

*Eighth Edition*

# DEATH, SOCIETY, — AND — HUMAN EXPERIENCE



**ROBERT J. KASTENBAUM**

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**DEATH,  
SOCIETY,  
and  
HUMAN  
EXPERIENCE**

**Robert J. Kastenbaum**

*Arizona State University*



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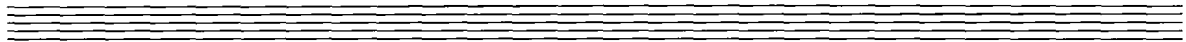
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## **Death, Society, and Human Experience**



Yvonne Quinn takes care of her prized pet, Amoeba, a sparrow she saved three years ago. She thinks the bird is attracted to her blue nail polish.



*For Cynthia*  
*and for those*  
*you have loved...*

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## PREFACE

Approximately 6,000 Americans died on September 10, 2001. Another 6,000 died on September 12. The “same” 6,000 also died September 11, the day of the terrorist attack on America—not the same people, of course, but the average number of those who die of any and all causes every day of the year. The jogger who collapsed with a massive myocardial infarction, the long-term sufferer with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who just could not draw another breath, the driver who had persuaded himself that he could handle his alcohol, and the woman who could still remember the names of all her grandchildren but could not coax another day’s life from her worn body—all these people and more end their lives without making a ripple in society at large.

The sudden, unexpected, and traumatic deaths of September 11, 2001, made more than a ripple. There were many reasons for this intense response, as will be discussed in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, it is striking how much we can be affected by some deaths while at the same time averting our attention from the universal exit procession of all mortals. Are some deaths more important than others? If so, would this mean that some lives are more important, or is it the circumstance of death that makes the difference? Perhaps there is still another explanation: We prefer not to notice dying, death, and grief unless it forces itself on us. Woody Allen probably spoke for more than a few others when he cracked that “I’m not afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

In this book, we consider dramatic and violent forms of death, the kind that go by such names as homicide, suicide, terrorism, accident, and disaster. However, we will not allow these events to lull us into believing that death mostly happens to other people in other places when something goes very much wrong. We sort of know better, even if we try to keep ourselves from knowing we know. We also know that it is useful to give some thought to the road ahead and how we might prepare for the journey. There will be surprises enough, even so, but perhaps fewer occasions on which we find ourselves at a loss to cope.

The first business of life is to stay alive. Ask the blades of grass that struggle up to the sunlight through the hard surfaces of a city street. Ask our resourceful adversaries, the virus and the microorganism, which continue to reinvent themselves whenever we launch a new pharmacological assault. Ask the child of a devastated homeland who has already experienced massive loss, stress, and deprivation but has determined to survive it all and does. Ask nurses, paramedics, and physicians who have seen people make remarkable recoveries, seemingly because they had such a strong will to live. Ask firefighters why they risk their own lives to save people they have never met.

Even at its most resourceful and most fortunate, though, life does not succeed indefinitely in its first business of staying alive. That is a pretty good reason for having books and courses focused on dying, death, and grief. For many years, society featured the strategy

of ignoring death and practically everything connected with it, including the dying and the grieving person. Unfortunately, the rule of silence created more problems than it solved. There was little comfort for the dying or grieving person and little counseling for the troubled mind of the suicidal person. Inadequate communication contributed to tense and conflictful relationships. Health care professionals had their own share of misery: responsible for care of the “incurable” (as dying people often were known) but not prepared to deal with mortality in their own thoughts and feelings.

Many people participated in the systematic avoidance of death and paid the price in anxiety, burdensome defenses, and hard knocks from a reality that would not let itself be ignored when the defenses failed. Others trembled or brooded alone, haunted by death-related anxieties that isolated them because these feelings scared off their friends. Still others challenged death by risky actions; these episodes turned passive anxiety into active thrills but, too often, resulted in serious injury or death. Few had the opportunity to reflect on dying and death with the help of a sensitive instructor and knowledge-based writings. There was at first a lot of resistance to what has now become known as death education. By now, however, many people recognize that *thanatology*—the study of life, with death left in—can be one of the most valuable projects for a student of any age.

This book is intended to contribute to your understanding of your relationship with death both as an individual and as a member of society. For example, you will learn

- How our thoughts and feelings about death develop from childhood and how we struggle with anxiety and denial toward a more mature and effective view of death.
- What very different ideas and meanings have been associated with death throughout the centuries.
- How and why the ideas of “death” and “dead” have become unsettled in our own time.

- How dying people are perceived and treated in our society, and what can be done to provide the best possible care.
- What choices and decisions we have about the way we are treated at the end of our lives.
- How people respond to the sorrow and anxiety of grief and the challenge of moving on with their lives.
- Why the funeral and memorialization process is still with us today after so many centuries.
- Who is most at risk for suicide and who is most likely to become either a killer or a victim of homicide.
- What is happening in the continuing controversy over physician-assisted death.
- What the evidence tells us and what is left to our own judgment and intuition about near-death experiences and reincarnation as proof of survival of death.
- How we can help others cope with their death encounters.

These and many other topics are presented as interactions between the individual and society. It is true that we live and die as individuals. However, it is also true that we live and die within a particular society during a particular time in world history. Preoccupation with our thoughts and feelings as individuals could lead us to lose sight of the larger picture in which social dynamics so often influence the timing, mode, and experience of dying as well as our basic interpretations of life and death.

We draw on the best available scholarship and research as well as on the words of people who have found themselves in the middle of death-related situations. Often, we will note the limitations of current knowledge and offer alternative interpretations. It is our intention to present information clearly, but without undue simplification.

I welcome you personally to this book and to the course to which this book may contribute. When I first taught a course on death approximately 40 years ago, there were few



death educators, counselors, and researchers addressing these issues. Today, both the cadre of death educators and their knowledge base have expanded considerably. Take advantage of your instructor's expertise: Do not hesitate to ask questions and share your experiences. Explore the ever-growing literature on the human encounter with mortality: Discover what observers from many different perspectives can offer to us. Now join me in one of humankind's oldest—and newest—voyages of discovery.

### **NEW FOR THE EIGHTH EDITION**

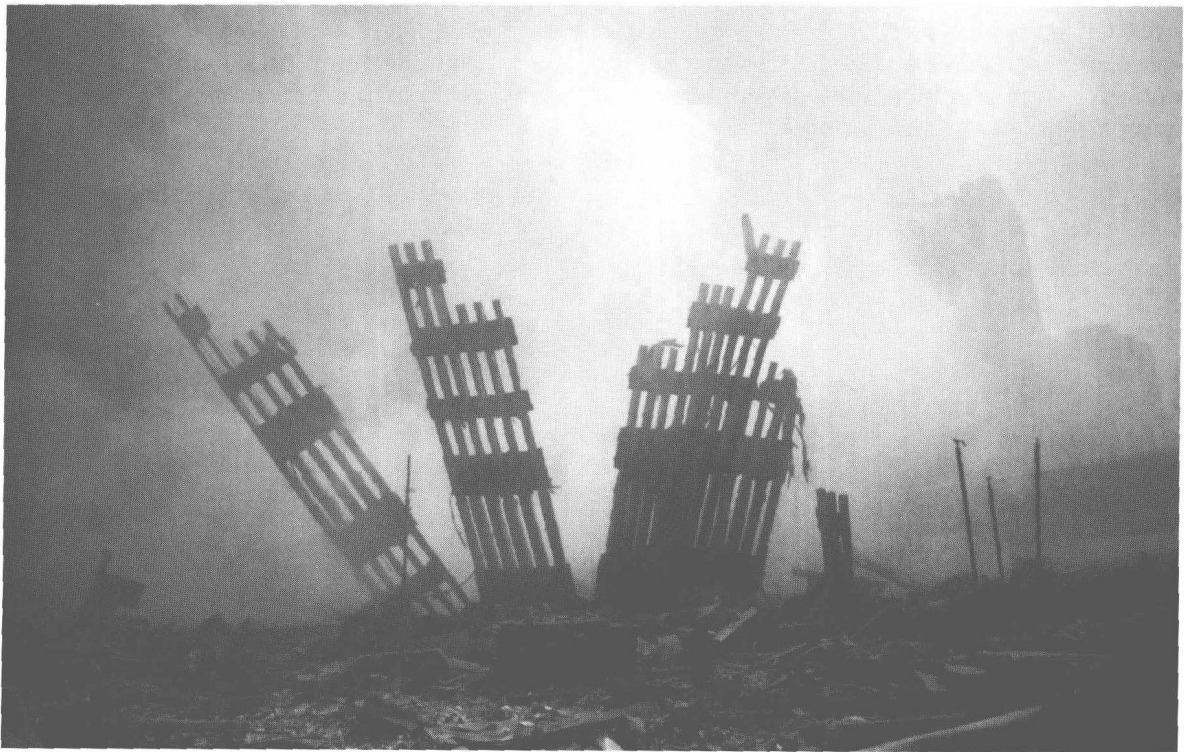
The Eighth Edition begins with a new chapter that describes and discusses the terrorist attacks on America. I do not leave this disturbing topic at the close of this chapter. Implications and reverberations are traced in several other chapters.

Other topics that receive new or expanded treatment include abortion, human sacrifice, and extinction. The new multiple-perspective approach to dying and terminal care intro-

duced in the Seventh Edition is presented in more detail at the suggestion of instructors and students. Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the international hospice movement, has kindly consented to discuss her own views in a new interview. Throughout the book, I have updated wherever significant new information or developments have emerged.

The structure of the book was revised slightly for the Seventh Edition, seems to have worked, and so has been left alone except for the addition of the new introductory chapter.

I appreciate the comments offered by the reviewers: Lois M. Easterday, Onondaga Community College; Lewis P. Gravis, Sampson Community College; James R. Johnson, Albuquerque TVU Community College; J. Alan Kee, Amarillo College; and Daniel Leviton, University of Maryland. It was also good to hear from other instructors and readers who had useful suggestions. I hope you will find this book helpful in your explorations of death, society, and human experience.



The skeletal remains of a WTC tower continue to stand as a memorial to the victims.



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