

The Last Dance

ENCOUNTERING DEATH AND DYING



Lynne Ann DeSpelder



Albert Lee Strickland

FOURTH EDITION

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Encountering Death and Dying

L Y N N E A N N D E S P E L D E R

Cabrillo College

A L B E R T L E E S T R I C K L A N D



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To our parents Bruce Erwin DeSpelder & Dorothy Roediger DeSpelder and Luther Leander Strickland (1896–1966) & Bertha Wittenburg Strickland (1905–1985), who gave us our first “Golden Books” and shared with us the joys of reading.

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Preface

The study of death is concerned with questions that are rooted at the center of human experience, the most important of which are not fully answerable in terms of a standard textbook definition. Thus, the person who sets out to increase his or her knowledge of death and dying is embarking on an exploration that is partly a journey of personal and experiential discovery. In writing *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, our aim has been to offer a comprehensive and readable introduction to the study of death and dying, one that highlights the main issues and questions as well as the most interesting problems. We are sensitive to the reader's need for a text that balances intensity with relief, detailed investigation of specific issues with general discussion of broader topics. There is a sense of genuine collaboration between author and reader in exploring the sometimes difficult, perhaps painful, issues and questions relative to dying and death. The text embodies an approach to the study of death and dying that combines the intellectual and the emotional, the social and the individual, the experiential and the scholarly. It emphasizes the positive values of compassion, listening, and tolerance for the views of others and encourages the reader to engage in a constructive process of self-discovery.

This book presents a comprehensive survey of an area of study that is still in its formative stage. It is not an indoctrination to any one point of view, but an introduction to diverse points of view. The reader is invited to participate in discovering the assumptions and predispositions that have inhibited open discussion about death and dying for much of the twentieth century. Readers may well form their own opinions, but, when they do, it is to be hoped that this is done only after considering other possibilities in a spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness. Unbiased investigation makes available choices that might otherwise be neglected because of ignorance or prejudice.

The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying provides readers with a solid grounding in theory and research as well as methods for applying what is learned to their own situations, personal and professional. For individuals who wish to pursue further study of particular topics, a list of recommended readings is provided at the end of each chapter, and citations given in the chapter notes can be used as a guide to additional sources, including pertinent selec-

tions in the companion volume to this text, *The Path Ahead: Readings in Death and Dying* (Mayfield, 1995). Thus, readers are introduced to a broad range of topics in death studies while being encouraged to investigate more deeply particular topics that evoke special interest.

The study of death is necessarily interdisciplinary. Accordingly, contributions from medicine, the humanities, and the social sciences can all be found here in their relevant contexts. Throughout the book, principles and concepts are made more meaningful by extensive use of examples and anecdotes. Boxed material and other illustrative materials expand upon and provide counterpoint to the textual presentation. We urge readers to make use of these materials. Excessive technicalities and jargon are avoided; specialized terms, when needed, are clearly defined. Although topics are organized in a way that we believe will meet the needs of most readers, the book has been written to allow for flexibility in sequencing the chapters for those who prefer a different approach.

While retaining all of the features that instructors and students have found beneficial in earlier editions, the fourth edition reflects ongoing evolution in the study of death and dying. For example, Chapter 3 focuses attention on how forces of socialization influence the way people relate to dying and death in a given society. This material builds on the examination of American attitudes toward death in Chapter 1 and the discussion of historical and cross-cultural perspectives on death in Chapter 2. We believe the emphasis on sociocultural factors in the first three chapters will give readers a solid basis for appreciating how specific issues in death, dying, and bereavement affect individuals, families, and social groups. In addition, throughout the text, we discuss the role of ethnic traditions in modern, culturally diverse societies.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal, first, with the modern health care system, including options for delivering medical care to terminally ill patients, and, then, with the experience of life-threatening illness and patterns of coping with it. The issues discussed in these two chapters lead naturally to a concern with the ethical questions that arise in the context of dying in a technological age. Chapter 6 is devoted to an exploration of such concerns, including informed consent, euthanasia, and the definition of death. Taken together, these three chapters provide a comprehensive investigation of issues related to medical care at the end of life.

In the next three chapters, attention is given to the experience of bereavement and its aftermath. Chapter 7 deals with grief and how its expression is influenced by a variety of psychosocial factors. Chapter 8 examines how rites and ceremonies for the dead create opportunities for expressing grief. It also includes detailed coverage of the elements and costs associated with contemporary funeral rituals. Chapter 9 looks at ways in which the legal system influences our understanding and practices relative to dying and death. This influence is evident in the evolving nature of advance directives, organ donation, death certification, and the procedures and processes associated with wills and probate.

A lifespan perspective on dying and death is presented in Chapters 10 and 11. The kinds of death-related issues likely to be encountered at different

stages of life are placed within a developmental context that draws upon both theoretical work and clinical findings. Building on this discussion of normative patterns through the life cycle, Chapter 12 examines suicide as a mode of death that relates to a variety of risk factors, many of which are subject to alleviation through timely application of techniques of prevention and intervention. New to the fourth edition is an expanded discussion of the psychological autopsy as a means of investigating the antecedents of suicidal behavior. Continuing the examination of issues that are crucial to a comprehensive view of death and dying, Chapter 13 provides detailed discussion about various risks of death that have a particular impact in contemporary societies. Addressed are issues relating to risk-taking, accidents, disasters, violence and homicide, war and the nuclear threat, AIDS and other emerging diseases, and stress.

Questions about the meaning that human beings ascribe to mortality come to the fore in Chapters 14 and 15. Chapter 14 presents a wide range of concepts and beliefs regarding questions of immortality and the afterlife, drawing from religious and secular traditions as well as modern research into near-death experiences. Chapter 15 reviews the topics discussed throughout the text and provides a summary of the personal values and societal applications that can be gained through education about death. In bringing together many of the topics covered in the text, the chapter concludes with a discussion about how the “good death” might be defined.

Many people have assisted us in the making of this book. Over the course of its four editions, *The Last Dance* has been reviewed by instructors in a broad range of academic disciplines who have provided suggestions for making it a better teaching tool. Formal reviews have been provided by Thomas Attig, Bowling Green State University; Michael Beechem, University of West Florida, Pensacola; John B. Bond, The University of Manitoba; Sandor B. Brent, Wayne State University; Tom Bruce, Sacramento City College; Charles A. Corr, Southern Illinois University; Gerry R. Cox, Fort Hays State University; Steven A. Dennis, Utah State University; Kenneth J. Doka, College of New Rochelle; Audrey K. Gordon, Oakton Community College; Debra Bence Grow, Pennsylvania State University; John Harvey, Western Illinois University; Russell G. Henke, Towson State University; David D. Karnos, Eastern Montana College; Linda C. Kinrade, California State University, Hayward; Anthony Lenzer, University of Hawaii at Manoa; J. Davis Mannino, Santa Rosa Junior College; Wendy Martyna, University of California, Santa Cruz; Marsha McGee, Northeast Louisiana University; Walter L. Moore, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Vincent M. Rolletta, Erie Community College; Rita S. Santanello, Belleville Area College, Illinois; Thomas W. Satre, Sam Houston State University; Edwin S. Shneidman, University of California, Los Angeles; Judith M. Stillion, Western Carolina University; Jeffrey S. Turner, Mitchell College; Hannelore Wass, University of Florida, Gainesville; John B. Williamson, Boston College; C. Ray Wingrove, University of Richmond; Joseph M. Yonder, Villa Maria College of Buffalo; and Andrew Scott Ziner, University of North Dakota. Other colleagues have informally shared their ideas for enhancing particular aspects of the text. To all of these educators who have taken time to comment on the book through its successive incarnations, we extend our appreciation.

In addition, a debt of gratitude is owed to the scholars whose work is represented in these pages.

Assistance in gathering both text and art materials was willingly provided by staff members at a number of museums, libraries, and governmental institutions. Other individuals helped with research, clerical, and production tasks. Our collaborators on successive editions of the *Instructor's Guide* that accompanies this text deserve special thanks, and we express our gratitude to Barbara Jade Sironen, Patrick Vernon Dean, and Robert James Baugher. In our association with Mayfield Publishing Company, we have had the pleasure of working with a host of people who exemplify excellence in publishing. Particular thanks is due to Robert C. Erhart, who nurtured this book during its early development; Franklin C. Graham, whose editorial vision and warm friendship inspires and sustains us when the going gets rough; Albert Burkhardt and Nancy Sears, who initially set the tone for the book's design and art direction; Linda Toy, who, as head of the production department, somehow displays uncommon (though welcome) calm and cheerfulness despite pressing deadlines. For this new edition, we also thank Merlyn Holmes, who kept manuscript, galleys, and proofs on track, and Julie Wildhaber, who provided timely editorial assistance. Finally, we are grateful to Matt Strickland, whose generous and expert help in completing both the textbook and its ancillaries came in the nick of time. To all whose help was instrumental in bringing this edition of *The Last Dance* to readers, our sincere thanks.

L. A. D.

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