

DEALING WITH DEATH IN THE CLASSROOM

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She stood rigidly gripping the back of the hospital chapel pew until her knuckles were white; her face without tears. Green eyes staring widely without seeing. In one short afternoon her secure, happy world had been shaken by the death of her fourteen year old brother. His best friend had shot him accidentally as they were squirrel hunting. She was eleven.

Three seven year old boys were impatiently waiting for their teacher to begin church school. In the middle of their scuffling and shoving, Freddie said to Johnny, "Hey, I hear your old man kicked the bucket!" Johnny froze.

The senior art class was busily making objects of art for their classmate who was dying from a malignant brain tumor. When the news reached them that she wouldn't need their art work, they refused to believe it. She was too vibrant, too alive for death to conquer--and they went right on, finishing their work.

He had been the Christmas tree angel, a joyous little redhead constantly running after his dad to "help." Now he was crushed by a horse at a horse show. His favorite girl cousin refused to eat, had recurrent nightmares, and was constantly waiting for Steve to come to play. He was six; she was four.

He was the football hero who had brought his team to victory time after time. After his death, resulting from a wild car ride late at night, the school body sat benumbed at the church service--some of the students sobbing openly, others grim-faced, still others whispering in snatches just to have human contact.

These are true-life experiences of death in one small community. How are the young people involved to be helped through their experience of shock and mourning? For death is a shock; no matter how well prepared the individual or the family is, death is a final separation from a friend or loved one. Mourning is a very real experience with everyone, whether they reveal their feelings or not.

The student spends from five to eight hours each day in the classroom. How can teachers cope with those who

hurt and whose hurt has so many unanswerable questions? Possibly the most neglected area of instruction in the public school systems today is the subject of death. In the latter half of the twentieth century, texts are written, films are made, and teachers unhesitatingly speak of the biological processes surrounding the beginnings of life. Yet, the phenomenon of death, the end of the biological processes of life, is strangely absent from the curriculum. Yet, the teacher will find scant mention of death in his texts on human development. Clairborne S. Jones says in Explaining Death to Children, that "death is...an archaic word in contemporary America-- people pass away, pets are put to sleep, flowers wither and fade..." Yet death, no matter how it is dressed up, ignored, or denied, is a part of the regularly ordered cycle of life. Only as a teacher can come to terms with death, can he give reasonable support and explanation to his students who experience grief. He must be able to deal adequately with their strung-out emotions and help them to live life realistically and fully, for the person who is unable to accept death runs the risk of emotional disturbances and future disruption of a healthy life.

Contrary to common belief, even the very young child feels the effects of a death of someone close to him. He is aware at all times of important happenings in his small world. In the case of a death, very likely he is unsure of its meaning; if he is left to stumble onto meanings of his own, it can be very damaging to him. Bromberg and Schilder point out that "the child learns to consider death either as a blessing or as a great evil by watching and imitating his elders. For many, death is fearful because the grief-and-fear-reaction of his parents has made it appear so."² When the child of two or three years of age experiences a death involving his family relationships, there is little value in explanations, and possibly more harm in telling the child that the person he no longer sees around is "sleeping." In equating sleep with death, adults may cause the child to refuse to sleep. He needs to be assured that in all the changes he feels, the things that he is accustomed to are still there. He needs warmth and love and a sharing of the things that he understands.

Children of early school years often play death games such as "bang, bang, you're dead," or "I shot you dead-- you're s'posed to lie still." This is comfortable for them as long as no one takes them seriously. However, when death occurs to someone close to them or even to a pet, they react instantly and sometimes violently. Often their reaction is stoically hidden and they must be encouraged to talk about the problem. The little boy who found his cat stiff in death reacted violently. He screamed and tried to fight with his father when the cat was picked up for burial. Finally, he was reassured that

the pet was lifeless and allowed it to be buried. It was explained to him that all things are returned to the earth, and the earth receives all things and cradles them. Another reaction to the loss of a pet is seeming unconcerned. Hansi's dog was hit by a truck, and Hansi at first seemed unconcerned. However, he soon had recurrent nightmares and questioned why God should allow his pet to be killed. The situation was finally resolved by Hansi's sharing in the plans for a funeral for the dog. Each child is individualistic and unique in his reaction to the things that happen to him. He says and does things that have to be met "right on." Evasiveness on the part of teacher or parent only prolongs the adjustment for the child. Robert Kastenbaum in Explaining Death to Children, states that if the child has not been told the truth about death, he will find it particularly difficult to know when death is not involved.³ The child is a part of the family and should share in the sad experiences that are connected with the death of a member of the family. Even if he does not know the distant relative, if he sees his parents in grief, he feels the need to cry, too. This way he has the opportunity to work through the strange emotions he feels around him, and he learns how to live through the unordinary events of life.

Older children are more complex in their relationships within their families and with their peers in school. They have reached a more mature attitude of the world about them. They have strange new feelings about love and are able to understand the feelings of others. This sensitivity to others can very often be the cause of severe reactions to the bereavement they may experience or what they observe in others. Some young people suffer extreme depression. For example, three years after the death of his mother, it was brought to the attention of the school's counseling service that Paul was refusing to answer when called upon in class. He was sullen and refused to communicate with the psychologist. Finally, after many weeks of patient counseling, he responded to a cup of hot chocolate given to him by the psychologist. It was only after many more sessions, as well as parent-teacher conferences, that Paul and his teachers discovered that with the loss of his mother, he had had no one to fulfill his emotional needs. With an improved home situation, Paul improved scholastically and eventually recovered emotionally. Yet, he undoubtedly had experienced damaging traumas that would leave permanent scars.⁴

Other bereaved children find it impossible to concentrate on their assignments. It was two years after the loss of both her brother and her sister that Gail was able to maintain her usual grade average. She dropped out of all extra-curricular activities, stayed

very close to her home, and preferred her parent's company to that of her peers.

Still others feel a sense of hopelessness in achievement: who will there be to applaud the lessons well done? For whom should they work hard? Still other children who are grieving respond in anger. They become discipline problems in the classroom. Very often they are unaware themselves as of the reason for their anger. Johnny persisted in throwing balls in the forbidden area near the greenhouse. At last the inevitable happened, Johnny's behavior resulted in broken windows, but a discerning school official reasoned that Johnny's anger resulted from his associating flowers with funerals. With the proper counseling, Johnny was able to work out his grief and became less of a discipline problem.

Usually teachers and other adults are understanding and kind during the first year of bereavement. But lack of time and perhaps a greater lack of knowledge in handling the children leaves their healing in the hands of the school psychologists or counselors. Difficult as it may be to accept, a child may suffer the effects of bereavement two or three years after the loss has occurred. However, like any other illness, bereavement must be treated directly. Usually the prescription is love, understanding, warmth, and acceptance. With these in hand, the teacher will be able to recognize the symptoms of the grieving child and bring all his forces to bear upon them.

In a questionnaire on a choice of discussion topics given out to high school students, the subject of death and dying was the item most frequently checked. In spite of the great increase of knowledge and technology in the world today, death is still the area of the great unknown. From a physical standpoint, no one can relate to another what it is like to die. In the book, What Happens When You Die?, Maurice Maeterlinck is quoted:

Life is a secret; death is the key that opens it; but he who turns the key disappears forever into the secret.⁵

The adolescent, in his time of emotional explosions and smolderings, as well as his exploring of new ideas and understandings, wants to know about death and its meaning for him. Yet it is his life experiences up to this point that will carry him through his bereavement. Dick's brother had died in the service, and a year later his father had succumbed to surgery. After seeing his mother safely home from the hospital, seventeen year old Dick disappeared for many hours. He had suddenly been moved into the position as head of the house, and he

had to find his way by himself. In the days that followed, friends stood by with love and understanding. Dick knew they were there, but he worked out his grief by himself. It is difficult to help adolescents in their grief. Their efforts to puzzle out the meanings of life and death on their own must be respected. The more students feel that they can approach teachers with their ideas on any subject and receive an interested, dependable hearing, then the more likely they are to share their concerns about death. If parents and teachers can approach the subject of death without dismay or embarrassment and if they can respect the youth's view of reality, then his development of a healthy, positive attitude toward death will be assured. C. S. Lewis says in A Grief Observed, that he came to realize that "bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love."⁶ Life and death are inseparable; when the ingredient of love is added, the teacher will not only be adding knowledge to his students, but will be teaching them how to live with the extremes of life as well.

Footnotes

1. Clairborne S. Jones, "In the Midst of Life," in Explaining Death to Children, ed. Earl A. Grollman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 127.
2. W. Bromberg, "Death and Dying," Psychoanalytic Review, XX, 213-14.
3. Robert Kastenbaum, "The Child's Understanding of Death: How Does it Develop?" in Explaining Death to Children, ed. Earl A. Grollman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 100.
4. Hella Moller, "Death: Handling the Subject and Affected Students in the Schools," in Explaining Death to Children, ed. Earl A. Grollman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).
5. August H. Wagner, ed., What Happens When You Die? (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1968), p. immediately following title.
6. C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed (New York: The Seabury Press, 1961), p. end paper.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON DEATH AND DYING

RESOURCES FOR THE TEACHER

Charon, Jacques. Modern Man and Mortality. New York: Macmillan Company, 1964.

This book deals with the "therapy of death fear" and raises the perennial question: "What is the purpose and meaning of life if death is---as it appears to be to an ever broadening segment of our society---the total annihilation of the conscious personality?" The author believes it is not a waste of time to search for an answer to the above question.

Foss, Martin. Death, Sacrifice, and Tragedy. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1969.

What makes man cover up the "important feature of life...death?" The only thing that justifies human existence is every person giving himself to others without restraint. Every life is destined to be sacramental and intercessional.

Grollman, Earl A., ed. Explaining Death to Children. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

The emotional and mental health of both adult and child is not the denial of tragedy but the open and frank acknowledgement of it. When tragedy is admitted, people can find comfort in each other and can go on to build worthwhile lives, even in a world such as the world of the twentieth century.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. On Death and Dying. New York: Macmillan Company, 1969.

The author worked with dying patients for two and a half years and gives an account of a new opportunity to focus on the patient as a human being, including him in dialogues, and asking him questions about the final stages of life with all its anxieties, fears, and hopes.

Lewis, C. S. A Grief Observed. New York: Seabury Press, 1961.

An intensely personal account of his wife's death written on notepaper in longhand as "a defense

against total collapse, a safety valve" Mr. Lewis comes to the conclusion that "bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love."

Mills, Liston O., ed. Perspectives on Death. New York: Abingdon Press, 1969.

Contains the revised and edited versions of lectures given at the Vanderbilt Divinity School by the faculty and other guest speakers. This book makes available the biblical teachings on death and how they are interpreted by the church. It investigates current concepts of death as they are reflected in contemporary literature and theology.

Pieper, Josef. Death and Immortality. New York: Herder and Herder, 1969.

A philosophical approach to the subject of death. "One who has been struck by the experience of death is forced to direct his gaze towards the whole of reality."

Rogness, Alvin N. Appointment with Death. New York: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1972.

"Nation-wide surveys show that young people are especially interested with this one unrehearsed event in their existence and their attitude toward it affects many other decisions in life." The book treats the subject of death helpfully and realistically.

Vernon, Glenn M. Sociology of Death. New York: Ronald Press Company, 1970.

This book is an attempt to help readers examine their own reactions to death and dying as well as understand the behavior of the dying individual.

Wagner, August H., ed. What Happens When You Die? London: Abelard-Schulman, 1968.

A compilation of letters by some of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century gathered in the last thirty years in answer to the questionnaire, "What is the meaning of death?" Some of the responses are from David Ben-Gurion, Sir Richard Gregory, and Abbe Felix Klein.

Lewis, C. S. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Illustrated by Paul Baynes. New York: Macmillan Co., 1960.

The first of a seven volume series that deals with the eternal struggle of good versus evil, and life versus death.

✓ Saint-Exupery, Antoine de. The Little Prince. Translated from the French by Katherine Woods. New York: Reynal and Company, Inc., 1943.

Full of mystical symbolism, meaning different things to different people. More easily understood by the Christian child.

Speare, Elizabeth George. The Bronze Bow. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961.

Death represented by hate; overcome by love. Setting in the time of Christ.

White, E. B. Charlotte's Web. Pictures by Garth Williams. New York: Harper & Row, 1952.

The death of a spider who achieves immortality through her children as well as through her selfless achievements in saving the life of her friend, Wilbur, the pig.

Wilde, Oscar. The Happy Prince. The complete fairy stories of Oscar Wilde. Illustrated by Philippe Jullian. London: Gerald Duckworth & Company, Ltd., (distributed in the United States by the Macmillan Company), 1952.

This anthology includes the story of "The Selfish Giant," who, through the example of a little lame boy, dies happily, knowing that he is no longer selfish.

III. Books for the teen-age student.

Buck, Pearl S. The Big Wave. Illustrated with prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai. New York: The John Day Co., Inc., 1947.

Jiya's parents were killed by a huge wave and his foster father helps him to recover from his shock, accept death, and live again without bitterness. "We do not fear death because we understand that life and death are necessary to each other."

Dooley, Thomas Anthony. Doctor Tom Dooley, My Story. New York: Farrar, Straus & Company (Ariel Books), 1960.

A hero who lived courageously with cancer and died believing that he would continue to live.

Frank, Anne. The Diary of a Young Girl. Translated from the Dutch by B. M. Mooyaart-Doubleday. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1952.

During the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam, a young girl ignores the shadow of death and confidently plans for the future.

Gunther, John. Death Be Not Proud. A Memoir. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.

A glimpse of a brave family whose son goes through the ordeal of terminal cancer at the age of seventeen.

Munford, Lewis. Green Memories, The Story of Geddes Munford. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1947.

At nineteen, Geddes Munford was killed in World War II. This book may help the older child to understand tragic deaths as well as understand the reactions of the survivors.

Musgrave, Florence. Marged. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Company (Ariel Books), 1956.

A Welsh girl in American becomes embittered because the flooding Ohio River claims the lives of her parents. She blames her grandmother for their deaths because she refused to go to safety in time. The realization of the grandmother's feeling of guilt finally brings peace to Marged.

Weir, Ester. The Loner. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1963.

The only person who had ever befriended a homeless, nameless boy is killed before his eyes. He runs away in his grief. Eventually he finds a family, a home, and a name.

IV. Films

- Dead Birds 83 min.
16 MM Film Optical Sound color
- Depicts the people of the Dani tribe of West New Guinea. Protrays their elaborate system of inter-tribal warfare and revenge, and their belief that people, like birds, must die.
- Prod. Gardner Dist. MGHT 1963.
- Dear Little Lightbird 18 min.
16 MM Film Optical Sound color
- Portrays a father's reactions to the life and death of his three-year old son who was born with a heart defect.
- LC no. FLA65-713 Dist. AUSLDR 1964.
- Great Plan 20 min.
16 MM Film Optical Sound color
- Tells the story of two children whose grandmother is dying and who can't understand why God would let her die, and why their grandfather isn't crying. The grandfather tells them what he thinks death means.
- From the Breakthu series
Prod. TRAFCO Dist. TRAFCO 1962.
- My Turtle Died Today 8 min.
16 MM Film Optical Sound Color
- A boy's pet turtle dies and a pet cat gives birth to a litter of kittens. Designed to stimulate discussion on the inevitability of death and the continuity of life.
- LC no. IIA68-211
Prod. BOSUST Dist. FA 1968.
- Sandpile, the part five, Death 26 min.
16 MM Film Optical Sound Black and white
- Examines the meaning of life and death through dramatized vignettes, presents various concepts discussed by the cast and the theologian, Dr. William Hamilton. From the Look Up and Live Series. TV
- PROD. CBSTV Dist. CAROUF

V. Periodical articles for further study by the teacher.

- Bourjaily, M. "Pretty Good Teacher, For a Cat." Readers Digest, 98(March, 1971), 82-6.
- Cargar, H. J. "Death is Alone: Excerpt from Death and Hope." Catholic World, 210(March, 1970), 269-72.
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- Gordon, A. "Answer at Nightfall." Readers Digest, 97:143-5 S '70. 97(September, 1970), 143-5.
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