

## Death on a Smaller but Equal Scale

How a Group of Young Americans Engaged with Death Studies,  
in Theory and in Practice

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### Abstract

In 2007, I “retired” from teaching in New Zealand and moved back to the United States. Within a year, I found myself back in the classroom again, this time teaching a course entitled “Perspectives on Death and Dying” at the local community college. This article begins with an exploration of some of my own grief that I brought to the new task, and my challenges to engage an unfamiliar culture (Mexican Americans making up about 80% of the students in the class). It then surveys the topics the students chose to write about in their final summative essays over the three semesters that I have taught this course so far, as a glimpse into what troubles tertiary-age American college students about dying, grief, and death. The paper concludes with a description of how remaining aware of my own personal grief, processes, and the grief of others, outside of, but simultaneously with, the classroom experience better equipped me to teach the course and to be more sensitive to the encompassing grief that these socially marginalised students bring with them into the academic setting.

**Keywords:** death, dying, grief, teaching, tertiary students, Hispanic

In January of 2008, I opted for early retirement after 15 years of teaching in Auckland and I moved back to the United States, where I was born, for a variety of personal reasons, including my mother’s failing health. However, it wasn’t long before I was seeking somewhere to make some money by teaching.

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The Coachella Valley, where I presently live, a two-hour drive east of Los Angeles, is unlike any environment I'd experienced before. It is as beautiful as Auckland, though in an opposite way, in that it is a desert. Our average annual rainfall is 3 inches, or 7.6 centimetres, about as long as my index finger. In winter temperatures bottom out at about 35 Fahrenheit (2°C), and in summer they reach 120 Fahrenheit (49°C).

The valley is only a three-hour drive from Mexico, and we therefore have a large Hispanic immigrant population. The two primary sources of income in the valley are tourism and retirees, both of which depend on the cheap labour of immigrants for services. In some parts of the valley, one hears more Spanish spoken than English, and the majority of Mexican migrants have no family history of education beyond high school.

Late in 2008, I was hired as an adjunct in the Philosophy Department of the College of the Desert (CoD), and was assigned to teach a one-semester course entitled "Perspectives on Death and Dying." The College of the Desert is what in America is called a "public community college," that is, it offers only two-year associate degrees, designed to equip students to go on to complete their four-year degree at one of the several California universities that have branch campuses in the valley. The present enrolment at the college is about 13,000 students. Eighty-five percent of the students are from the first generation ever in their families to seek tertiary education; 70% are employed 20 to 30 hours per week in order to pay their own way through school; and the majority of the students come from a Hispanic background, many of them the first-born generation in the US.

From mid-January to mid-May 2009, I taught "Perspectives on Death and Dying" within the Philosophy Department. There are several sections of the course, each taught by a different faculty member, yet with identical learning goals and assessment expectations. The dean of Social Sciences chose the textbook—*The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, by deSpelder and Strickland (2009). As I write, I have now completed four semesters of teaching the same 14-week course, three hours per week, and am under contract to continue to teach it for an indefinite period.

### **The paucity of supporting literature**

Students at College of the Desert come largely from homes where no one prior to them has had a tertiary education, or where English is rarely spoken, thereby leaving them at a distinct disadvantage as they compete for limited resources to prove their merit. There are no university-level libraries in the valley, and students at CoD are generally

accustomed to doing research via the Internet, with a heavy reliance on non-academic resources such as Wikipedia, but without easy access to the more rigorous academic-level databases. This also made it difficult for me to locate resources that would “teach me to teach” a field slightly off-centre from my primary training in theology and psychology.

Death education as a field is relatively young: the first formal course in death education at an American university was offered in 1963, and the first qualitative studies of the process of dying among patients, hospital staff, and family members were published in 1965 as *Awareness of Dying*, by Glaser and Strauss, calling for more death education for nurses (deSpelder & Strickland, 2009, pp. 27–28). In 1969, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*, and the influence of her theories is still felt widely in the field. From the 1970s onward, a series of academic journals in Death Studies began regular publication, including *Death Studies*; *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying*; *Loss, Grief, & Care*; *Issues in the Study of Aging, Dying, and Death*; *Mortality*, and *The Journal of Palliative Care*.

The teaching of Death Studies thus began with medical and nursing school courses in the 1970s. The literature of the time was oriented toward teaching those who aspired to a career in medicine and medical services, rather than informing an undergraduate course in liberal arts (see, for example, Mount, Jones, and Patterson, 1974). As Kübler-Ross’s work became better known in the 1980s, and as liberal arts in America began to expand its offerings to attract a broader range of students, courses addressing various aspects of Death Studies and aimed at a general undergraduate population became more frequent, and can now be found within the Arts curriculum at many universities and colleges internationally.

Surprisingly little academic research has addressed the thorny issues of teaching Death Studies outside of medical schools and counsellor education programmes. In a dedicated search, I was able to locate fewer than 30 such articles that would assist me in designing a curriculum that would meet the needs of community college students without strong backgrounds in academia. The sparse literature still proved helpful. Hull (1991) reminded me that my classroom would include many students with little experience of death and dying, yet some others who carried a traumatic experience. Indeed, in each of the past three semesters, I have had at least two young students per class who had been the first to discover the body of a father or uncle who had suicided. As well, I was cautioned to anticipate unexpected emotions in the class, underlining the importance of building a climate of trust and safety (Lillyman, Gutteridge, &

Berridge, 2010), in order to help the students to feel supported as they explored their own thoughts about human existence and faced their own finitude, and the finitude of those they loved (Pinho & Barbosa, 2010).

Students took the course for professional (pre-nursing), individual (curiosity and personal development), and academic (general credits in Arts) reasons; it thus appealed to the same student populations noted by Wass in 2004 and Watts in 2007. Some students needed to begin thinking about death and dying by exploring the “small deaths” in their lives, such as lost pets, disappointments, broken relationships, parental divorce, disappointing grades, failure of career aspirations, or financial difficulties (cf. Carson, 1984; Viorst, 1986). Indeed, at times I underestimated the amount of loss and disappointment students carried with them, forgetting that even though the vast majority were 18 to 24 years old, most worked 20 to 30 hours per week, carried as heavy an academic load as they could manage, and had ongoing family responsibilities, including those young students who already had more than one child. Some were also struggling culturally. For example, a young woman in the third semester wrote a moving essay on how difficult it was to teach her husband and children the importance of celebrating El Día de los Muertos (“The Day of the Dead”) when her husband was white and her children were out of touch with their maternal Mexican heritage (see, for example, Younoszai, 1993).

To temper the potential “dryness” of a college-based lecture, I usually began the class by reading a particularly interesting obituary from the local newspaper, reciting some poem about death (see, for example, Johnston, 2008), or reading a chapter from Eagleman’s (2009) engaging *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. Each class ended with my playing a musical track—usually something from pop music (students often sang along with Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven”), though I also used the Jewish *Kol Nidre* and the Christian *Requiem Aeternam* or *Dies Irae*. Once I even tried to teach students to perform the Māori haka.

I too had to learn new ways to teach. As Watts (2007) points out, synthesising theory, the practical, and the personal with academic assessment is somewhat of a dilemma, especially in relationship to sensitive subject matter. A number of the resources consulted mentioned the importance of the lecturer’s personal openness, or what Watts (2007) calls “Locating the ‘I’” within lectures, to give the students a place to connect with the lecturer’s own continuously developing thoughts and vulnerabilities around issues of mortality and the end of life. It turned out to be ironically propitious that my own mother was in the final stages of her life over those three semesters, and I chose to share my story of her journey with them.

Finally, nervous, and under-resourced both externally and within themselves, students turned often to the online *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* to find support for their assignments. Given the backgrounds that they were struggling to overcome in order to achieve their educational goals, I allowed them to use that as a resource for their essays, as long as they also found print literature to complement it. The *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* is quite a rich resource, yet as I explained to the students, we in academia still expect people to read things they can hold in their hands.

### **Research data**

The course design I devised requires each student to pass a True/False mid-term and final exam, and to write one essay of 2500–3000 words. Students each have to turn in a proposal to me, to which I respond; then a few weeks later, an outline of their essay; then a few weeks later a bibliography in APA format, and finally their entire essay assembled. Over the three semesters that I have taught this course so far, I have averaged 48 students per semester, giving me a research pool of nearly 150 student essays on which to base this study. It may have been a bold move to let the students choose their own essay topics each semester, but preparing this study has allowed me to assess whether that was responsible or not. The field of Death Studies is, of course, huge, as deSpelder and Strickland's 650-page textbook suggests. So as you can imagine, the range of essay topics was quite broad, but I think this analysis illustrates something about the interests of 18- to 24-year-old Americans within the enormous field of Death Studies.

### **Essay topics**

#### *Culture*

Over the three semesters, nearly 20% of the students have chosen to write about a topic directly related to issues of culture within Death Studies. Most of these students were Hispanic in origin, though up to second generation American-born. Of those, most chose to write about El Día de los Muertos, the Mexican "Day of the Dead," a popular cultural festival that falls around the same time as Halloween and All Saints Day. Actually, El Día de los Muertos is celebrated on two days: the first day is to welcome back the spirits of deceased children from the present and past generations of the family, and the second day is to welcome back the spirits of deceased adults. Every home is decorated with figurines of skeletons dressed in culturally appropriate clothing, and large

amounts of food are left out to welcome back the spirits of the deceased, as are favourite possessions, such as a deceased child's favourite toys so they can come back to play with them. Many of the students were far enough removed from their familial culture that the essay gave them an opportunity to explore the background and history of the festival—the rituals are a mixture of indigenous Mayan culture and imported Spanish Catholicism—as well as its symbolic representations, such as garlands of marigolds, whose bright yellow makes the deceased feel happy. One student produced a particularly fine comparative exploration of the minute differences in celebration among three small but geographically diverse villages in Mexico. She chose this topic, she told me, because though her family is Mexican American, and she's heard of the celebration all her life, her family does not observe it and she's never seen it done, and wanted to learn more about the culture that her family seemed so determined to deny.

### *Grief*

In each of the three semesters, about 30% of the students chose to write about some aspect of grief work. Many of these students were majoring in nursing, and the topic choice was appropriate. They seemed to know something about Kübler-Ross's work, but were unaware of the subsequent critiques, so choosing this topic was a useful step for them. Some used the essay as an opportunity to explore further their own unresolved grief, particularly around the death of a grandparent. These students focused on the need to "grieve the family they once knew" after a grandparent dies, and the importance of "locating" the deceased and "relearning the world" (Attig, 1996). A Japanese student wrote a fascinating essay trying to sort out why he was deeply affected by the death of one grandfather, but not of his other grandfather—coming to the conclusion that each death is grieved (or not) in a unique way, shaped by whether there were memories of "good times." Yet another student, from whom I have "borrowed" the title of this article, "Death on a Smaller but Equal Scale," wrote about how the small griefs of our daily life prepare us for the larger griefs, much in the same vein as Viorst's (1986) book, *Necessary Losses*. He called them "nondeath deaths."

In the second of my three semesters, a 23-year-old "first responder," covering both fire and traffic emergencies, wrote about the cumulative grief he carries in his body because his employer, the county fire department, does not provide any post-incident processing of internalised trauma. His role at a recent house fire served to illustrate his point. A family had fled the house safely, only to realise that the grandfather wasn't with them. My student had to go back into the house, found the grandfather burned to death

in his bed, and then had to come out to tell the surviving family. When he got back to the fire station, the chief said “You OK?” and my student responded “Yup,” and that was typical of the level of post-trauma care he was given by his employer. Reading his essay made me angry and worried, and I wrote him a long note saying so. In a strange twist, this student was stabbed in the chest while responding to a domestic violence incident two nights before the final exam, so I had to give him his exam in the hospital.

### *The politics of death*

California is a very political place, and so students in all three semesters chose to write on some aspect of Death Studies that is political in nature. Two students in the first semester, both Hispanic females, wrote heated arguments against the way America uses the death penalty in its criminal justice system. A total of 16 students over the three semesters wrote about aspects of informed suicide, physician-assisted suicide, or euthanasia. All supported the right of an adult of sound mind to take his or her own life, by whatever means could escape legal sanctions. This legal right is protected in Oregon and Washington, the two states north of California, and I suspect will eventually be legalised in California as well. In the second semester, one student wrote an interesting essay arguing that the constant acts of terrorism around the world don't give us time to take a break from the grieving process, which is why they keep us on edge. Another student's essay described in detail the horrible deaths of immigrants from dehydration and sunstroke as they try to cross the border illegally into the US, holding Americans accountable for murder.

### *Suicide*

In the first semester, six students wrote on suicide by young adults, that is, people who were the same age as the students. They focused on individual suicide as a mental health issue, and on both suicide prevention and education and support for the bereaved. Interestingly, none of these students mentioned having known anyone who had suicided, but all were aware that suicide is a significant problem among young adults from immigrant families who face social discrimination, unemployment, and a culture of drugs and alcohol. In both the second and third semesters, the number skyrocketed up to 16, or 30% of the class, who wrote on suicide. Most wrote on youth suicide in high school or the early 20s, though some wrote on suicides of family members, including five who wrote on the suicide of parents or grandparents. I do not yet understand whether this significant increase was a quirk, or if something else was

going on. I do know that some of the students had been at a local high school three years earlier when there was a significant cluster of student suicides in a few short months. But that does not explain the dramatic rise in numbers of essays.

### *Comparative religion and the afterlife*

Four students in the first semester, and five in each of the second and third semesters, wrote essays that compared concepts of death and the afterlife in Christianity and Islam. Interestingly, a number of them described themselves as atheists. In general throughout the course, students showed real curiosity in learning more about Islam as a living belief system. There is very little Islamic presence in the Coachella Valley, but of course, it is of general interest to Americans on a national level. A fifth student in semester one wrote a fascinating essay on the role of death in existentialism, drawing on Ecclesiastes, Camus' *The Stranger*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, grounding each of those sources in his memories of his grandmother's death. In the second semester, one student asked if Near-Death Experiences (NDE) were simply an advance glimpse of the dying person's future reincarnation, thus framing an NDE as a sign that we do not die, but pass from life to life.

### *The denial of death, and death anxiety*

Of the four student essays that addressed this topic in the first semester I taught, the most creative was by a young man who studied obituaries in the local newspaper, looking for the raft of euphemisms by which Americans avoid speaking of or facing the reality of death. His favourite was the obituary of a local gay man, born in Kansas (so you guessed it), and structured around *The Wizard of Oz*. The obituary was written by the husband of the deceased (they had been among the 18,000 same-sex couples who managed to get married in California before the right was removed from them), and ended "Somewhere over the rainbow he is looking down and smiling—his yellow brick road has led him to the Emerald City." The public was then invited to a memorial service in one of the local gay bars.

### *Medical issues*

Four women in the first semester, all training to be nurses, wrote about home hospice care of the dying in a very sensitive and informed manner. In the second and third semesters, no one wrote about this topic or any related medical issues, which was somewhat unexpected, since several of the female students were employed as semi-professional or professional end-of-life caregivers. My surprise at the end of the



first semester came when one student removed his shirt to show the whole class that he had had “Do Not Resuscitate” tattooed on his chest!

### *Popular culture*

Three students in the first semester used popular culture as the basis for their essay. One young male, an almost-too-typical California surfer type, wrote about the use of hallucinogenic drugs as near-death occurrences. Another young male, covered with tattoos and an ex-member of a local Hispanic gang and former meth addict, wrote about the death of rapper Tupac Shakur. A young Hispanic woman, the quietest person in the class, wrote about the use of popular songs for healing grief. I will return to her essay shortly. In the second semester, only one student used popular culture as his hermeneutic, writing about the song lyrics of *narco corridos*, the death squads associated with the Mexican drug cartels. Members of the death squads wear rosaries around their necks, and sing, “I am ready to die, as soon as I kill you.” The topic was great; the essay less so, because he scared himself with the topic and didn’t develop it adequately.

### *Five particularly fine examples*

Essays from two students in the first semester I taught stood out in particular among the 48 received. One, by a young male in the class who was studying to be a doctor’s assistant, was entitled “Clarity and Contradiction: Death as a Nonsensical Farce in Five Acts.” It was a publishable-quality essay, in which he discussed the death at age 20 of his best friend, a young man with whom the student had quite a psychologically merged relationship, and how the student’s inability to manage his own grief wound up destroying his relationship with the woman he was in love with.

The other outstanding essay was by a young Hispanic woman, one of those “lost children” that we sometimes get in class. She was extremely quiet and unusually short which, rather than making her stand out, made her even more invisible. Her essay explored how the lyrics of popular songs can teach people to grieve in healthier ways. To illustrate, she used four songs: “Perfect,” by Simple Plan (a son apologises to his father for not being the perfect son); “Confessions of a Broken Heart,” by Lindsay Lohan (a daughter grieves her recently deceased father); the beloved “Tears in Heaven,” by Eric Clapton (a father grieves the death of his young son); and “Heaven,” by Los Lonely Boys, which was played at the funeral of her cousin who suicided. I’d like to argue that the field of Death Studies could benefit from more research on how grieving young adults turn to their own familiar popular media for comfort, and whether there are specific songs that offer consolation (see, for example, Pacholski, 1986).

In the third semester I taught, there were also three particularly creative essays. The first was about the history of photographs of dead but beloved family members, usually displayed with coffins, but how the change over time in the way such photos are staged reveals changing attitudes about death. A woman who had lost a teenage family member in a car crash wrote the second outstanding essay. She developed a very convincing argument that at age 18 (the age of legal consent in California), all young men and women should have to retake their driving test, but not be given a new driver's licence until they had also filled out the Advance Medical Directive and Do Not Resuscitate forms, since this formal "brush with death" would encourage them to drive more carefully. The third outstanding essay was entitled "What To Do with Dad's Ashes?" The student admitted that she had been driving around for four years with the ashes of her father in the trunk of her car. The essay gave her a chance to explore the options—burying them atop the local mountains, putting them in a columbarium at her local church, having them made into jewellery, or scattering them at sea—and to make the decision to return her father to the ocean he had loved so much.

### **From theory to practice**

I was able to use five incidents during the three semesters to talk with students about some of the emotional work around grief and loss. In retrospect, these five incidents were a valuable part of the curriculum, though none was planned.

Each semester, up to 75 students attempted to enrol in my class, but due to the fire warden's restrictions on room occupancy a maximum of only 50 were allowed to register. "Perspectives on Death and Dying" is a very popular course at the College of the Desert, and three sections of it are taught each semester. This was the first opportunity to talk to students about the "small deaths" that happen in everyone's life by discussing their disappointment at not being able to take classes they wanted.

In all three semesters, some students didn't earn the mark they wanted on their tests or essays. Certain programmes at CoD are so competitive that students must earn an A average to stay in them. Of course, not everyone gets A's. However, this provided the opportunity to talk with the class about anxiety, disappointment, and loss, and the management of grief.

In the first semester I taught, 50 students began the class, and only 40 completed all the assignments. That meant that ten students failed the course, because they either did not turn in their major essay or missed the final exam. Some students took the final exam, even though they had no essay to turn in, but none would discuss that with me

after the exam. I think they were wrapped up in their sense of failure and self-disappointment, and yes, grief.

During the first and second semesters I taught the course, I talked to the students a lot about my mother, Wanda, who had recently been moved out of her home into a residential centre for the elderly. Mom put on a brave face, and made wonderful new friends, but struggled psychologically with her declining health. On July 29, 2010, shortly before I was to begin teaching, and on my deceased father's birthday, Mom died suddenly at the dinner table at the residential centre. So just as I had talked with my students in the first two semesters about Wanda, so I could talk to students in the third semester about my own grief over the loss of my mother, and how it was affecting me and allowing me to think through, once again, the process and meanings of death and dying.

The final example is not the students', but my own. The last meeting of the semester's class was scheduled for May 14, 2009, though the final exam was a week later. On that date, we were scheduled to wrap up the lectures, evaluate the course, and say goodbye to each other in a ritualised manner. However, when I hopped in the car to drive the 25 kilometres to the college, my car wouldn't start. With a sinking feeling, I realised that I was going to miss the last class, and it was even too late to tell the students why I wouldn't be there to tell them how much I had enjoyed the semester with them and to say goodbye. It took me a long while to process all that, but when I could think rationally again (!), I realised that I was feeling some of the grief that I had so carefully, academically, and clinically discussed with the students but that they'd never seen me display on a personal level. And that led me to again think through how I could still be the professor and, at the same time, bring my own emotions and grief experiences into the class without crowding out room for the students to bring theirs. In the second semester I taught, I was more open with the students about my own history with grief, from deaths to broken hearts to unfulfilled dreams, and I believe that my personal transparency also became part of the curriculum. As a 66-year-old, I had thought, and was thinking a lot now, about death—the little nondeath deaths and the big one to come, including my own—and as such, I had learned to offer myself to the class as a living textbook.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the closing word should go to one of my students, who expressed in an essay what the course had meant to her. The essay was an “extra credit” response (a student

could earn a few extra points to add to his or her overall semester total and thus earn a higher mark) to a *New York Times* article by Anemona Hartocollis (2009). The student wrote:

*My life's challenges have certainly shaped me into the strong person that I am. I am ready for whatever God has in my destiny. As my husband's disease progresses, it is good to know that there are different alternatives. His multiple sclerosis can be very painful and it is devastating to see that even Vicodin doesn't always work. I am ready for the worst and I have been able to accept his coming death through this course.*

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