
INTRODUCTION: DEATH IS NEVER SPOKEN OF HERE

BY RACHELLE M. SMITH

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, those of us fortunate enough to live in the United States and other developed nations enjoy the blessings of modern civilization. Thanks to science, technology, and good government, we live in communities that are relatively peaceful and prosperous. Modern life provides us with abundant food, good shelter from the elements, and health care that has extended our life expectancy well past that of our ancestors—or even our grandparents. It’s no wonder then that death today has become something of a mystery for us, despite the fact that we will all eventually die.

Part of the mystery surrounding death is due to the fact that we, unlike previous generations, seldom witness it. In England in the 1600s, two-thirds of all children died before the age of four. Can you imagine what it must have been like to have two out of three of your brothers and sisters die in childhood? As recently as the 1950s in America, tens of thousands of children died from polio before Jonas Salk’s vaccine virtually eradicated it. Today, relatively few children in the United States die from disease or malnutrition. Modern life has extended the lives of adults as well. Before modern times, if you were lucky enough to survive childhood, your average life expectancy was somewhere between twenty-five and forty, depending on your social class and gender. Many women, until the advent of modern medicine in the twentieth century, died in childbirth. Currently, the average American can expect to live to be seventy-eight. Up until very recent times, death for our ancestors was a

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common, everyday occurrence. Today, death is the domain of the very old or the very unfortunate.

The relative rarity of death in our lives today may explain our seemingly contradictory response to it. While popular culture is filled with an abundance of the fictional undead—vampires, werewolves, zombies, you name it—realistic depictions of actual death and dying are few and far between. Many of the most popular books, movies, and TV series of recent times feature the undead, such as HBO's *True Blood* series, AMC's *The Walking Dead*, or the hugely successful *Twilight* franchise. Actual death, however, has become a kind of cultural taboo. Individuals generally no longer die at home cared for by friends and family, but instead die in institutional surroundings, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices. Very few films or TV series portray death as a normal, natural part of life. When real death is addressed, it is exceptional, dramatic, and often in the service of a social issue, such as cancer or AIDS, as in the films *The Bucket List* (2007), *Philadelphia* (1993), and *Wit* (2001). While the average American watches multiple fictional deaths each week through multi-media outlets—streaming video, DVD rentals, TV broadcasts, etc.—few people under thirty in this country have ever witnessed the actual death of another.

Some people may argue that our ignorance of death is a good thing—why not take advantage of modern life and continue to protect ourselves from the gruesome and painful reality of death? Yet death is a natural part of life, as natural as birth, which today is the occasion for celebration by family and friends, although it used to be as shrouded in mystery as death is today. In the past, it was considered impolite to refer to a woman as pregnant. People instead used a variety of euphemisms, such as “expecting,” or “being in the family way,” or the popular “with child.” Nor was giving birth the public event it is today. In the past, women gave birth at home with a doctor or midwife in attendance. After WWI, it became common for women to give birth in the hospital, with friends and family—even fathers—prohibited from any participation in the process of birth itself. Today, most hospitals have separate facilities for labor and delivery in order to achieve a more welcoming, home-like atmosphere, with some women actually choosing to give birth at home. Giving birth is no longer seen as a kind of sickness, but instead as a natural, joyful process. Labor and delivery rooms look more like hotel suites, with space for children, parents, grandparents, and friends to witness the birth.

If our society can overcome the fear and shame that was once associated with giving birth, and instead transform it into a happy celebration, surely we can also come to a better understanding of death. As the readings here illustrate, acceptance of death as a normal part of life confers real emotional, financial, and social benefits.

Given our unease with death, this book includes a collection of works designed to demystify the topic for readers, especially the question of what happens to us when we die. Physician and scholar Elisabeth Kübler-Ross discusses our modern fears about death in a chapter from her influential book, *On Death and Dying*. Biologist Lewis Thomas provides a reassuring explanation of the merciful qualities of dying naturally in his essay “On Natural Death,” while Constance Jones describes what actually happens to our consciousness as we die in her essay “The Dying Brain and Near-Death Experience.” Mary Roach provides a graphic depiction of the natural process of decay in the excerpt from her book, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, and is contrasted with Jessica Mitford’s critique of the funeral industry in the excerpt from her book *The American Way of Death, Revisited*.

This collection also includes works by some of America’s greatest writers on the experiences of loss, grief, and death, such as Audre Lorde’s speech about her fight with cancer and the medical establishment titled “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” Also included is E. B. White’s wonderful essay on mortality in “Once More to the Lake.” Essays by Virginia Woolf and Annie Dillard, both on the subject of the death of a moth, use the lyrical gifts of the poet to evoke the themes of death and feminist liberation, while Mitch Albom provides readers with a moving portrait of his dying professor in an excerpt from *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

Other works included help extend the critical discussion of death, such as Jenna Wortham’s article “As Facebook Users Die, Ghosts Reach Out” on death and social media, or Claire Lambrecht’s interview of Ruth Davis Konigsberg, who pointedly critiques Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work. Perhaps most controversial is Helen Prejean’s real-life account of an execution, in an excerpt from her famous book *Dead Man Walking*.

To begin our discussion of society’s peculiar attitude toward death, consider the following song lyrics by Ralph Stanley, Blue Öyster Cult, and Jars of Clay. Song lyrics, along with the music, images, and voice of the artist, create

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meaning for songs. Popular culture is a rich mine of attitudes and beliefs about many themes—death being only one. The lyrics of each song below make a statement about the topic. What do you think they say about death?

“O DEATH”

BY RALPH STANLEY

O, Death
O, Death
Won't you spare me over till another year
Well what is this that I can't see
With ice cold hands takin' hold of me
Well I am death, none can excel
I'll open the door to heaven or hell
Whoa, death someone would pray
Could you wait to call me another day
The children prayed, the preacher preached
Time and mercy is out of your reach
I'll fix your feet till you can't walk
I'll lock your jaw till you can't talk
I'll close your eyes so you can't see
This very air, come and go with me
I'm death I come to take the soul
Leave the body and leave it cold
To draw up the flesh off of the frame
Dirt and worm both have a claim
O, Death
O, Death
Won't you spare me over till another year
My mother came to my bed
Placed a cold towel upon my head
My head is warm my feet are cold
Death is a-movin' upon my soul
Oh, death how you're treatin' me
You've closed my eyes so I can't see
Well you're hurtin' my body
You make me cold

You run my life right outta my soul
Oh death please consider my age
Please don't take me at this stage
My wealth is all at your command
If you will move your icy hand
Oh the young, the rich or poor
Hunger like me you know
No wealth, no ruin, no silver no gold
Nothing satisfies me but your soul
O, death
O, death
Won't you spare me over till another year
Won't you spare me over till another year
Won't you spare me over till another year

“(DON'T FEAR) THE REAPER”
BY BLUE ÖYSTER CULT

All our times have come
Here but now they're gone
Seasons don't fear the reaper
Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain
We can be like they are

Come on baby, don't fear the reaper
Baby take my hand, don't fear the reaper
We'll be able to fly, don't fear the reaper
Baby I'm your man

La la la la la
La la la la la

Valentine is done
Here but now they're gone
Romeo and Juliet
Are together in eternity
Romeo and Juliet

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40,000 men and women every day
Like Romeo and Juliet
40,000 men and women every day
Redefine happiness
Another 40,000 coming every day
We can be like they are

Come on baby, don't fear the reaper
Baby take my hand, don't fear the reaper
We'll be able to fly, don't fear the reaper
Baby I'm your man

La la la la la
La la la la la

Love of two is one
Here but now they're gone
Came the last night of sadness
And it was clear she couldn't go on
Then the door was open and the wind appeared
The candles blew then disappeared
The curtains flew then he appeared, saying don't be afraid

Come on baby . . . and she had no fear
And she ran to him, then they started to fly
They looked backward and said goodbye
She had become like they are
She had taken his hand, she had become like they are
Come on baby . . . don't fear the reaper

“ALL MY TEARS”

BY JARS OF CLAY

When I go don't cry for me in my Father's arms I'll be
The wounds this world left on my soul will all be healed and I'll be whole.

Sun and moon will be replaced with the light of Jesus' face
And I will not be ashamed, for my Savior knows my name

It don't matter where you bury me, I'll be home and I'll be free
It don't matter where I lay, all my tears be washed away.

Gold and silver blind the eye, temporary riches lie
Come and eat from heaven's store, come and drink and thirst no more

It don't matter where you bury me, I'll be home and I'll be free
It don't matter where I lay, all my tears be washed away

So weep not for me my friends, when my time below does end
For my life belongs to Him, who will raise the dead again.

It don't matter where you bury me, 'cause I'll be home and I'll be free.
It don't matter where I lay, all my tears be washed away.

Ooh, it don't matter . . . Ooh, it don't matter.



Choose one of the songs listed above. Using Google, Bing, or another search engine, find an audio or video performance of the song on a Web site, such as YouTube. Does the artist's performance change your interpretation of the song's lyrics? If so, how did it change? If not, why not, in your opinion?



Working together in groups, compare the lyrics in these three songs. Identify the main speaker or speakers in each song. What do you think is the speaker's attitude toward death? Underline specific passages in each song to support your analysis. Are these attitudes alike? Are they different? Explain.

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