

Anthropology 457: Anthropology of Death and Dying

Weekly Reflection Papers

See also: [Syllabus](#) | [War Journal](#) | [Research Paper](#)

Goals

A primary goal of the assignments is to look for cultural patterns and apply a systematic analysis that includes reference to gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or any other significant variables. Try to recognize diverse cultural responses to the basic human experience of death and dying. When considering our own familial or social milieu, are there beliefs and practices (either overt or covert and unspoken) that prevail?

Week One: Death Be Not Proud

1. KICKED THE BUCKET: Write a two page death autobiography. What has informed your understanding of death and dying? You may refer to movies, television and popular media, music, church, friends and family, or even pets. What do you know about death and dying? What do you want to know about the anthropology of death and dying?
2. PASSED ON/PASSED AWAY: Each class is different from every other and in a metaphorical sense, has a "life" of its own. When the class ends, so does that life we are a part of now. Plan your death as if you will die during dead week, knowing that the memorial service will occur during our "final." Does the foreknowledge of your death change how you live this quarter? What would you do differently if you thought your death was imminent? How would your relationships change? What would your ideal death entail? Will you be conscious of dying throughout, until the last moment? How will you die? What happens when you slip this mortal coil? What happens after you die?

Week Two: Dead Can Dance

1. ETHNO: Review the obituaries in the Bellingham Herald or The New York Times. What analysis can you bring to the review that is reflective of culture: religious, socio-economic, kinship, ethnicity, gender, age or generation?
2. TECHNO: The first two articles in AE review issues concerning definitions of death, specifically brain death. Why has the reliance on cerebral brain death been criticized? What implications would there be for our society if we perceived of death as a decentralized process and not cerebral brain death? What do you think about all this?

Week Three: Mummy, Give Me Money

As always, choose ANY option or opt for your own topic.

1. MUMMY: Trace your genealogy. Try to find the year and the mode of each relative's death. What do you know about your ancestor's deaths? Discuss the patterns relative to causes of death. Consider your genealogy or the kinship chart you have constructed from the viewpoint of an anthropologist. Are there repetitions in funeral rituals? What do you know about the beliefs about life after death of those on your chart or genealogical discussion? What mourning customs, if any, are prevalent? Is there an avoidance of mentioning the name of the deceased to the recently bereaved in our own culture?
2. AS LONG AS WE BOTH SHALL LIVE: Adjunct to the assignment: Interview a person from another country or a different cultural/religious/ethnic group. Ask about the following: funeral rituals, beliefs about life after death, mourning customs.

Week Four (Halloween week): Day of the Dead

1. FOR NOW AND FOR ETERNITY: Please critique the readings in your reflection/essay this week. Summarize, critique, react and interact with the authors and subjects. What are you thinking? How can the readings lead to thinking differently?
2. TELL LAURA NOT TO CRY: Consider grief from various perspectives. Have you grieved? Is there such a thing as "good grief"? Compare grief in different cultures. Is grief a cross-cultural universal? Is it displayed in culturally-specific ways? How is grief tied to social structure, subsistence, gender, the economy, religion, etc.?

Week Five: The Ghosts of Venice - DEATH IN VENICE - due Tuesday.

1. THE BENNINIS AT HARRY'S BAR: The gondola tipped and you fell in the canal. Maybe it was the bennini, the sun's glare, the crowds, or that Venetian ambiance, but you sank like a stone. You have a near death experience. Describe it. A year later you tell the story to three people: Jane, a biological anthropologist; Gordon, a Northwest Coast Indian shaman; and Lee, your best friend. How do they each interpret your NDE? What do they tell you? How do they explain it from their various perspectives? What do you think about what they think? Why?

Week Six: Dance with the Devil

1. Death Takes A Holiday: In Hebrew culture as in East Indian society the body is most often disposed of within 24 hours. In Tibetan culture the must not be disturbed for 3 days. Compare and comment on ethnic/religious differences. You might bring in our discussion with Dr. Goldfogle, the medical examiner we visited.

2. Joe Black: Discuss the portrayal of dead bodies in the media - television news, movies, or popular programming. Is a picture of a corpse killed in war offensive on the evening news? Why were coffins carrying American men and women killed in Iraq forbidden on television during the first year of the war? When we have seen so much death in the movies, are we numb to death in the news?

Week Seven: 28 Days

1. TONGLÉN: You are a cultural anthropologist in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina studying the repatriation, or lack of it, of Bosnian Muslims to their homes. A forensic anthropologist asks you to assist in the identification of remains found in a mass grave. There is not identification on the bodies, but much of the clothing is handmade or patched. In order to assist in the identification, what do you do? What tools do you use? When you reach the point of finding kin or friends of the murdered men to help in your identification, how do you proceed? What are your concerns? What kind of reception to you expect? What kind of economic support do you expect?

2. BARDO: Continue to compare/critique readings. Compare/critique the class materials, including lecture, films, quests, and discussions. Which article in the Death text did you find the most memorable? Which would you have dropped? What is your stand on euthanasia? What about the death penalty? Did the Elie Weisel article change your understanding of the Holocaust? How does Rummel define/explain "urban homicide," "megamurders" and "kilomurders"? What is the future of death and dying with reference to "democide"

Week Eight: Waking Life

1. THE GHOSTS OF MR. HARRIS. A former professor in the anthropology department lived in a big old house on the Southside of town years ago. He said he believed it was haunted. Yes, my former professor said there was a ghost in house. It didn't bother anyone, but it was a cause of some concern when his children would hear doors open and close, the stairs creek, odd noises now and then. Do you believe in ghosts? Why do we tell ghost stories? And on this coming Halloween, why do we love to scare ourselves?

2. EVERYBODY DIES: How would you like to die? How will you die? Tell me about your death! Everybody dies!

Week Nine: The Big Sleep

1. DEATH BE NOT PROUD: You are an applied anthropologist working for a mental-health center. A child is dying of leukemia. You are called in to counsel the child, but it becomes evident to you that the parents need counseling, too. Drawing from your anthropological training and the Rinpoche text, discuss your approach to this situation. What background information do you need (re. the ethnicity, religion, etc) of the family?

2. THE BIG BAD WOLF: Examine several books containing fairy tales for children that involve a death theme (for example, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, or the Three Little Pigs). Analyze the stories based on the following questions: Who dies? How did the death occur? Was the dead body shown? If there was a death ritual, what was it? Did the characters in the story express grief? What was their response? Did the story mention the words death, dies, or dead? What would a child be likely to learn about death from hearing or reading this story? As another alternative, discuss the portrayal of dead bodies in the media - television news, movies, or popular programming.

Week Ten: Samadhi

1. A BEAUTIFUL CORPSE: To your surprise you have just found out that you have inherited the funeral home of a long-lost relative. The will states that, if you can keep the funeral home business for five years and make a profit, you will receive an inheritance of \$1,000,000! You now have some decisions to make about your new business. You must hire 5 new funeral directors. What characteristics do you want them to have? What would your casket selection room look like? What innovation would you bring to your new enterprise to make it the "best funeral home in the nation"?

2. THE WIND BENEATH MY WINGS: visit a card shop or the greeting card section of your local grocery store and conduct a semiotic analysis of the sympathy cards. What does your analysis suggest about the American way of grieving?