


Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51767-6 - The Study of Dying: From Autonomy to Transformation

Edited by Allan Kellehear

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The Study of Dying

What is it really like to die? Though our understanding about the biology of dying is complex and incomplete, greater complexity and diversity can be found in the study of what human beings encounter socially, psychologically and spiritually during the experience. Contributors from disciplines as diverse as social and behavioural studies, medicine, demography, history, philosophy, art, literature, popular culture and religion examine the process of dying through the lens of both animal and human studies. Despite common fears to the contrary, dying is not simply an awful journey of illness and decline; cultural influences, social circumstances, personal choice and the search for meaning are all crucial in shaping personal experiences. This intriguing volume will be of interest to clinicians, professionals, academics and students of death, dying and end-of-life care, and anyone curious about the human confrontation with mortality.

ALLAN KELLEHEAR is Professor of Sociology at the University of Bath.

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Therefore learn, know yourself and see

Look how I am, and thus shalt thou be

From The Kalendar and Compost of Shepherds

Guy Marchant (1493)

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Preface

What is it like to die? If the contributors to this volume are to be believed, much depends on who you ask. Dying is no one thing, no single experience, no easy stereotype of decline or failing. Dying is not encompassed by what we know about illness even though illness is a common route to death. Dying is not always about decline and hopelessness though both decline and despair are commonly associated with the end of life. Dying can be quick or slow, heroic or degrading, emblematic of a life or unexpectedly transforming. Dying people can display control and autonomy or fear and dependency. Dying is like living because dying people are living people – they are not dead, yet.

In these ways, the human experience of dying is complex, diverse, surprising and full of possibility. This book brings together a collection of scholars and clinicians whose aim is to demonstrate some of this complexity to the reader. Their meditations, examples and reviews remind us not to be too quick to stereotype dying as simply sad and bad. The aim of this volume then, is to dare us to pause and think again, and to re-examine our common fate more carefully, more thoughtfully, even more hopefully.

I begin this book with an overview of what the social and behavioural studies have observed about dying. I summarize their observations and opinions into ‘themes’. I have then asked each contributor from medicine or the social sciences and humanities to explore what their own discipline has observed about dying, noting how, if at all, these social and behavioural themes apply to their own areas. The early chapters examine some of the clinical and biological processes involved in dying and death. These writers remind readers of the underlying organic and animal basis of our final dying moments that lead to death itself. But just minutes or hours before those often-uniform organic processes take place, individual and social meanings of dying can express themselves in a mesmerizing diversity of ways.

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Most of this book, then, is specifically looking at how people behave just minutes, hours or days before their death and how that conduct is influenced by an array of physical, psychological, cultural and spiritual factors triggered by the fact that they will die very shortly. In addition to these descriptions and observations about dying are other meditations and observations about dying as we have recorded these in our art or literature, on screen or inside Western theologies, philosophies or histories. In this broad way this book is less about 'death and dying' and more about 'living with dying'. And in this way too, this is the first major multidisciplinary review devoted specifically to the topic of dying both as a lived experience and as a process of meaning-making in the shadow of imminent death.

Of course, there are limits to what we can do in such an early, introductory volume. We limit ourselves to mainly Western literature and experience. Our art chapter, for example, provides highlights rather than an exhaustive review of artistic representations of dying from the Classical period to the present. We do not attempt to look at hunter-gatherer or prehistoric art. Our religion chapter is devoted to Judaeo-Christian thinking and not, for example, Islamic or Shintoist ideas about dying. We have not attempted a chapter on children's views about dying. There is obviously much more to say and far more to describe. There is far more to debate and challenge. There is much to think about.

But if this collection of essays stimulates a more critical, thoughtful, more global set of meditations – and research – about our common fate, then both professional and philosophical aims of this book will have been ably achieved. The specific, multidisciplinary study of dying is an important, recent area of scholarship. We hope we have been able to demonstrate, in this collection of reviews and observations, the basic elements of our knowledge about this experience as it currently stands. And we hope through the book's ability to provoke important discussion about what we know about dying, or perhaps more importantly about the gaps in our current understandings, that it will stimulate far more work by far more people in the future.