6.2.8 Question 15- How to present death education

There has been some research that points to the experimental (sometimes called experiential) as the best way to approach death education. A number of editorials and articles have appeared bemoaning this approach, but educators in general seem to favor this style. Hands-on is seen as the best way to learn about anything. We would agree, in general, but our survey results point to a different way

(Table 6.7). Fully 50% of the males and 38% of females (41.6% overall) named class discussion as the best way to run a death education course. The caveat to this is, however, that the instructor should be careful not to push students to share personal information. One or two respondents even suggested that sharing personal information might not be a good idea. One male also said that it was imperative to avoid the degeneration of the class discussion into a therapy session (our words). Surprisingly, lectures (the other typical form of education – i.e. didactic) and personal experience sharing came in a close second to “class discussion.” Just behind these were journal and book readings. Several people mentioned that the classroom environment must be safe and non-judgmental. An intimate atmosphere was also cited as a necessity by three females. All of these remarks point to some ambiguity with regard to discussion that is personal and intimate – which could easily be construed as having therapeutic leanings, and the concern that discussion does not become group therapy. Some single remarks also came from males for objectivity, statistical information, and polling the class for study preferences.

Table 6.7 How to Present Death Education (Question 15)

		Male	Female	Combined Total
Discussion	Count	5	10	15
	%	50%	38.46%	41.66%
Lecture	Count	3	3	6
	%	30%	11.5%	16.6%
Readings/book s	Count	0	5	5
	%	0.0%	19.2%	13.8%
Personal experience sharing	Count	1	6	7
	%	10%	23%	19.4%
Other	Count	4	13	17
	%	40%	50%	47.2%

Readings in general received 19.4% interest by our students, while documentaries garnered 36.1% and videos earned 27.8%. In a nation where the entertainment industry is big business and everyone wants to be a star, it is not really surprising that our students are more interested in things they can watch, rather than things they must read. Even reading has become something of a watching endeavor. That is, much of the reading young people do in the US is online, or on a hand-held

Kindle™. It is still reading, of course, but the line between reading and looking has become somewhat blurred by the use of screens backed by light, as opposed to a light shining upon a flat page. Beyond this is the obvious preference for watching and listening rather than for reading.

### **6.2.9 Question 16-What books/videos would be helpful for this course?**

We were looking for specific suggestions, but came away with mostly genres. That is, for example, documentaries and general books were named most often at 25% each, followed by Television shows and videos at nearly 14%. Religious books and videos each received three mentions, as did the Bible, and one male named academic books as a good resource. All-in-all, it was a disappointing response, though the frequency with which documentaries was named is of interest.

### **6.2.10 Questions 17**

What interests us about this situation is that when asked what should *not* be presented in a high school death education course (Question 18), about 22% of the students said that “depressing” or “upsetting” topics should be avoided. What is most interesting about this is that 56.2% of those surveyed who said a death and dying elective should be offered (Question 17), also said that the course should use documentaries (Question 16). This is not to say that all documentaries surrounding death and dying issues must necessarily be depressing, but these topics have certainly proved to be emotional mine-fields in US culture, and one might therefore argue that they are potentially depressing. This is where cultural expectations, community traditions and support, and meaning of life that includes death, would come into the conversation. If death is considered (and it most certainly is by a large majority) the sad end, and something to be avoided for as long as possible, then watching documentaries about people who are dying or have died, is potentially depressing. This may explain why researchers have found that so many parents do their utmost to protect their children from the touch of death in their lives. And it may also explain the concern so many have that death education could cause a rise in suicide rates. It

does not matter that evidence does not conclusively bear this concern out.<sup>4</sup> As one often hears from people in a debate over reality, “Perception is everything.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a comment, while very common, and reasonable on its philosophical surface, is not actually logical. To use a simple example, if I were to point to a chair and say, “That is a lamp,” it would not then be a lamp even if I perceive it to be a lamp. It would, in fact, still be a chair. Again, if someone were to say that Cindy Crawford is in reality a man, saying so would not make it true – even if the person who said it truly believed it. The suggestion is, of course, that if Cindy Crawford is a man for that person, then that is that person’s reality. The problem is in the definition of reality. If realities clash (Perhaps, from the former example of the chair/lamp, one can see where this could cause problems, say, if he were to attempt to turn the chair on so that he could read a book...), communications will be threatened.

Communications are the thread that holds the social fabric together and gives meaning to one’s life (and death). People communicate through systems, associations, media, and education. And so, we are specifically concerned that teens are aided in making life-meaning via education.

As for perception and the discussion around the appropriateness of providing death education, while some studies find an increased rate of death anxiety and/or suicidal thoughts among teens who take death education courses, there has yet to be proved a causal relationship. We must ask ourselves what is to be done with studies that indicate anxiety reduction.<sup>6</sup>

It is also interesting to us to consider that if a significant number of the students thought depressing topics should be avoided, but also felt documentaries would be a good way to study death, then it seems likely that these students do not themselves think of death as very depressing, but are worried that others will. In this respect, they are mirroring the fears of both parents and school officials. This, then, is

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<sup>4</sup> Corr and Balk (1996, 14) provide a list of studies that conclude that contrary to popular belief, bereavement during adolescence tends to result in early maturation, not psychosis.

<sup>5</sup> “Perception is reality” is how Kant put it, but the idea has taken a number of different forms since he first discussed it.

<sup>6</sup> Suicide has been chosen here only as an easy example, but is not now (as a topic) germane to our argument. We have discussed elsewhere the fact that there are many contradictory findings offered by the various studies on suicide.

yet another reason to educate young people in the facts of death and dying, and to help them find and make their own life-meaning. It also indicates a need to educate teachers, staffs and parents about death and dying.

Of those students who thought death education should not be offered to high school students, 1 in 4 said it was because high school students were too immature. All males who said “no” to a high school elective indicated this reason. Females also said teens are too young to think about death, teens don’t have the mental capacity to understand death, it is too controversial a topic, parents may object and (this one was a surprise) teens are too lazy (Tables 6.8 and 6.9).

That so many respondents named maturity as a reason not to offer the class is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. Knowing what is now known with regard to the adolescent brain and its continued immaturity up to around the age of twenty-five, this is a very interesting response. If they are right, that adolescents are too immature to handle death education, then they are mistaken in wanting to take such a course since they were themselves adolescents at the time of the survey. We believe this to be unwarranted fear, with the same root causes discussed throughout this thesis.

Table 6.8 Should Death Education be Offered to High School Students? (Question 17)

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Combined total</b>
Yes	3	15	18
No	4	13	17
Maybe	2	2	4
Totals	9	30	39

Of note is the fact that some respondents gave more than one answer. Such ambivalence is not unusual among teens regardless of topic, but it stands out in this case, because more than one answer to this question only occurred amongst females. Total male responses fell one short of the ten male respondents.

Two other rather interesting points arose here. First, nearly seven out of ten students with parents still married felt that the elective course should be offered, while just two of these ten thought high school students were too immature. Of the students of divorced parents, about 55% thought the elective should be offered, and 36% of these thought high school students were too immature. The confidence level of

significance for these last findings is at 95%. Of the possible reasons for this, the massive amount of research conducted around children of divorce suggests that the upheaval and loss experienced by such children has much the same effect as the loss at the time of a parental death. It is also of interest that 40% of our males said high school students are too immature, while almost 27% of females said the same.

Table 6.9 Should Not be Offered to High School Students Because – Students (Question 17)

		Male	Female	Combined total
High school students not mature enough	Count	4	7	11
	%	40%	26.9	30.5%
Not mentally prepared	Count	1	1	2
	%	10%	3.0%	5.0%
Parents may object	Count	0	1	1
	%	0.0%	3.0%	2.7%
Unnecessary burden on the young	Count	0	2	2
	%	0.0%	7.6%	5.5%

However, it should here be stated that the majority of the respondents said the course should be offered, or it should be offered if certain criteria are met (such as it is an elective only, i.e., not required, or that no one religious idea is espoused, etc.). These two responses combined garnered almost 61%. Full “yes” answers came in at 47%, and full no answers came in at almost 39%. Yes answers were accompanied by statements about coping, comfort, and early preparation for death. It has already been seen, that the “no” answers were overwhelmingly attended with the immaturity of the high school student. A few of both “yes” answers and “no” answers were associated with more than one reason.

One of the “no” answers came from a female who said that she “was not ready to fully understand death in high school.” This was a young woman who had experienced three difficult losses by the age of nineteen, which was also her age at the time of the survey. At sixteen years of age, she lost her grandfather to pancreatic cancer. At seventeen she lost a fifteen-year-old female friend in a jet skiing accident, and at nineteen she lost her dear pet dog to old age. She says, “I grew up with my

dog, he was my best friend” (sic.). It should be considered, then, that she was grieving for her lost dog at the time of the survey.

One answer we decided to list as a “maybe” was from a female who said, “I think college-age would be smarter, but death is an issue that could arise at any time so it’s smarter to be prepared and informed on it earlier” (sic.). The reason for her mid-answer turn-around may be explained by her answers to losses in her life. The same year that she took the survey, a young male student was beaten to death in a campus robbery. She names this as a death that affected her saying that the reason why was, “Someone my age dying and in my own community/school. It made me think about my own mortality and how unexpected things can happen to anyone anytime. It upset and scared me” (sic).

Finally, we found one of the unqualified “yes” answers to be fascinating in both its brevity and implications. An eighteen-year-old male says quite simply, “Yes! was presented in my high school” (sic). This young man listed no losses on his survey, but mentions the importance of learning to cope several times. What fascinates us is that taking the course did not at all disturb him, and this is clearly the implication for the concern so many of the students had who said “no” to the course for “immature” high school students.

A major surprise arose in the area of past losses and a need for such a course. There was no statistically significant correlation found. That there would be a correlation of loss to a need for a course was one of our presuppositions. Anything we might suggest in the way of reasons for this would be highly speculative. The best way to resolve this issue would be to revisit our respondents for more in-depth interviews. We do not have the ability or luxury to do this, and so we will rely on prior research to answer these questions as best we can. It may serve well to remember the young lady whose survey did not meet our age requirement for final inclusion in the study.<sup>7</sup>

The reader will recall that she was in high school when a good friend of hers committed suicide. She was one of ten young people who were eventually provided with professional psychological counseling. Her survey indicated quite clearly that a

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<sup>7</sup> As the young woman was under the age of twenty-five, it might be argued that she is still representative of adolescence.

course on death and dying would not only be appropriate for high school students, but that it would also go a long way in preparing teens for losses beyond their control. Perhaps the best method of discovering whether-or-not young people who have suffered great loss would benefit from such education would be to define great, or extreme, loss, then pool together a large group of teens who have experienced this. It would also be necessary to have at least two control groups. One such group would be comprised of those who have had (defined) lesser losses, and another might be a group of teens who have not yet experienced loss. All three groups would have to be filtered for other types of major life events, such as divorced parents.

Table 6.10 Should be Offered to High School Students Because – Students (Question 17)

		Male	Female	Combined total
Just “yes!”... and they need to learn how to cope	Count	2	7	9
	%	20%	26.9	25%
It is an inevitable part of life	Count	1	3	4
	%	10%	11.5%	11.1%
As elective only	Count	0	3	3
	%	0.0%	11.5%	8.3%
The earlier the better	Count	0	2	2
	%	0.0%	7.6%	5.5%

### 6.2.11 Question 18- Topics to be added or deleted from a high school class

First, we observe again that some of the respondents who said high school is no place for death education also then named some things that should be added or deleted from a high school course. Two males and two females said the two classes (college and high school) should not vary, while three males and two females, in keeping with their previous response that the class could not be presented in high school, then repeated their statement that it was not appropriate for high school students.

By far the topics to avoid in a high school class most named by our respondents were that the course materials and discussion should not go too deep, and that graphic images and subjects ought to be avoided. Together, these two items were mentioned 33.3% of the time. Females named these at the rate almost 30.7% and



males named them at 40%. Also mentioned by one or two students were psychological issues, specific religious beliefs, bodily decay of the corpse, real/personal accounts and, oddly, too much class work!

Table 6.11 Topics to be Deleted From High School Death Education (Question 18)

		Male	Female	Combined total
Psychologically deep/depressing	Count	3	5	8
	%	30%	19.2%	22.2%
Graphic details	Count	1	3	4
	%	10%	11.5%	11.1%
Don't do at all	Count	3	2	5
	%	30%	7.6%	13.8%
Other	Count	0	5	5
	%	0.0%	19.2%	13.9%

The topics mentioned for addition (Question 18) were burial rites, an introduction to philosophy, coping strategies, suicide, dying as part of life, factual information, and religion. We are not apt to celebrate over the last topic named, however, since it was cited just once. In fact, all of these subjects arose only once but for coping strategies, which was referred to twice. A couple of students said they could not think of anything, and a few of the respondents left the space blank.

#### 6.2.12 So, could respondents have benefitted from death education?

We are satisfied that there is a need for death education in public schools. It would probably be best to begin this education at home with very small children, and continue it once children become students, but it would be foolish to pretend that social resistance to death education does not remain entrenched in US society. Therefore, we are convinced that it would be best to begin our campaign at the high school level.

The reader will recall that despite the large number of students who felt a death and dying course is or might be out of place in high schools, there was a larger number who thought it was a good idea and some others who thought it could be a good idea if done right. With regard to the respondents who said such a course was a bad idea, the large majority of them named immaturity as the main reason for this. Since research suggests that our respondents are barely, if at all, removed both by

intellectual capacity and emotional maturity from those they claimed were too immature to discuss death, we very much wonder how it is that these same young men and women consider themselves ready for death education. Obviously, the likely answer to this rhetorical question is that they think themselves far more mature than they were just a year or so earlier, and in fact, both they and high school students would benefit greatly by appropriately designed death education.

### **6.3 Students, Faculty/Staff – and the question of parental approval**

Just one of our 36 student respondents (Question 17) said that parents might object to their teens taking death education. This one female said that “some parents might not want it discussed with their kids” (sic). Here, it may be instructive to look at this nineteen-year-old woman’s complete survey, as it is not typical of most of the surveys. This young woman said that she could have benefitted from a death and dying class “because it would be a good class for people to take if they have lost someone close to them.” The year she filled out the survey her father died at the age of sixty-three from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). When she was fourteen her best friend’s mother died in a motorcycle accident, and when she was seventeen, a boy from the high school class ahead of her died in a car accident. What she says disturbed her about the former was how painful it was for her friend. We surmise that she was concerned with how the latter’s close friends and family coped with the young man’s death as her answer to the question about topics of interest (Question 12) was “Different grieving strategies, how people deal with the death of a loved one, coping” (sic). She also mentions the need to learn how to cope with death when asked about concepts and topics to be included in death education classes (Question 13). She is unable to name any topics to be avoided “because all people view death very differently.” (Question 14) When asked about the best method for teaching about death (Question 15), she does not name ways of presentation like discussion, lecture, etc., but rather, she is interested that “any material about death should be presented carefully and respectfully, especially to avoid upsetting people.” Finally, for additions and deletions from a high school class (Question 18), she says, “Death shouldn’t be talked about as openly as it would be in college.”

All of the young woman’s answers suggest the emotional need to understand and be able to cope with death when it occurs. That she seems sure such a course

would have helped her when she was in high school, but is less sure that other high school students will be able to handle it, may point to her need to understand herself better and to make meaning in her life. It is also interesting that she should say parents might object. If one could have been “a fly on the wall” in her home at her father’s death, it might have been highly instructive. Still, it is clear that she believes *she* would have benefitted from death education *before* her first experience with death at age fourteen. We quite agree! But for now, high school age (usually fourteen through eighteen) is a start we are willing to accept.

As for parental concerns with death education, it is hard to say why this was, or was not, mentioned by our student respondents. It is possible that as still emotionally and cognitively immature human beings, they simply did not think of this possibility. It is also possible that it did not occur to them because their knowledge of their parents’ ways, ideas, fears, personalities prohibited the thought. In other words it is possible that the parents of our respondents would not be averse to their children taking death education in high school. Without follow-up interviews, we cannot be sure. However, it should also be remembered that other students in our sample group experienced loss(es) but did not suggest that parents might object. With regard to this issue of parental approval or objection, a far different outcome came about with the compilation of the faculty/staff data.

Of our forty-six faculty/staff respondents, fourteen said that parents might object (Question 27). This number includes one “maybe.” The fact that more faculty/staff respondents named this possibility, squares with the available literature on the topic. We also need to mention here that the faculty/staff survey was not open-ended. At the end of the survey there were several blank lines, on which relatively few of our respondents made comments. The point is that with parental disapproval as a possible choice named for the respondent, just fourteen of forty-six chose it. This number represents 30% of the faculty/staff who took the survey. Males were more than twice as likely to choose this answer as were females. While there were four more men than women who filled out the survey, this still indicates a rather large variance between the sexes. Research indicates that parents are not as worried about

their children learning about death at school than faculty/staff suppose.<sup>8</sup> It seems the students are more attuned to this than are the teachers, but this is hardly surprising since the students are the ones living with the parents. The disparity over this question between male and female faculty/staff, though, is of great interest. Since women are the traditional care-givers in society, we were more apt to presuppose that they would want control over the transmission of such knowledge to their children, but if that were true, the numbers should have come out something in the area of the opposite of how they actually tracked.

However, if one looks at that same idea of women as care-givers from another angle, one might logically surmise that these women, many of them mothers, would in fact want their children to have the benefit of death education and the preparation for coping that it can provide. That leaves our male respondents, ten of whom said parents might object. Knowing that educators have paired death education with sex education as controversial topics;<sup>9</sup> and, as men are the general targets of sexual harassment lawsuits and the like, perhaps it is not a stretch to suggest that they would be worried that parents would be uneasy over controversial death education as well as controversial sex education. In the end, it is best to remember that our 30% of faculty/staff respondents naming the possible parental disapproval, while statistically accurate, is not an actual problem. Had this number been closer to 50%, we might have had reason to pause. It is instructive, however, that this rationale for not offering a high school elective on death and dying was marked more often than any other, to include the big issue for the students – which was high school student immaturity.

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<sup>8</sup> This point is well expressed by McGovern and Barry (2000), when they say, "...teachers were more likely than parents to agree that death education would take away from parental responsibility."

<sup>9</sup> See Gabriel Moran, for one, at <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/0-INTRO.pdf> (NYU), *Introduction: Does Anyone Need Death Education?*, who says that "If one can deal with death in education, other things might fall into place. Conversely, the controversies surrounding sex education or moral education might suggest which paths to follow and which mistakes to avoid in trying to include death in education."

Table 6.12 Parents Will Object to Death Education – Faculty/Staff (Question 27)

		Male	Female	Combined total
Yes	Count	10	4	14
	%	40%	19%	30.4%
Maybe	Count	1	0	1
	%	4.0%	0.0%	2.17%
Totals	Count	11	4	15
	%	44%	19%	32.6%

## 6.4 Faculty/Staff responses

Twenty-five of our faculty/staff respondents were male, and twenty-one were female, making the survey pool total forty-six. Males comprised 54.4% of the respondents and females comprised 45.6%. The reader is reminded that the questions on the faculty/staff survey were not open-ended, but specific (see Appendix B for full survey). Questions 24 through 27 asked the respondent for specific input about whether-or-not high school students should be offered an elective in death education.

### 6.4.1 Question 24- It is never appropriate to offer death education

Just three of our faculty/staff respondents chose this answer. One was male, and two were female. This represents just fewer than 6.5% of forty-six respondents. One of the females said death education should be incorporated into other classes, but should not be a separate elective. It is significant that so small a number said such education is never appropriate. Strictly argued, only two suggested this in any pure fashion. The male said that the ability to teach the course was not available in public schools, which implies he may be in favor of death education if instructors are properly trained in the subject. The other female said that death should only be addressed as required by experience. This, in fact, is the usual model seen in US public schools, though there are certainly schools that offer death education modules and even death education classes. Most often, however, it is after a loss that counselors step in to help the bereaved.<sup>10</sup> But this model has clearly fallen short of the need. Since just one person in our pool of respondents said this, and as the negative responses were so few, we do not think this issue should determine whether-or-not to offer teenagers death and dying electives. If anything, so few negative

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<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*. Online at <http://www.deathreference.com/Da-Em/Death-Education.html>. Also see Wass (2004).

responses tells us that our faculty/staff respondents mostly agree with our assessment of the need for death education.

#### 6.4.2 Question 25-Offer to juniors and seniors only

32% of all respondents indicated that offering the course to Juniors and Seniors might be the way to go. There is a caveat, however. Just five of the fifteen who marked this answer, marked it alone. While some also indicated reasons such as immature students and parental disapproval, others said this was possibly the right way to go and two contradictorily also marked the answer that indicates the course should be offered to all students. Sounds like extreme indecision, which is hardly a surprising response from confused and sometimes embattled educators. What is more, fully 80% of those who said the course should only be offered to Juniors and Seniors, were male (Table 6.12). Perhaps it would be best to compare these numbers to those regarding the question of offering the elective to all high school students.

Table 6.13 Only Offer Death Education to Juniors and Seniors (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Grades) (Question 25)

		Male	Female	Combined total
Yes	Count	12	2	14
	%	48%	9.5%	30.4%
Maybe	Count	0	1	1
	%	0.0%	4.76%	2.17%
Totals	Count	12	3	15
	%	48%	14.28%	32.6%

#### 6.4.3 Question 26-Offer to all high school students as an elective

More than half of all those surveyed chose this response. This is a total of twenty-five... twelve males and thirteen females. These numbers represent 48% of all males and almost 62% of all females. What is perhaps most suggestive about these numbers is that fifteen of the twenty-five respondents who said all high school students should be offered death education recorded losses other than grandparents and other relatives. All of the remaining ten recorded losses of grandparents and/or other relatives, but for one, who recorded nothing in the personal loss section of the survey, but wrote “Bad Karma” in the margin. We aren’t sure if this is a superstitious remark along the lines of “knock on wood,” or if the respondent thought that to

answer the questions about personal loss would be to introduce negative vibrations into the cosmos. One more possibility, of course, is that he just did not wish to think about it. We will never know. As for all the others who chose this answer, in order to be evenhanded and not misleading, we wish to mention that of those who did not choose this answer were a few who also had experienced seriously close losses, though mostly they lost grandparents and other relatives.

Table 6.14 Offer to ALL High School Students as an Elective (Question 26)

	Male	Female	Combined total
Count	12	13	25
%	48%	61.9%	
% of all faculty/staff	26%	28%	54%

None of this diminishes the fact that more than half of our faculty/staff respondents thought it a good idea to offer all high school students death education.

A female health and physical education teacher with a master's degree, and who had received training to teach death education as part of the health education package, wrote this on her survey,

We have many students who have a difficult time dealing w/ a loss of a loved one at ALL grade levels. This should be covered throughout middle school and High School (sic).

Of interest is that while this forty-one-year-old has been trained to teach death and dying, she has not yet had opportunity. She is clearly convinced of the efficacy of death education but has not yet been given the option of teaching such a course or unit.

#### 6.4.4 Question 27-Reasons why it might be better not to provide death education to high school students

Table 6.15 Possible Reasons Not to Offer Death Education (Question 27)

	Too Immature	Topic too difficult	Too depressing	Teens cannot learn coping skills	Don't grieve as adults	Aren't ready to reflect upon meaning
Count	4	3	6	3	2	0
	8.69%	6.5%	13%	6.5%	4.3%	0%

We have already discussed the issue of parental concern (above) with regard to our faculty/staff respondents. While 30.5% of our students said teens are too immature for death education, just 8.69% of our faculty/staff respondents chose this reason. One of these responses was a qualified “may be,” as in, some teens are and some are not too immature. 6% also said teens cannot learn the necessary coping skills, but none of them said high school students were not ready to reflect upon life’s meaning. However, 13% (six respondents) said the topic is too depressing for teenagers.<sup>11</sup> We are left, then, with the question of parental objection as the only reason chosen by our faculty/staff in significant numbers. But is this problem real or imagined?

According to Corless, Germino and Pittman (2003), many schools have implemented crisis plans (e.g. AIDS intervention), but have yet to address death education in any systematic manner. Thus far, if US schools approach death education at all they do so mostly in small units within disciplines such as health education. Corless, Germino and Pittman claim that parents feel such education would be an infringement upon the responsibility of the church. They also maintain that it is the task of the public school to instruct the youths in all aspects of life in order to groom them for life in our society. This last assertion is rather broad and possibly disputable, but the point is well taken that if acceptable school instruction includes topics such as AIDS and sexual activity, why should death be taboo?

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<sup>11</sup> We think it reasonable to suggest that the suicide of the young man may have left these faculty members with a sense of fear over anything that could possibly be construed as depressing. We have already discussed how some, perhaps many, think of death in this way.



Apparently, it is because – one is told – parents see death as a religious subject. This, of course, means that parents apparently think of death in terms of afterlife; and, afterlife, they suppose, necessarily concerns specific beliefs about God.

Educators are sometimes concerned that death education take place in public schools because they believe that parents are also too uncomfortable about death themselves to talk to their children about it (Homedes and Ahmed (1987, 35). McGovern and Barry (2000), working in Ireland, agree with this assessment, but add that while both educators and parents were sometimes uneasy about talking with children about death, faculty were likely to overestimate parental concern with death education in the schools. Parents, in fact, were not as worried about loss of their responsibilities as teachers thought. Even so, they highlight the need for education professionals and parents to collaborate. There was some concern, however, with the attitudes and the level of knowledge of teachers with regard to death and dying.

These are not flimsy concerns and must be addressed when undertaking to provide death education in public schools. We wish to stress, however, that these are not insurmountable issues and that the mental and physical welfare of US children is too important to ignore this serious need. Several relatively recent US social changes and world events have made educators more aware of this need.

First, Christian churches across the country are losing members at an alarming rate. The exodus began in earnest in the 1960s and 1970s, and has more recently taken on a speed that we describe somewhat hyperbolically as sonic. Even in the deep-south churches are experiencing huge losses. The reasons for this are many, and some of the loss may be temporary as it could be tied to the slowed economy, but the result for our purposes remains the same: children are not going to church, and are therefore not confronted by the church with a religious eschatology. This eschatology is not being replaced by discussions in most to nearly all homes (Edgar and Howard-Hamilton 1994, 2).

Another social event that concerns many parents and educators is the distressing rate of suicide among youth. Whether-or-not this rate of suicide represents a change in US society is beyond the point. That it concerns parents is enough. We wish to argue that death education done correctly – with properly trained teachers, and the time to do the job right – helps to promote good mental health, giving youth the

ability to cope with loss, and an additional maturity that aids in the area of making meaning for all of life, to include death.

Finally, in this age of “terror” parents are in great need when it comes to dealing with loss. It would, of course, help if parents were prepared to discuss death with their children, but it will first be necessary to grow prepared parents. Such events as those that occurred at Columbine, the World Trade Center, and Virginia Tech, have made the parental and teaching staff inadequacies on this topic obvious.

In the end, we are convinced that with the proper communication parents will support death education in the public school. Ideally, there will be a partnership of staff and parents to address the issue and avoid misunderstanding. We feel strongly that in US society meaning has been lost for both the individual and the society as a whole, and that it has become imperative to find ways of helping children learn how to make their own meaning. The side benefit of this education, we believe, will be citizens who quite naturally imbue social systems with meaning.

## **6.5 Further and summary remarks**

Our surveys tell us what we need to know in order to move forward with death education in US high schools. While there is some concern amongst students that other teens are not prepared to discuss death, and while faculty and staff worry that parents may not approve, we can see that the evidence in support of these concerns is both limited and ambiguous. First, a majority of our student respondents believed they could have benefitted from death education. Second, a lot of studies indicate that parents, once properly briefed about death education, may be more open to having their children attend the course than teachers think.<sup>12</sup>

In 1994, Edgar and Howard-Hamilton (*Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*) reported that social violence and lack of death knowledge and education had become the impetus for providing death education in the nation’s public schools, beginning in elementary school. The article, *Noncrisis Death Education in the Elementary School*, discusses a program of education offered to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The program had been going on for ten years when the article was published. The entire process, from planning to training, to presentation of the course, was open to all

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<sup>12</sup> W. G. Warren (1989); McGovern and Barry (2000); Jones and Hodges (1995); Pratt (1987) (teachers “ambivalent”)

concerned... faculty, administrators, and parents. While some parents apparently indicate a little concern over afterlife ideas the class may address, most are very happy to let the school deal with talking to their children about death. Post-class evaluations are provided to parents, and most are very appreciative of the help it gives their children, especially when crises arise. Edgar and Howard-Hamilton indicate that parents say taking the course makes their children uncomfortable and causes a lot of unrest and even havoc to the family, but that these facts do *not* diminish parental satisfaction with the course.

Many proponents of death education call for an early start.<sup>13</sup> Elementary school, they say, is where it should begin. We do not disagree with this assessment, but we are very aware that the process of moving death education into the realm of the normal, the mundane, has somehow stalled. While some, citing the media blitz of violence both as fact and entertainment, claim that death is no longer a taboo topic, we believe the continued avoidance of the discussion is proof of the opposite. Our student responses point to this idea in that they mirror society when it comes to whether-or-not others can handle death education, but are largely open to the topic for themselves. People like to believe they are exceptional. In any case, our respondents overwhelmingly indicated an interest in death education, to include the afterlife and cultural religious ideas that are connected to death.

As for our faculty and staff respondents, a large majority of them said that death education should be offered to high school students. If we couple this with the student interest in afterlife and religious ideas, we are looking at good cause to provide death education through a religious lens.

Even as we declare victory, we are not so imprudent as to suggest there should be no precautions. We now move on to conclude our study with a general summary of the purpose, the findings, the recommendations, and the precautions of offering a death education course in US public high schools.

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, J. (1998), Morgan, E. (1994), Schowalter et al. (1989), Prickett (1980).

## **CHAPTER SEVEN – REVIEW, REFLECTION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ADOLESCENTS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE/DEATH**

Whether repressed feelings are themselves harmful, as many psychologists claim, I'm not so sure, but without question there is a problem when positive thinking "fails" and the cancer spreads or eludes treatment. Then the patient can only blame herself: she is not being positive enough; possibly it was her negative attitude that brought on the disease in the first place. (Ehrenreich 2009, 42)

Breast cancer, I can now report did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a "gift," was a very personal, agonizing encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before – one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate. (Ehrenreich, 2009, 43-44)

Talking about the end of life is often uncomfortable. Why think or talk about something as unpleasant as our own (or our loved one's) death? Why not think about happier things – and cross that difficult bridge later? Patients have taught me, however, that later is often too late. (Johnson in *Christian Century* 2010, 10)

We have come to the conclusion of our thesis. With this chapter we will review and reflect on the most salient points herein – the purpose and the findings of the thesis. We will answer the question, "Why death education?" We will now connect this question to issues surrounding death and dying in the US. We will also make recommendations with regard to both future research and provisions for death education in the nation's public high schools, and will look at one possibility for a working syllabus. Along the way we will touch on some general precautions as they

have a direct bearing upon what may or may not be undertaken by the school system. We will close our thesis with a short wrap-up and a few final remarks.

## **7. 1 Introduction**

The three quotes above are highly representative of what is happening in US society. The recent publication of these essays points directly to the fact that little has changed in cultural attitudes and understanding. Ehrenreich (2009) shares her experience with the “cancer culture” of America whereby individuals with cancer are not only expected to “buck up,” be strong, and fight the disease with their last breath, if necessary, but they are now even expected to be somehow thankful for the so-called “gift” of cancer. Ehrenreich makes much of statements she has heard from cancer survivors to the effect of “I wouldn’t be who I am today, if I hadn’t gotten cancer,” or “God gave me cancer to make me a better and stronger person.” Ehrenreich speaks to a phenomenon that Moller encountered in his interviews of dying patients. This is a popular concept. In Chapter Two, we mentioned an elderly woman whom we visited just days ago. She was at the end of her days, and briefly expressed some sadness and dissatisfaction, and then said she should not feel that way, as though she were both weak and ungrateful to express pain, sadness, and loneliness.

It is one thing for religious people to say that God cares for them, loves them, and is with them at all times, but it seems to us that many people do not completely think through the implications of saying that God gave them some disease, or pain, etc. The logical end of such an argument is that God causes fathers to rape and abuse their own children, or that God wants some people to torture and murder others because they are somehow more evil than they are themselves. The excuse for the former scenario is that the child would not have grown up to be so strong and compassionate had she not experienced the pain and horror of parental betrayal and violence. The excuse for the latter is that torturing and murdering such evil people is doing God’s will on earth, ridding the human race of such worthless people by punishing them for their evil deeds. While it may be true that adversity makes people stronger, and possibly more compassionate, both scenarios, if thought through logically, paint a picture of a God who is far from gracious or forgiving.

Whatever one’s view of God, such is the current understanding of the “man on the street.” This idea that the dying individual needs to “buck-up” and be strong adds

to the problem of miscommunication, and helps neither the dying person nor his loved ones. Both must be strong. When someone dies, it is acceptable to grieve for a short, though unspecified, period of time. It is even common for those considered experts to talk (i.e. write) about appropriate grieving,<sup>1</sup> which includes both the method and the length of time involved in the grieving “process.”

We are not here disparaging Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work surrounding the process of dying, as we are convinced that she made a marvelous contribution to the world’s knowledge of how people deal with dying. But we are suggesting that talk of appropriate amounts of time, and appropriate ways of grieving, only add to the anxiety people feel when confronted with death in any of its forms. No one wants to be considered maudlin, insane, or weak. And so, people are left to their own devices in dealing with the pain that accompanies loss. This is especially hard for children and teens, who are not yet mature enough to cope with loss, and who have not been given the necessary tools. We could very easily argue that the same can be said for adults, but at the very least the children must learn how to cope. In their work with young children Edgar and Howard-Hamilton (1994) found through post tests given six years after students took death education that when compared to students who did not take a course on death, the students who took the program enjoyed increased positive self-identity and self responsibility, as well as earlier onset of generativity (especially where peers and younger siblings were concerned). Dunning argues that information about death helps to guard children from psychosis, to include thinking that takes the form of fantasies surrounding death and dying (2006, 502). This is a cry for prevention, which is a major point that seems to be lost on many educators. It would make most sense to talk and learn about death and to make life meaning *before* one is forced to deal with an occurrence of it. Dunning claims that taking this tack both lessens the difficulty of dealing with death as it is approaching, and the grieving that takes place after-the-fact (2006, 500). This seems to us an obvious point, but we still find ourselves surrounded by large numbers of researchers and/or death educators who take a rather tepid approach to the actual proviso of death education.

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<sup>1</sup> See Edgar and Howard-Hamilton (1994) for an example, and Kübler-Ross (1969 and 1974), for another.

Many death educators continue to recommend a sort of spreading-around of the necessary education. This includes teachable moments like discussion of the loss of a beloved pet. But this idea is more difficult for high school students. For example, it hardly seems prudent to wait until after a classmate has been killed in an automobile accident to address coping methods or to discuss what a young person's life means. In fact, we are not the first to suggest that such a plan is almost impossible. How is a young person supposed to calmly discuss what the dead youth's life has meant when she is full of questions like, "Why my friend?" "Could this happen to me?" "Is there something after all of this, or is death the end?" We believe it is extremely important to provide teens with a safe place to address their concerns and questions, as the previously discussed concern of how to comfort a bereaved friend, or cope with personal loss. This must be done intentionally and "piece-meal" tactics must be avoided, because they don't allow for deep conversation and reflection. Communication in small bits and pieces is not solid enough for teenagers to cultivate their own meaning of life that incorporates death.

Johnson (2010) insists that it is imperative that people find a way to communicate with one another about death. To this end, he recommends creation of a place for dialogue that can be entered into easily, and just as easily ended. In other words, it must take on a more normal aspect as part of everyday life and discussion. He then says people need to learn how to both listen and talk about death without trying to deny ("You aren't going to die." "Don't say that."), or "fix" the situation. If this is to work, the discussion must be reengineered as part of a normal conversation. In this way, both parties will be able to locate a comfortable stance.

The point is that when one is, or a loved one is, about to die, one will naturally be saddened by the impending separation. Crying will be a common response. But if one is strong, one will not succumb to tears. It is a simplistic idea, but true nonetheless. Years have passed in which the society has said that crying is okay...that it does not make one a weakling to cry. Yet people do not actually accept this. Society still insists that one remain strong – that one fight – that one not give in; and this leads to the manifestation of denial, if not actual denial. If someone voices the fact that they might die, everyone present feels the need to rebuke him. In a way those present are saying, "What? You are giving up?" This situation leads to a

doubly guilt-inducing state of affairs once the loved one has died. This is so because those left behind, in not acknowledging the possibility of the death of their loved one, are not afforded the opportunity to say goodbye. This leaves both the departing and those left behind all alone in the situation. Thus, one feels guilt for not saying goodbye, and one feels guilt for leaving the dying all alone as they face the unknown. To top it all off, once the dead are buried, the living are not allowed to grieve too long, or too hard. How does one cope with such a mess? Dunning (2006) insists that death education not only eases the process of mourning, but it helps children make sense of death and know that they will make it through the grief. Death is understandably hard on everyone.

Anyone who has ever lost someone to death without being able to say goodbye, and anyone who has found themselves all alone in their grief will have some small idea of how difficult these events are for teenagers. Death is a natural part of life, but it is still hard to say goodbye to loved ones, and it is still hard to help others cope with their losses. We have another anecdote that helps to illustrate the problem. Two young women recently appeared on a television morning news program that ran a piece about forgiveness. Their story was that they had been best friends from a very early age, but when they were teens, one of their mothers died and the other teen walked away from their friendship. The girl whose mother had died needed her friend more than ever, but her friend did not know what to say or how to act. In her discomfort, she eschewed their life-long camaraderie. Some years later they were more-or-less reunited by accident and able to reconnect. They were lucky. We propose that their friendship suffered a destructive effect because neither of the teens had a frame-of-reference from which to face a mother's death. Our research tells us that this problem of non-communication and miscommunication is quite common among teenagers (and arguably all people in society). They do not know what to do or say, so they avoid the issue altogether.

With suspect attitudes and a dearth of knowledge with regard to death and dying in US society which directs how one approaches the final life-cycle event, it is hard to imagine how young people can make sense of it all. These are not-fully-matured people; they have no appreciation for loss in a society that refuses to even talk about or accept pain, let alone provide comfort. To talk about death as part of life



would mean to accept that it is normal, that it sometimes cannot be understood or explained, that it is not always the result of some fault on the part of the one who dies, and that it is okay to grieve deeply.

In a society where medical personnel believe they have somehow failed when someone dies, and individuals are taught that they too fail if they get sick and if they succumb to pain and death, how can the barriers that keep people from finding comfort and aid in their communities be surmounted? Our answer to this rhetorical question is obvious when viewed through the above discussion: through education.

## **7. 2 Purpose and findings**

We wanted to know whether-or-not the research would reveal a need for youths to learn about death and dying from a religious perspective in order to make meaning for their lives (and deaths). Our experience, both anecdotal and from the surveys, as well as a preponderance of the literature in this field, has indicated that the need does indeed exist.<sup>2</sup> In 1978 a ten-week experiential death and dying course was offered to college freshmen who were then surveyed six months later in an attempt to discover what the students were able to take away with them (Stefan, 1978). We maintain that the best length for such a course is at least 15-16 weeks. The ideal length, as far as we are concerned, is at least 18 weeks in duration. However, some interesting results were obtained by Stefan. For example, the students were asked what helped them most in the course. They replied with equal frequency that personal discussion in the class was very helpful, as well as the idea that life should be appreciated. Of great interest to us is the conclusion to which Stefan came, which is that

...the course could be enhanced by focusing on a living-dying theme where the emphasis would be on self actualization, coping with non-terminal illness and the management of conflict.

These are easily topics one would want to cover with adolescents. Optimally, it may be best to begin this education with small children in elementary school, but we are convinced that our greatest chance of persuading school boards, staff and parents that death education will help their children, is to start with high school. Along with Corr

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<sup>2</sup> Stevenson (1993, in *Death and Spirituality*, Doka & Morgan, 283) says that attitudes toward death are closely related to religious belief and behavior in large numbers of people.

and Balk (1996, 244) we would like to insist that it is imperative to include the community in the design process of death and dying curricula to the extent that stated goals and priorities of the class are representative of everyone affected. To that end we would like to produce a text that is both age appropriate and approaches the topic through a religious lens.

Because so large a number of our students named the afterlife and cultural religious ideas and beliefs as topics to be covered by a course on death and dying, we believe we have conclusive evidence of the need for a class that uses a religious model.<sup>3</sup> Our insistence on this feature of the course, and the fact that we are also highly interested in helping youths make meaning in their lives, has not been an angle of discussion commonly taken by Thanatologists. In fact, there has been more silence in this area than dialogue. The dialogue that does occur generally takes the view that religion should be left out entirely. Stevenson (1993) suggests that if values are not intentionally addressed, then unexamined values, and personal values of individual teachers, will fill the void. This is itself a concern for some parents who do not want to see teachers determine their offspring's beliefs, nor want to see their children wholly secularized. It seems likely to us that the silence around religion has arisen from the misunderstanding surrounding parental concerns. That is, teachers, staff, and researchers alike, have assumed that the preponderance of parents would object to death education.<sup>4</sup> Jones and Hodges (1995) surveyed 118 parents of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders and discovered that parents who harbored their own dislike, fear, or generally bad attitudes about death were also more likely to say that death education obstructed parental responsibility. It is a fascinating finding that points directly to the need for death education on all levels and indicates a social communications disconnect.

The main reason for this miscommunication appears to arise from a two-pronged notion that surfaces surrounding religion. The first prong suggests that

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<sup>3</sup> Stevenson says that it isn't religion itself that is generally the object of concern, but religious values being passed from teacher to student in the classroom.

<sup>4</sup> Jones and Hodges (1995) borrow from Barnes (1993) when they suggest that parental support is essential as "...organized parent groups frequently exert formidable opposition to nontraditional school curricula, especially programs viewed as intruding into matters of family concern."

religion is a very personal matter and should only be approached by the family or the church. No doubt this would not cause too many problems if all or most people were connected to some religious sect. This, however, is no longer the case in US society. While most Americans still consider themselves religious (or spiritual), many of them no longer concern themselves with church affiliation.<sup>5</sup> This idea dovetails with the other prong of this miscommunication, which is that the First Amendment of the US Constitution prohibits the school from even talking about religion. Of course, this is an erroneous understanding and the amendment actually says that government will make no laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion nor will the government make provision for a state-established religion. The amendment does *not* say that people may not discuss religion in publicly supported venues, such as the school.<sup>6</sup>

Reasonable consideration would tell the more reflective person that this would in fact be absurd, for it would suggest that other topics may also become publicly taboo, such as sex, sexual orientation, drug and alcohol use, career choice, vegetarianism, wearing white clothing after Labor Day...One can easily see how foolish this idea is if taken to its logical, or illogical, conclusion.

No topic is therefore beyond discourse. What is off-limits for death education is any form of proselytizing or pressure aimed at the students that would push them in any one direction with regard to their personal beliefs or creation of meaning in their lives, whether religious in nature, or non-religious in nature. As a precaution, it would be necessary to educate teachers/staff and parents on the meaning of the First Amendment, as well as to make them aware of what is and what is not appropriate for teachers to share with children. It would be wise, therefore, to include parents in the development of this course so as to avoid miscommunication and to ease any fears they might harbor about the character of the course. To be clear, though, one should remember that it is a misperception of teachers and staff that parents are universally concerned about the presentation of this topic. For many years in the US, courses such as Mythology<sup>7</sup> and, more recently (20 or so years), World Religions, have been

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<sup>5</sup> See Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life online (retrieved June 25, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Chapter Two for several examples of this problem.

offered as electives.<sup>8</sup> There has been little if any controversy over these topics and no negative effects as far as we know. There is no reason to suppose, then, that death education presented through a religious lens would cause either students or teachers problems. It has been pointed out, however, that while parents are not ideologically opposed to death education in general, they are interested in the specific content of classes (Jones and Hodges 1995). Still, there is much evidence in US culture to suggest that death education presented through a religious lens would even be welcomed, if approached correctly. The vacuum created in the human psyche (see Chapter Two, page 42) with regard to social, psychological and spiritual elements, may be filled by engaging in death education that helps people to make meaning of death as part of life. This is likely also to lead to changes in societal attitudes and approaches to death and dying. Today's teenager is tomorrow's adult, and tomorrow's adult will set the tone for all of society.

### **7.3 The conversation as it stands today**

The dialogue over all things concerning death is widespread and very interesting in its implications.<sup>9</sup> One example of this unofficial and disorganized dialogue took place this spring (2010) in the bi-weekly journal *Christian Century*. In April (6<sup>th</sup>), an article by the mortician Thomas Lynch appeared. Lynch's main point was that while cremation was growing as a popular option for the disposition of corpses, there was an unfortunate absence of ritual that Lynch finds necessary for a proper, spiritual and communal "send-off." Two months after this article appeared, the *Century* published a number of representative letters which they had received in reaction to Lynch's article (July 15, 2010)<sup>10</sup>. Most of these letters were highly critical

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<sup>7</sup> Council Rock High School in Newtown, PA offered one such in the mid-1970s and continues to do so currently.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Lakewood High School, Lakewood, Ohio, and Owosso High School, Owosso, MI, are just two public high schools offering mythology, and one will currently find high school World Religion courses in Modesto School District, Modesto CA, Laurel High School, Knoxville, TN, to name two.

<sup>9</sup> See *Resources* for scholars in this specific field, as well as some sociologists and psychologists. We also here refer to the popularity and preoccupation with death attested to by media coverage and discussed elsewhere in this thesis, at length.

<sup>10</sup> Individuals are not here identified, but all letters may be found in the Vol. 127, No. 12 issue of July 15, 2010.

of one or more points of Lynch's argument. The first letter says that "The time for ritual is at the time of death, before the body is whisked away..." Lynch, however, feels strongly that there should always be someone to accompany the body, wherever it goes. Several writers objected to Lynch's dismay that funerals so often take place without the body of the deceased, and one even described his own attempts to "honor the goodness of our bodies," whether-or-not the body of the deceased is present. His letter reads much like a defensive apologetic, and one wonders who he is trying to convince. Finally, there is one letter writer who says, "this notion of 'glorifying the corpse' seems to be just another way that our culture allows us to pretend that death is not real." While we agree in principle that society engages in death-avoidance tactics that see it as something a bit "unreal," this statement is colored by notions of dualism. The writer appears to be saying that the body is a mere corpse, to be done away with in whatever fashion is most convenient. It is the spirit to which one must attend.<sup>11</sup> We say that even if one lives on in spirit, this life is an embodied one throughout. Indeed, death is real, but so is life that includes death.

Still, there are those who do have healthy and realistic outlooks on life, as it includes death. On April 10<sup>th</sup> of 2010 the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) aired a documentary called, *When Families Grieve*. The program was aimed at children. Katie Couric hosted, accompanied by a number of Muppets from the cast of the children's series, *Sesame Street*. Several families were depicted as they discussed their feelings and coping strategies (or lack thereof). The father of one young family died and the mother was left to explain to her two young daughters of around ten years of age that their father would not return. While some of those interviewed said they couldn't tell their little ones about the loss, this young mother said, "I didn't want them to fill in the blanks. I wanted them to have the truth because death is part of life." She included the girls in the farewell rituals, which featured, among other things, the writing of letters to their father. They put the letters into the casket along with a couple of items the children had picked out, like a stuffed bear. The program

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<sup>11</sup> Morgan (1993, 3-8) identifies human "spirituality" as the place where we find meaning, and the will to be, i.e., freedom. We rather like this definition, but also realize it is but one amongst many. See Keith Ward (2000), Karen Armstrong (2009), and Robert Wuthnow (1998).

showed how others were eventually forced to tell their children the truth as the young ones kept asking questions.

It is not surprising that some people choose to avoid talking about death when they do not themselves know how to approach it. Much of the outlook on death in the US has taken on a technological bent. Moller's suggestion that technology has taken over all aspects of society to include dying and death is a defensible one. We would even go so far as to say that avoidance has blurred the line between the psychological and the scientific. The more technologically advanced society becomes, the less able it is to deal with death. On June 13, 2010, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* aired a story about DNA testing for the general population. For \$1,000.00 anyone can have their DNA tested. The purpose is to discover what illnesses one is predisposed to genetically. In this way, if for instance one discovers he is genetically more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease, he can then take steps to try to avoid it. This is a case of medicine and technology attempting to control the life cycle. We are not saying it is necessarily wrong, and we can certainly see why someone would want to know if they were likely to develop Alzheimer's, but we do think this could easily have negative consequences. It is absolutely understandable that one would like to live a long, healthy life. Life is a good thing, if sometimes sad and even brutal, but this testing might just degenerate into despair if one should discover Alzheimer's or some other serious predisposition or condition. This, and the violence that permeates media outlets, points to a need for intentional and well-considered discussion and reflection.

People need to create meaning in their lives. Harville, Stokes and Templer claim that ideas of impermanence, or existence, are most probably related to life meaning (2003-2004, 180). They also say that religious ideas have a profound effect on one's attitude toward death (2003-2004.). They conclude, along with Alexander and Alderstein (1958), "...that attitudes toward death may be influenced more by the certainty of religious beliefs than the content of religious beliefs" (Harville, Stokes and Templer 2003-2004, 169). A long life and a hereafter of some sort appear to be the two greatest desires.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The reader will recall how the students we surveyed so often named "afterlife" as a topic for inclusion in death education.

As for life, there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to live a long and healthy one. What is problematic is obsessing on staying alive at the expense of living. The idea of death has become so hard for people that much of society has developed nebulous ideas about spirituality and afterlife in order to avoid thinking reflectively on a deeper and real level of meaning. How do humans determine acceptable ideas and beliefs? If Harville and colleagues are correct, people tend to take on the attitudes of those with whom they associate (2003-2004, 182). They also say that the deaths of significant others do less to form these attitudes than do the ideas of other people. While this is certainly not always true, it does square with our own findings. So, we are left with the question of what ideas exactly are being transmitted between persons.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) runs an ad on television that offers life insurance (June 2010). A mature husband and wife are in their kitchen talking about a way to get some insurance and she says something to the effect of how she would like to leave enough money to cover the bills and expenses they might leave behind. It sounds as if they are going on a trip.

We would like to propose that this is exactly how people, to include youths, think of death. It is a trip, or a journey. Again, there is nothing implicitly wrong with this idea, but we believe it is important that people reflect on these things and don't just tacitly adopt them, with no thought to what life and death mean for them, especially since those from whom they get these ideas have not themselves thought them through. It is not surprising, perhaps, that our student surveys indicate a strong interest in notions of an afterlife.

There is clearly a need for a class on death and dying. Teachers and staff overwhelmingly support it, and a majority (67%) of our young respondents said they might have or would have benefitted from such a course. The concerns that arose around teen immaturity are suspect in light of the recent findings about the brain that says people are fully mature neither intellectually nor emotionally until reaching the mid-twenties. That our teachers and staff did not name immaturity of high school students as a possible problem in presenting the course suggests that our student respondents only imagined that while they were ready for death education, their peers were not. This is something of a curiosity, and it would be interesting to follow up on

the reason(s) for this disparity at a later date. For our purposes, however, it is not an issue. Not only did a large majority of our faculty/staff say yes to the course, more than half of them said it should be offered to *all* high school students.

We are convinced by the current nature of American society, the habits of the medical community, the many recent television programs (*CSI Miami, Body of Evidence, etc.*), the proliferation of popular books about vampires and the undead, and by the responses to our surveys, that the US is in need of death education courses in US public schools. Our purpose is unambiguous – people are in desperate need of meaning in their lives as well as some understanding of the interplay between life and death. Students want to know how to cope with death when it inevitably occurs. They want to know how they might overcome fear of death (23% - all females). They want to know to what ideas of afterlife the various religions and cultures adhere. A religious lens, or model, is therefore called for – one that will help students to reflect on the meaning of life that includes death, one in which they are encompassed both as individuals and as part of a community. The precaution here is that teachers must be well-trained in death and dying literature and information. They must be schooled in the ways of guidance that avoid leading students in any one direction.

Teacher/staff responses have served to solidify the certainty that death education is a must. While 30% of our faculty/staff responses named parental objection as a possible problem for providing death education to high school teens, the large majority also said the course *should* be provided. Therefore, as a precaution, we feel strongly that parents must be afforded opportunity to be part of the process from inception, through development, to implementation

#### **7. 4. 1 Recommendations for approaching parents, teachers/staff, and school boards**

This last statement, that parents must be part of the entire death education progression, is both precaution and recommendation. For even though student responses did not indicate a possible parental issue in this regard, it is not unusual in the US for a very small minority of vociferous people to prevent something from



happening, even when a large majority of the people are in favor of it.<sup>13</sup> This is both the good and the bad of the US democratic system. The possibility that there could be some objection only underscores the need to build a good case for death education and to recruit parents to take part.<sup>14</sup>

Since faculty are in favor of death education, it would be wise to enlist their aid with the parents. Once parents are okay with it, it will be easy to obtain school board approval, which would be the major hurdle otherwise. School boards are elected – by parents. And school boards are as confused about what parents want as are faculty and staff. By enlisting faculty to contact parents, unnecessary miscommunications with regard to the purpose of death education, or its possible complications may be circumvented.

In the area of complications, we are to some extent indebted to Robert Stevenson, whose years of offering death education to high school students reveals both the efficacy of the course and the fact that it does not cause students harm. In her interview with Stevenson, Eugenia Pfeiffer (2003) asked about the need for death education in the public schools. Stevenson points out that formal death education, as opposed to what life teaches through natural loss, helps to identify predictable and desirable outcomes. He says that school-based death education can help to alleviate parental fears and open the lines of communication between student and parent, as well as give young people coping skills in all areas of loss in life.<sup>15</sup> People fear what they don't know or understand, says Stevenson, and talking about one taboo (death) can help people talk about others as well. He also claims that death education prepares young people to be parents who are able to talk to their children about currently taboo, or difficult topics.

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<sup>13</sup> Refer to studies named herein of parents and educators in favor of death education. See Myers (2008), Blumenfeld (2008), Chiusano (1996), Corr and Balk (1996, re. Schlafly 1988), for some examples of the fringe minority who oppose death education.

<sup>14</sup> In their study of Irish parent and teacher attitudes toward death education, McGovern and Barry (2000) conclude that the necessity to include parents in the process of developing effective death education is of paramount importance. Of interest is that the authors also purport that, more recently, Irish understandings of how to cope with death have been changing. They describe a current situation that more closely resembles general western attitudes. They say, “The traditional home wakes are being replaced with a more clinical approach to death, allowing little participation for children in death rituals” (326).

<sup>15</sup> Here, Stevenson makes the claim that a lack of knowledge results in fear (Pfeiffer 2003, 90).

Stevenson found that beyond the other benefits of the class (ability to cope and communicate), students, some who were normally average, or below-average performers, tended to operate at a much higher level in his class – some at the college and post-graduate levels (Pfeiffer 2003, 98). He attributes this outcome to high interest and motivation. Despite some societal fringe fears that death education causes greater anxiety and even suicide (Phyllis Schafly, Eagle Forum (sic.)), Stevenson claims that of more than three thousand students who took his class in over twenty-five years, no suicide attempts were made after taking his course (Pfeiffer 2003, 105). In fact, he says that students petitioned to have death education class changed from 9 to 18 weeks. Suicide attempts, he says, went up when the school board began to cut back on the course, deeming it unnecessary (Pfeiffer 2003, 141). In some subsequent conversations with school board officials, Stevenson found that there are those who imagine that the topic (death) does not apply to everyone. Students, however, indicated to him that it was the most important class they ever took (Pfeiffer 2003, 143-144). It would no doubt be helpful to use Stevenson’s considerable success to calm any residual fears of all parties concerned with our enterprise.

#### **7. 4. 2 Recommendations regarding course subject matter**

One point that should be made quite clear to all concerned, particularly to parents, is that the elective we will offer will not in any way be an attempt to evangelize or proselytize their children. The course will look at death from a religious point-of-view, but while it will peer into rituals surrounding death and concepts of afterlife, there will be no question of worship in the classroom or any form of proselytization. To be well-rounded, it will also cover such topics as how one might speak to and comfort others in their grief, and contemporary ways of burial and memorial in the US, as well as physician-assisted suicide, etc. Each subject area will be imbued with obvious and/or subtle aspects that aid in meaning-making. All information will be geared toward the teenaged audience, with specific consideration for their youthful and as yet not-fully-mature emotions and mental capacities. We are inclined to recommend some experiential learning despite the fact that the teaching methods most named by the students were discussion and lecture. These will be used

as well, of course, but like many death educators, we believe hands-on learning is important.<sup>16</sup>

We also here mention a couple of precautions that arose in student surveys. The first is that instructors be very careful not to allow class discussions become therapy sessions. This will mean that there must be provisions to furnish counseling to those students in need of emotional guidance.

The second precaution will require that teachers be trained with care in every respect. They will need to avoid sharing too much of their own opinions, especially with regard to religious ideas. This was a concern of several of our students. It is an area that will not always be easy for teachers because while there are some students who prefer that the instructor act only as facilitator, there are also students who look to their teachers for guidance. It will be necessary to develop training that helps teachers to become self-reflective and that aids them in learning how to be sensitive to student needs. Instructors must themselves first become self-reflective if they are to help students become self-reflective.

## **7. 5 Death Education Syllabus:**

(One full term, fall or spring, *or* one full year, with the latter recommended. Some adjustments would be made to the following syllabus depending on the length of the term. It is assumed that further refinements would be necessary. Assignments might vary widely between schools and even classes within a school, depending upon the composition of the class receiving the instruction. The purpose of this thesis is to argue for death education in public high schools in the US, and it is not specifically a curriculum development thesis. The syllabus that follows is therefore by way of example only.)

Death and Life: finding meaning and purpose in living and dying  
Anytown, USA High School  
A. Thanatologist, Instructor  
Tuesday/Thursday 12:30-2:00

Course description: This course is dedicated to the search for answers to life's most obscure questions. What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of death? How does one cope with loss? How does one help others cope with loss? What happens to people when they die, and after they die? Is there an afterlife? While there are no definitive answers to these questions and others

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<sup>16</sup> Illene C. Noppe (March, 2004) notes that college courses that used both "experiential" and "didactic" learning techniques, had the effect of decreasing death anxiety. She cites Leming & Dickinson (2002).

like them, it may help us to discuss the questions aided by those who have reflected on these same questions before us. Therefore, we will look to the various religions of the world to tell us what they have learned. How do the world's religions answer these questions, and how do people in other cultures deal with death? What are their rituals like? What about euthanasia, physician assisted suicide, and abortion? When is it right, if ever, to "pull the plug"? The questions are unending, the answers myriad.

Of course, we do not claim to know the answers to all of these questions. For example, no one knows if there is such a thing as an afterlife. Even so, there is much to be learned by reflecting upon the many beliefs and ideas proposed by the various civilizations over thousands of years. This will give us a good starting-point for making meaning of our lives and which includes our deaths. Seeing how others have made meaning may well give us a useful foundation for finding our own way.

Required texts:

Ruffin, Ro Turner. Making Meaning in Life and Death: a secondary school text.  
(City: Company, YEAR). ISBN<sup>17</sup>

*and*

Albom, Mitch. Tuesdays with Morrie. New York: Doubleday, 1997.  
ISBN: 0-385-48451-8. (Also available in paperback.)

*or*

Wiesel, Elie. Night. New York: Bantam, 1960. ISBN: 0-553-27253-5.

Other readings as required by instructor.

Assignments:

**Participation:** As this course is highly dependent upon class participation, it is listed first. Our class discussions and reflections will be most important because it is true that we do not live, learn or exist in a vacuum. Learning from each other will help us in our search for our own life-meaning as well as serve as an aid to our ability to help others in their time of loss and grief. Because of the importance of participation, your standing in this area will comprise 20% of your final grade.

**Reflections:** Throughout the term (year) you will write reflections in which you will discuss life and death as it relates to our text, the story you choose to read ("Night" or "Tuesdays with Morrie"), class discussions, videos we watch, etc. You will write about your feelings and ideas as they specifically relate to the

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<sup>17</sup> This text is listed for purpose of example only, and does not exist as of this writing.

class to include all the above-mentioned as well as contemporary issues found in our society and our global community. You may reference ideas from TV/movies, news, music/songs, art, poetry, conversations with friends or family, personal experience, etc. Always indicate your source. *For example:* you are reading a magazine and there is a poem about death and/or life. What is the author's point? What symbolism is used? Is there a deeper meaning? What is the author saying about people, religion, society? How does this poem affect you emotionally? How does the poem relate to class discussion? You will be required to do one reflection every week. The last reflection you write will suggest some of the ideas you have embraced during the term and indicate ways in which you imagine your future of making meaning in life. See Course Schedule for due dates. These will comprise 20% of your final grade.

**Book review and reflection:** You will write an 8 to 10 page book review and reflection on Elie Wiesel's *Night* or Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. You will be provided with a link to online instructions for writing the review. With the review, you will reflect on the ideas and meanings the author is trying to convey in the narrative, as well as share your own insights. As you write, you will consider how the things you have been learning with the class are or are not mirrored in the text of the book you have chosen to read and review. The Book Review will make up 20% of your final grade. See Course Schedule for due date.

**Midterm:** The midterm will be in essay form. The instructor will provide the class with five topic choices, from which each of you will choose three to write about. 20% of your final grade will be determined by the midterm. See Course Schedule for test date.

**Final:** The final will also be in essay form and will make up 20% of your grade as well. See Course Schedule for test date.

**Field trips:** The class will take trips as time and opportunity allow. Trips we may take will include such places as graveyards, funeral homes, and hospice homes as well as hospitals. If such a sad event should arise, we may also attend a local funeral where religious rites are being observed. Students will be required to obtain parental permission for these outings.

**Extra credit:** Should events arise that are clearly related to the class topic, extra credit may be earned. For example, if the President of the United States were to be assassinated, or a terrorist attack take place in our city, the entire class may earn extra credit in various ways.

Course Schedule: (partial)

6 Sept.	Tues.		First day of class. Syllabus. Preliminary discussion – “How I see life and death. What death means to me.”
8 Sept.	Thurs.	Read	Ruffin – Introduction What issues surrounding death and Afterlife do the world’s religions try to answer, and how do they go about It? Discussion. Sign-up for book review choice.
13 Sept.	Tues.	Read  Read	Ruffin, Chap. 1, pp. 2-20, Islam Article, Islam and death rituals in The United States today. Discussion.
15 Sept.	Thurs.	Read  Guest speaker Prepare	Ruffin, Chap. 1, pp. 21- 45, Islam Imam, Al Salaam Mosque Come with two questions for speaker
20 Sept.	Tues.	Read  Read	Ruffin, Chap. 2, pp. 47- 63, Judaism Ruffin, Chap. 10, pp. 446- 455, burial vs. cremation. Discussion of ethical pros and cons.
22 Sept.	Thurs.	Read  Field trip	Ruffin, Chap. 2, pp. 64- 83, Judaism, ritual and remembrance. Temple Beth Shalom
27 Sept.	Tues.	Read  Video	Ruffin, Chap. 12, pp. 523- 531, Pulling the plug (when is a person dead?) Documentary, persistent vegetative state, brain- dead, and saying goodbye

29 Sept.	Thurs.	Read	Ruffin, Chap. 3, pp. 85-100, ancient Christianity and funeral rites
		View in class	Online video, contemporary Christian death rites, from Memorial to formal funerals and cremation. Discussion.
4 Oct.	Tues.	Read	Ruffin, Chap. 3, pp. 101-125, Christianity, afterlife and Eschatology. Discussion. In-class journal entry.

## 7. 6 Recommendations for further research

We think that it would be wise to consider here the fact that Robert Stevenson's death education course at a New Jersey high school, while highly successful, did not spawn copycat courses all across the country. It may be that a greater rise in suicide at the same high school will be the only outcome that will convince naysayers that there is a great need for the class. However, we are unwilling to assume this for several reasons. First, it is really just speculation. Second, as we have pointed out a number of times, the evidence does not conclusively show a causal relationship between death education and suicide. Finally, as we do not believe that suicides rise with death education, we are intent upon clinging to our purpose of helping young people make meaning for their lives as this is the real need. As Corr and Balk (1996, 41) put it, "Rarely...is it recognized that creating a meaning for death within the context of life may be the crucial achievement of adolescent development." What then is the reason Stevenson's work has not been broadly imitated? This is an area for careful research.

Another unanswered question that could easily have an effect on how death education is received revolves around the way teenagers see themselves and others. That is, why do our teens think they could have benefitted from death education, but feel that other teens may be too immature? It seems most likely to us that they simply do not see how illogical this assumption is. Still, the proper field for research along these lines could be in psychology or sociology, or specifically in thanatology.

Also, we know that our student respondents are interested in religious and afterlife ideas, but very few of them mentioned religious media as appropriate tools for the classroom. Future research questions might include those that discover how students define religion in general and how they understand religious issues.<sup>18</sup> It might also be helpful to know if females find fiction in the forms of video and books more useful for learning about death than do males. We would be especially interested to learn if females are actually more concerned about afterlife ideas than are males.

Follow-up research should also delve into finding out what students mean by “upsetting” and “depressing” ideas, when they say these should be avoided in death education. Surely what is depressing or upsetting to one person may not be so for another. While one student may find the topic of abortion highly upsetting, other students may not be bothered by the subject in the least. A number of students said that details of what happens to the body at the time of death should be avoided. Conversely, some students were very interested in these same details. It seems therefore important to question respondents in order to define upsetting and depressing.

Divorce and other losses, also sometimes called “exit events,” have been found by some studies to be common to youths with emotional disorders.<sup>19</sup> Our survey results may obliquely point to a correlation between the idea that an elective should be offered high school students and the condition of divorce. Four of eleven students from homes where divorce had occurred gave an unqualified yes to the idea that death education should be available to high school students, while eleven of the twenty-two students from intact parental marriages gave the same unqualified yes. This means that fully half of the students from intact homes think it is a good idea, whereas only 27.5% of the students from homes of divorce agree. It may be noteworthy that just four of the students of divorced parents said the course should be offered since five of the same group said it should not. Four of the latter group gave this answer because they feel that high school students are not mature enough for

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting point made by Harville, Stokes and Templer (2003-04, 181) is that some studies point to certainty of religious beliefs as being more important than what particular belief(s) one holds.

<sup>19</sup>For one (or two) Servaty and Hayslip (2001, 312) make this claim.



death education. This represents 36.4% of all students from homes of divorce. Conversely, just 18.2% of students from homes where parents remain married agreed with this assessment. (See tables 7.1 and 7.2, below)

So, while we cannot claim statistical significance regarding the idea that children of divorce have suffered trauma, and wish to avoid what they think will be further trauma, the fact that they named lack of maturity as the reason high school students should not take death education is suggestive in the extreme. As this idea relates to serious loss and the need for death education, we wish to reiterate that in-depth questioning is in order.

Table 7.1 – Yes, High School Students Should be Offered Death Education and Parental Marital Status Cross Tabulation

		Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
To help people cope	Count	7	0	2	1
	% within parents' marital status	31.8%	0.0%	18.2%	50%
Death comes to all	Count	2	0	1	0
	% within parents' marital status	9.1%	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%
Interesting	Count	1	0	1	0
	% within parents' marital status	4.5%	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%
Emotions are uneven in HS	Count	1	0	0	0
	% within parents' marital status	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 7. 2 – No, High School Students Should Not be Offered Death Education and Parental Marital Status Cross Tabulation

		Married	Separated	Divorced	Widowed
High school students not mature enough	Count	4	1	4	0
	% within parents' marital status	18.2%	100.0%	36.4%	50%
Not mentally prepared	Count	2	0	1	0
	% within parents' marital status	9.1%	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%
Parents may object	Count	0	0	0	1
	% within parents' marital status	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
Topic too serious -a burden	Count	1	0	0	0
	% within parents' marital status	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Yet another interesting point for further research surrounds the whole so-called parental disapproval issue. An awful lot of assumption attends this matter, but very little research may be found to back the claim. It could prove very helpful if someone were to do the research. Perhaps then the question could finally be placed in perspective.

We think it would be interesting, and possibly very instructive, to find out if there is any correlation between personal loss and whether death education should be offered in public high schools. Cross referencing of the survey information regarding these two questions is not conclusive. Asking respondents for their feelings about this connection would carry some issues of its own as self-reporting is rarely, if ever, strictly objective, but we still feel much could be learned via these questions.

There is much more research to be done surrounding the issues of death education, but this does not diminish the need to get started. A lot of work has already been done in this field and we think it is time to do something about the obvious need. We believe that US children, and US society, will benefit from death education in terms of coping strategies and meaning-making for all of life. The research can, and should, continue...hopefully in a more organized fashion that will unify the researchers and answer a lot of the remaining questions. Yet, even though there is more work to be done, we believe it is imperative to begin to fill the void felt by US teens.

Science has clearly established that children, to include adolescents, are not yet mentally fully-formed individuals. Hulbert (1998) indicates that education is about the social, cultural, moral, spiritual, mental and physical progression of students. She says that "Death education can make a positive contribution to all these aspects of the developing child" (1998, 84). Obviously, we are inclined to agree. In fact, we continue to maintain that death education is highly important to all people as an aid in making meaning in life as it includes death. Such education is essential to society if it is to raise-up healthy individuals who then become useful and upright citizens. These are the citizens who will themselves become parents whose attitudes will then be passed along to their children. A healthy social attitude, imbued with deeper understanding of life's meaning, will, we propose, lead to a more healthy society.

Studies... conclude that unresolved grief has a lasting and negative impact on mental health. On this basis it seems reasonable for schools to teach about loss and death not only as a form of preventative medicine but also to encourage future citizens who have a healthy view of life and living.

–Hulbert 1998, 85

We are not suggesting that death education alone is necessary for the creation of good and healthy citizens, but we do believe it is a crucial component of what is required to effect success in this endeavor.

In our view, the best way to realize this outcome is via death education presented through a religious lens. Hulbert makes the point that death education presented through a religious model in all its color and variety of ritual and spirituality will “enrich peoples’ lives and also meet their psychological needs, [and] schools may help all their pupils appreciate values inherent in minority cultures” (1998, 86). This, she intones, may help students grow spiritually and aid them in forming their own philosophy of life (1998, 85). Hulbert sees the religious model as providing an all-inclusive starting-point for examining concerns of all peoples. As we do not know of a single society that is completely bereft of religion in some form or fashion, we are prone to agree.

### **7.7 Final reflections and remarks**

We are satisfied that young people will derive great benefit from taking death education, and that the best method of presenting this education is through a religious lens. The result of our student survey indicates tremendous interest in subjects of afterlife and religion, and we believe that this, coupled with prior research, as well as everyday anecdotal information, gives strong indication that any attempts to exclude religion from death and dying discussions is futile. Furthermore, we are persuaded along with Hulbert (1998) that there is an excellent case for the need to provide a point of departure that will allow students to build a life of meaning. The religious model is just such a point of departure. It is a model that provides a complete template for meaning-building: tenets, rites and supportive community. It is a model that illustrates a design for life and includes both individual and communal meaning.

This model will lend itself nicely to providing an organized framework upon which the students might build their own meaning. We wish to reiterate one more

time that we are not insisting that students find religious meaning, only that the religious model demonstrates how to build a life of meaning. As Hulbert has pointed out, the religious model is one that will aid the teacher in helping the student to reflect upon loss, change, death and bereavement (1998). Within this reflection is a deep self-reflection – one that will help students come to terms with their mortality and make meaning for all of life and death – if provided a safe place and enough time and guidance to shape it.

A large preponderance of the literature points to the need for death education in public schools.<sup>20</sup> While there is some disagreement about how this topic should be presented, there is general agreement that it should indeed be presented. Public schools are regarded as the ideal place to offer death education for a number of reasons. Pfeiffer (2003) delineates several: 1. Children spend a lot of time at school, 2. Schools have the necessary resources, and 3. Teachers have the luxury of objectivity. We would add that teachers do, or should, have knowledge and understanding of developmental psychology, and are therefore in a good position to address the topic in an appropriate manner.

Even though a lot of death educators recommend integrating the topic as much as is possible into the entire curriculum, we would recommend that at least for pre-teens and teenagers, there be developed a separate course that allows the students to focus their attention more directly on the topic and aids the instructor to offer intentional and deeply reflective guidance. We concede Pfeiffer's point (2003) that death permeates all of life, but we do not concur with her that spreading the information across the entire curriculum is the best way to manage the subject. We repeat, if this were so then it would also be logical to present psychology, science, physical education, art, and even mathematics in an integrated manner. Homides and Achmed (1987, 35) assert that death education can no more be taught in a single course than can life preparation, but we take exception to this argument because the answer to the argument is contained within itself. That is, they give no basis for the argument; who has proved that life preparation cannot be taught in one course? This is a logical fallacy. The implication is that life is just too big, and death is just too big,

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<sup>20</sup> Ariès (1981), Warren (1988), Corr, Nabe and Corr (2003), Schowalter and Cole (1987), Breen and O'Connor (2007) Morgan, E. (1994), Morgan, J. (1998) Corless (2005).

for either topic to be addressed in one course. We say, first, that death and life are not separable, as their statement assumes, as death happens to everyone's life, and second, that everything is dependent upon the course itself, and all the many issues that go into preparing it. These are the concerns that we have been discussing throughout this thesis.

Yet another point of general agreement among death educators and researchers is that death education has what critics would consider the counter-intuitive effect of enriching life.<sup>21</sup> A number of reasons for this phenomenon are mentioned. One is that people need to learn to appreciate life before death comes. Another reason stated is that death sometimes comes suddenly to loved ones and people need to be aware that each time they say "goodbye" may be the last (Morgan 1998). These are fine reasons as far as they go, but we would like to add that for all of life to take on meaning, death must be understood as part of it. It becomes clear that people are full of unanswered questions. This state-of-being can produce fear and anxiety<sup>22</sup>.

We are not claiming to be able to answer all of the questions that surround death and dying. There is admittedly much mystery that remains. What we are saying, however, is that with guidance students may come to create their own meaning of life (that includes death) and learn to live with purpose the whole of their being, or existence. We are convinced that the place for this reflection is in the safety of the school, where the teachers will be trained and prepared to guide students through the many issues that surround "existence," and where, amongst their peers, young people may come to a point of reflection that is deep, or shallow per their own choice, where meaning is all their own, yet connected to the world around them, and where they may come to an understanding of life/death that may or may not change over the years, but will most certainly give them the confidence to go forward, to move out into the world, where they may begin to test their awareness.

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<sup>21</sup> Corr, Nabe and Corr (2003), Morgan, E. (1994), Howard-Hamilton (1994), Morgan, J. (1993), Stefan (1978), Balk (2009), Kastenbaum (1998), Corr and Balk (1996).

<sup>22</sup> Dunning (2006), for one, agrees.

## APPENDIX A – STUDENT SURVEY

This survey addresses the efficacy of death & dying curricula at the secondary and tertiary educational levels. This is an anonymous survey so do not use your name. All answers should be as detailed and specific as possible. Use the back of the survey, or attach another sheet, if you run out of space. Your thoughts and recommendations are valued. Thank you.

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

4. A) Only Child? \_\_\_\_\_ B) #Brother: \_\_\_\_ C) #Sister \_\_\_\_ D) #Half/Step Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Parental Status (divorced, widowed, married, remarried)

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6. A) Death of immediate family (who?): \_\_\_\_\_

B) Cause of death (specific): \_\_\_\_\_

C) Their age @ death: \_\_\_\_\_ . D) Your age @ their death: \_\_\_\_\_ ?

7. A) Death of a friend (who & gender?): \_\_\_\_\_

B) Cause of death (specific): \_\_\_\_\_

C) Their age @ death: \_\_\_\_\_ D) Your age @ their death: \_\_\_\_\_

8. A) Deaths that affected you (who & gender?): \_\_\_\_\_

B) Cause of death (specific): \_\_\_\_\_

C) Their age @ death: \_\_\_\_\_ D) Your age @ their death: \_\_\_\_\_

D) Why this death affected you: \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Have you had a near-death experience or premonition? (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

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10. What formal courses/instruction have you taken that touched on the subject of death & dying? (be specific): \_\_\_\_\_

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11. If you have never had the opportunity to take such a course, do you think you could have benefited from one? (why, why not?): \_\_\_\_\_

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12. What topics would interest you regarding death & dying? (be specific): \_\_\_\_\_

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13. What concepts/topics should be presented in such a class? (why): \_\_\_\_\_

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14. What concepts/topics should be avoided in such a class? (why): \_\_\_\_\_

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15. What is the best method to present this material? \_\_\_\_\_

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16. What books/videos would be helpful for this course? \_\_\_\_\_

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17. Could such a class be presented in high school? (why/why not?) \_\_\_\_\_

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18. For a high school level class, what material should be added or deleted from the college level class?: \_\_\_\_\_

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## APPENDIX B – FACULTY SURVEY

### Personal information section

1. You gender: Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Your race: Black \_\_\_\_\_ Latino \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_ White \_\_\_\_\_ Native American \_\_\_\_\_
4. The highest educational degree you have completed: H.S. \_\_\_\_\_ Associate \_\_\_\_\_  
Bachelor \_\_\_\_\_ Master \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_ Post Graduate \_\_\_\_\_
5. Your highest degree type: Education \_\_\_\_\_ Humanities \_\_\_\_\_ Sciences \_\_\_\_\_ Health/PE \_\_\_\_\_  
Business \_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Your current job title: Principal/Vice Principal \_\_\_\_\_ Humanities teacher \_\_\_\_\_  
Sciences teacher \_\_\_\_\_ Health/PE teacher \_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
7. Years at your current position: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Total number of years with public schools: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Years with private schools: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Current grade(s) you teach: (9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> ?) \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions 11 through 19 have to do with your personal experience with death and dying (d&d).

11. You experienced your first *personal loss to death*: Never \_\_\_\_\_ Age at 1<sup>st</sup> loss \_\_\_\_\_
12. Relationship of the above (Question 11) loved one: Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_  
Grandparent \_\_\_\_\_ Sibling \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse \_\_\_\_\_ Other relative \_\_\_\_\_ Colleague \_\_\_\_\_  
Friend \_\_\_\_\_
13. The cause of the death of the above (Question 11) person: Old age \_\_\_\_\_ Disease \_\_\_\_\_  
Violent crime \_\_\_\_\_ Suicide \_\_\_\_\_ Accident \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_
14. You experienced your first *difficult loss to death*: Never \_\_\_\_\_ Age at 1<sup>st</sup> difficult loss \_\_\_\_\_
15. Relationship of the above (Question 14) loved one: Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_  
Grandparent \_\_\_\_\_ Sibling \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse \_\_\_\_\_ Other relative \_\_\_\_\_ Colleague \_\_\_\_\_  
Friend \_\_\_\_\_
16. The cause of the death of the above (Question 14) person: Old age \_\_\_\_\_ Disease \_\_\_\_\_  
Violent crime \_\_\_\_\_ Suicide \_\_\_\_\_ Accident \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_
17. **Personal death scare** (you almost dies): Not applicable (N/A) \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
The cause of this scare: Disease/illness \_\_\_\_\_ Violent crime \_\_\_\_\_  
Personal behavior \_\_\_\_\_ Accident \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
18. You were in a coma: N/A \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If “Yes” number of years and/or months in coma: Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months \_\_\_\_\_
19. You died clinically and were revived: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If “Yes” did you have a post-death experience? (Out-of-body, saw a light, etc.)  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**-SURVEY CONTINUED ON REVERSE-**



**Questions 20 through 23 ask whether or not you have undergone death education, and for what purpose.**

20. Received death & dying (d&d) education: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

21. If you answered “Yes” to question 20, what was the purpose of the education?

Death and dying counseling \_\_\_\_\_ To teach a course or unit in d&d \_\_\_\_\_

22. If the education you received was for the purpose of teaching d&d, for which of the following applications was it?

A unit within a discipline (like health or psychology) \_\_\_\_\_

Death and dying as an elective course \_\_\_\_\_

23. Your actual teach experience of d&d includes?

N/A \_\_\_\_\_

Term elective \_\_\_\_\_

Unit within yours or some other discipline \_\_\_\_\_

**This last section is concerned with your personal opinions. Remember that the purpose of this study is NOT about teaching religion. Therefore, the ideal of church/state separation should have no bearing on your answers. We wish to know whether-or-not it is feasible to present a course in death and dying in public high schools as an elective.**

24. It is not appropriate under any circumstances. \_\_\_\_\_

25. Only appropriate for upper classmen (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, specifically). \_\_\_\_\_

26. Such a course should be offered as an elective to all high school students. \_\_\_\_\_

27. Please read the following possible reasons for not providing a d&d elective in high schools, and check all that you feel apply.

High school students are **too immature** to handle discussion about death and dying in a classroom forum. \_\_\_\_\_

The topic is **too difficult** for high school students. \_\_\_\_\_

The topic is **too depressing** for high school students. \_\_\_\_\_

It is **not possible to give teenagers the tools to cope** with such experiences before they have an actual loss. \_\_\_\_\_

Teenagers **don't suffer grief** in the same way as adults. \_\_\_\_\_

Teenagers **aren't prepared to reflect** upon life's meaning. \_\_\_\_\_

Parents of high school students **will object** to the offering of such a course. \_\_\_\_\_

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**If you would like to know the results of this survey, or have questions, you may reach me by email, and I will gladly send the results to you and/or answer any questions you may have.**

***Thank you for participating in this survey! Ro Ruffin, ruffin@xxxxx.xxx***

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