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DEALING CREATIVELY With DEATH

A Manual of Death Education & Simple Burial

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thousands of dollars,”

—*Jessica Mitford*

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—*Medical Self-Care*

by **EARNEST MORGAN**
EDITED BY JENIFER MORGAN

DEALING CREATIVELY WITH DEATH

A Manual of Death Education
and Simple Burial

by Ernest Morgan

edited by Jenifer Morgan

Zinn Communications
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INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRTEENTH EDITION

Important changes have occurred in the fields of death and dying since the twelfth edition of the *Manual* was published in 1990, and the cost of funerals continues to rise. Despite consumer protection efforts, these costs have increased much more rapidly than the consumer price index. This edition offers new information for coping with this problem, and solid counsel in dealing with pre-need sales, which have been rapidly increasing.

The highly publicized AIDS epidemic strongly affects the process of bereavement, care for the dying, and arrangements for disposition of the body. This is dealt with in Chapter 3, "Bereavement;" Chapter 2, "Living with Dying;" and Chapter 5, "Simple Burial and Cremation." References for further information are given.

The shocking increase in youth suicide is discussed in Chapter 4, "The Right to Die," looking briefly at causes and offering suggestions for prevention and further study.

Less well known is the rapid increase in the number of organ transplants performed. For example, in 1982 there were 103 heart transplants in the U.S. In 1993 that number had increased to 2,290. In the same year, we are told, there were 450,000 bone grafts. New networks have developed to coordinate organ donations in both the United States and Canada, and new laws have been passed providing guidelines. These changes, and the sharply increased need for organ donations, are discussed in Chapter 8, "How the Dead Can Help the Living," and Appendix 8, "Anatomical Gifts."

A quiet revolution is taking place in hospice care. The number of hospices in the United States has grown to about 2000. Chapter 2, "Living with Dying," reflects the changes taking place, including use of hospice care for patients with Alzheimer's disease.

Chapter 3, "Bereavement," has been substantially rewritten to reflect our growing understanding of grieving, and the growth potential which it contains.

Rapid changes in law are taking place in response to the medical

ability to prolong life in the dying, and the growing struggle, as a result, to avoid needless suffering and expense. Latest information on the rights of patients and families, and how to implement these rights, is contained in Chapter 4, “The Right to Die,” and Appendix 4, “Living Will.”

As with each previous edition for the past 32 years, the book has been massively revised, developing gradually into a small encyclopedia combining time tested wisdom with timely relevance. We are grateful for the suggestions of our readers and invite them to send us criticisms and information which may be useful in future editions.

FOREWORD

Of the many people who helped me over the years with writing projects, I count Ernest Morgan as *primus inter pares* — first among equals.

In the early 1960s, when I was preparing *The American Way of Death*, I ran across his *Manual of Simple Burial* — a brilliant little volume of advice to the hapless survivor who wants to avoid the full-fig funeral, with all the costly trimmings, decreed by the undertakers as what they are pleased to call “the standard American funeral.”

Once, years ago, Ernest Morgan and I shared a flight from Seattle to Oakland. In the course of our conversation I asked what motivated him to continue active in the field of Death Education and Simple Burial. He looked out the window for a while, then he said, “There are three reasons. First, working in this field is contributing to my own emotional maturity — my acceptance of death, my appreciation of life and my concern for my fellow beings.

“Second, I desire social change and a more humane and cooperative society. At no time are people more prone to think about life values, and more open to change, than at a time of death, or in thinking about death. This is a strategic time to influence them creatively, and combat what is phony, exploitative and ostentatious in American life.

“Third, the *Manual* is making money for the Arthur Morgan School!”

Mr. Morgan and I became firm pen pals and have corresponded for three decades. He was immeasurably helpful in giving guidance and practical advice when I was writing *The American Way of Death*, and for years thereafter as we fought in our respective communities what one writer called “the battle of the Bier Barons.”

Unlike the *Manual*, my own book does not deal with philosophic approaches to death and dying, but with the funeral industry. In his review of *The American Way of Death*, Evelyn Waugh wrote that “the trouble with Miss Mitford is that she has no stated attitude towards death.” I wrote my sister Nancy, who was a friend of Waugh’s, “Tell

Evelyn that I *do* have an attitude towards death. I'm against it." (When I told Ernest Morgan this, he commented in his wry, dry fashion, "Better not abolish death. If we do, people will need a government permit to have a baby!")

In contrast with early editions of the *Manual*, this expanded version, while retaining its useful information about memorial societies, bequeathal of remains to medical schools, etc., goes more deeply into the practical and philosophical concerns of death and dying.

His perceptive, humane views on these matters should provide great solace to the terminally ill and their families.

— *Jessica Mitford*

PREFACE / *How this Book Happened*

My father, Arthur E. Morgan, was an intensely creative man whose activities had a lasting impact in several areas of American life. He had long felt that American funeral practices could be simpler and more meaningful. In 1948, he formed the Burial Committee of the Yellow Springs Friends Meeting (Quaker) to study the matter in a systematic way.

After five years of study his committee evolved a plan whereby the Meeting would care for its own dead, handling the paper work, building the boxes, conveying the bodies to a crematory or medical school and arranging memorial services — all without professional assistance.

In 1953 I was drafted by the Meeting to chair this committee. I had no special interest in the project but did not wish to avoid responsibility, so I accepted. After all, I thought, I am a grown man, I can probably handle a dead body as well as the next fellow.

During the five years of study no one in the Meeting had died, but as soon as I became chairman they started dying! Then I discovered that what I had anticipated to be a disagreeable chore turned out to be a meaningful privilege — serving one's friends at a time of profound need. The plan worked well at small cost, and the memorial services became a comfort and an inspiration to all concerned.

Then, quite by accident, our little Burial Committee got nationwide publicity. Letters poured in, asking for information. Gosh, I thought, I can't answer all these letters, I'll mimeograph a few sheets to send these people. Then another thought occurred to me. A burial committee is fine for a close-knit rural group like ours, but in most situations a memorial society which works with funeral directors is more practical. I'd better include some information on memorial societies. So I started digging out this information. (There was no memorial society association then.)

A short time later, my stepmother, Lucy Morgan, asked me to make arrangements for her to leave her body to the University Medical School. She was a thrifty soul. "I don't want my body wasted," she said. So I went and met Dr. Graves (!) who was dean of the anatomy department. Dr. Graves was (almost too) enthusiastic. "If only more people would do this! There's a serious shortage of bodies in many areas." So I saw that I'd better tell people about leaving their bodies to a medical school.

Another five years passed. Instead of a few sheets I had a 64-page book, *A Manual of Simple Burial*. It appeared in 1962, printed by Celo Press, a division of the Arthur Morgan School which my wife and I were launching then. It was well received.

In 1963, another surprise. The Co-op League called a meeting to federate the memorial societies of the U.S. and Canada. Would I be a keynote speaker? I seemed to have become an authority. Soon I was on the Board of the Continental Association of Funeral and Memorial Societies. Who was it said, "There is a destiny that shapes our ends. . . .?"

The book sold well and helped support the school. New editions followed, each extensively revised. Howard Raether, then Executive Director of the National Funeral Directors Association, once asked me, "How come you change the book so much between editions?" All I could say was, "Times change, and new ideas and information keep coming."

One thing I learned was that people turn their backs on the idea of death and are thus inhibited from joining a memorial society or planning ahead. Death education is almost a prerequisite for coming to grips with the question. So with our sixth edition we changed the title to *A Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*. Sales continued to grow.

In 1971 my wife died of cancer after a long illness. During her final months we kept her at home where her life could be filled with love and fellowship and music — our introduction to what we now call hospice. Another dimension was thus added to the *Manual*.

Looking back, I realize that much of the book came from my long life in a warm, cohesive family where death was a repeated visitor, and from half a century in a small community where life and death were deeply shared. That was my university, which was supplemented by reading and by association with many knowledgeable people.

No one has benefited more from reading this book than I have from writing it. As a child I was devoted to my father, a man of great strength and gentleness. Accepting his death was hard for me and writing this *Manual* made it possible for me to face reality and accept his death and that of others whom I loved.

The *Manual* (now titled *Dealing Creatively with Death*) is no longer my book but belongs as well to a host of friends and scholars who have helped with it. In particular, my daughter Jenifer has done much of the research and writing for recent editions and has been my most faithful and exacting critic. Now in my eighty-ninth year I hope she will have a hand in future editions and will carry it on when I am gone.

Proceeds from the book still go to the Arthur Morgan school, and an alumnus of the school, David Zinn, has taken over the publishing through his firm, Zinn Communications.

— Ernest Morgan

INTRODUCTION / *About Accepting Death*

If we were to walk across the fields in summertime to some undisturbed spot and mark off a piece of ground say four feet square and then examine this little area minutely, we would find an astonishing variety of life. There would be many species of plants; possibly a mouse's nest, and other small creatures. Then, resorting to a microscope, we would observe an incredible host of microorganisms functioning in association with the larger life forms. But we would not stop there. We would start digging, exploring for additional life underground. There, too, we would find insects, nematodes, earthworms of various kinds, and a fresh array of bacteria. Nor would we necessarily stop when we reached bedrock. If that rock happened to be Ohio limestone there would be several hundred feet of dense fossil deposits laid down through millions of years, representing myriad species and astronomical numbers of individual lives.

In that little square of ground we would have seen an interdependent community of life in which birth and death were continuously taking place and in which diverse life forms were sheltering and nourishing one another. Written in the rocks beneath was a story of a similar process going back through eons of time.

Humankind is part of the ongoing community of nature, on a world scale, subject to the same cycle of birth and death which governs all other creatures and, like them, totally dependent on other life. Sometimes, in our high-rise apartments, our manicured suburbs and our chromium plated institutions we tend to forget this.

Our need is not to conquer nature but to live in harmony with it. This does not mean rejecting our technology, but it does mean controlling our numbers, quieting our egos, and simplifying our lifestyles.

Birth and death are as natural for us as for the myriad creatures in that little square of ground. When we have learned to accept ourselves as part of the community of nature, then we can accept death as part of the natural order of things.

We commonly act as if we, and those we love, were going to live forever. But we are wrong, for all must die — nor can we know when this will happen.

In our culture we tend to avoid the subject of death. This is unfortunate, for death is a normal and necessary part of life. Until we learn to face it honestly and accept it, we are not living at our best.

If we are to appreciate our fellows, if we are to live with patience, gentleness and love, let us be about it today, for life is short.

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1 DEATH EDUCATION

This chapter has three functions.

First is to break the ice — for those who need to have it broken — and help people think and talk about death more easily. Until they are able to do this without feeling uncomfortable they will have difficulty in benefiting from the ensuing chapters.

Second is to review briefly the emergence of death education and to discuss some of the ways in which it is strongly relevant to life, both of the individual and of society.

Third, this chapter gives a brief overview of the rest of the book, suggesting possible uses of the remaining chapters, and offering suggestions for persons who may be leading classes or discussions on the topic.

Why Death Education?

Death education is for everyone, because it relates not just to death but to our feelings about ourselves and nature and the universe we live in. A prime function of death education is to help us to think and feel deeply about the meaning of life in its many relationships — to help mature our values. As Abraham Maslow wrote, after recovering from a heart attack, “The confrontation with death — and the reprieve from it — makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to live it, to embrace it and to let myself be overwhelmed by it.”¹ Confronting death imaginatively through experience, reading, thinking, lectures and discussions often has the paradoxical effect of enriching life.

As we pass beyond the fear and avoidance of death so common in our culture, we can learn to accept dying as an appropriate culmination of life. To do this we need to be able to talk freely with our loved ones about death — both our own and theirs, whether imminent or remote.

Death education does not avoid grief — and should not if it could — but it can help us to cope with grief in a creative way so that we may grow in the quality of our lives. It can help us also to relate meaningfully to dying persons, and to meet the social and emotional needs of the survivors — including ourselves.

2 DEATH EDUCATION

Then, too, it can help us deal wisely with practical matters that must be faced at time of death, thus avoiding unnecessary ostentation, suffering and expense.

Death education is doubly valuable for those whose work brings them into frequent contact with dying, death and/or bereavement. These include not only health professionals, counsellors and clergy, but also law enforcement, military and disaster personnel who work with survivors of major loss and sudden death.

The Growth of Death Education

Forty years ago the subject of death was taboo in polite society, as sex had been in earlier days. In 1959, Dr. LeRoy Bowman's sociological study, *The American Funeral*, and Herman Feifel's *The Meaning of Death* cracked the barrier. In 1962 the first edition of my *Manual* appeared, followed in 1963 by Ruth Harmer's *The High Cost of Dying* and Jessica Mitford's bombshell, *The American Way of Death*. That same year the memorial societies emerged, largely under church leadership, as a united, continent-wide movement.

In 1967 Earl Grollman's *Explaining Death to Children* was published, and in 1969 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross gave the movement fresh depth and impetus with her classic *On Death and Dying*, stressing the need for death education among health care professionals. Since that time, hundreds of books and thousands of articles have appeared.

In 1975, the Forum (now Association) for Death Education and Counseling was organized, giving form and substance to the movement, and grew to over one thousand members working professionally in the field. Thousands of schools and colleges have classes in death education. Many churches likewise conduct seminars and conferences on the subject. Important, too, it has become a significant topic in courses in sociology, psychology, health care disciplines, literature, law, art, biology, philosophy, religion, and consumer education.

Simultaneously, hospice programs began in the United States. The National Hospice Organization was formed in 1977 to provide national leadership in education, research, standard setting and advocacy. Hospices now train thousands of volunteers and professionals to deal humanely with dying and death. See Chapter 2, "Living With Dying."

Clearly, death education has come into its own.

About the Death Educator

Educators and counselors need to have a deep understanding and acceptance of death and dying. It is this understanding, combined with personal experience, which qualifies one to teach. It is the ability to

share this experience and understanding directly from the heart that makes a fine teacher.

Similarly, an important qualification — perhaps the most important qualification — for anyone to counsel bereaved persons is that the counselor has dealt creatively with suffering and is able to reach out to, and empathize with, the person being counseled. Most such counselors — at least the good ones — have been drawn into the field by virtue of their own experience and what they have learned from it.

Such counseling, at its best, is a two-way experience in which the counselor as well as the counseled experiences growth. That is one of the rewards of being a counselor.

In recent years, arrangements have been made for the certification of counsellors in this field, by the Association for Death Education and Counselling. See Appendix 2, “Organizations” for listing. But this does not remove the responsibility of the rest of us to assist in this area when occasion arises.

Death Education for Children

Children have more awareness of death than most of us realize. Fairy tales, movies and television programs abound in death, as does the world of nature which they see about them.

Herman Feifel comments that “The shaping impact of awareness of death is active at all levels.”² By age two, children’s play demonstrates an awareness of death. Children three to five years of age commonly see death as temporary and reversible. From about five to nine years of age the finality is recognized and children begin to understand that death is an inevitable part of life. At first they think of it as something that happens to others, but not to themselves; later they realize it will someday happen to them. By age ten, if not before, most children understand the reality of death as adults do.³

Acceptance of death as part of life needs to be incorporated into a child’s normal activities at home and at school. On occasions of deaths in my own family, the children were kept close to the center of family life and given roles to carry out in family activities relating to the deaths. This gave comfort to the adults as well as to the children.

Although wildly emotional outbursts may be upsetting to children, adults should not try to conceal their emotions from their children. Naturalness and honesty are basic. The physical fact of death should be explained and children should not be discouraged from touching dead things if they wish. It should be explained that dead things feel no pain, as children commonly have great fear of pain. It helps to explain that we are part of the world of nature and share with all other creatures the