

Death. The Unspoken Obscenity

scott pearce talks his new death curriculum

Our abiding attitude toward death is to deny and brand as taboo rather than to confront and face as fact. Dr. Rollo May, writing in Love and Will says "The ways we repress death and its symbolism are amazingly like the way the Victorians repressed sex. Death is not talked about in front of children, nor talked about at all if we can help it."

. . . Yet one of the most consistent themes in literature, student films, and creative writing is death. It is usually a felt concern rather than an intellectual one. Any serious study in a college classroom should be both intellectual (theories of when and why death occurs, afterlife, body disposal, the American way of death, etc.) and emotional (what do you feel about death, afterlife, what does the fear of death make you do, when do you think about death, etc.) The history, science, and sociology of death have all been swept under the curriculum carpet in favor of more weighty matters. In literature death plays a constant role (name five books or movies in which no one dies) but is rarely dealt with except as a literary device for eliminating characters or ending stories. In school as in the rest of culture, death is hidden and made painless to us survivors.

The questions which follow really deserve mature thought, discussion and study. They are offered in the hope that you will reflect on them seriously and use them wisely in whatever classroom context they might best serve

On the Social Level:

1. Is the attitude of Americans toward death substantially different from the attitude of Europeans, Africans, or Asians?
2. How is death viewed and dealt with in other cultures?
3. What are some primitive ideas of death?
4. What are the various answers to the question "What happens to people after death?"
5. What are scientists doing to put an end to involuntary death?
6. Describe a society in which no one has to die unless he wishes.
7. Suicide: should it be a right? (Suicide is fifth in frequency as a cause of death among 15-19 years olds.)
8. Investigate cryonics. What do people do to avoid death?
9. If you had to design a perfect funeral what would it be like?
10. What could be done with bodies after death? If burial is continued, will we eventually run out of valuable space?
11. How is death presented in popular music today?
12. Is death presented differently in movies now than it used to be?
13. How can society better prepare its members for death?
14. Investigate the donation of the body to science.
15. How much of a factor is the possibility of global death?
16. Do people ever have the right to cause the death of others?
17. How does advertising exploit the fear of death?
18. Agree or disagree with this statement of Freud's: "In the unconscious everyone of us is convinced of his own immortality."
19. Take a poll of the class and compare your results with the Gallup poll which showed that "one out of every four people who believe in God does not believe in resurrection."

On a personal level:

1. How do you feel about your own death?
2. What experience have you had of death so far? What is the closest you have ever come to dying?
3. How do you feel about that experience?
4. What will happen to you after you die?
5. How would you like to die and when?
6. Describe your own funeral.
7. Do you have a right to take your own life?
8. What do you believe will happen to you after you die?
9. How does this belief influence your daily actions?
10. What would you do if you were immune from death?
11. It has been said that life would not be worth living if there is nothing for which one would be willing to die. Is there anything for which you would be willing to give up your life?
12. Have you ever considered suicide? [80% of people surveyed admit to having played with the idea.]
13. Would you donate your body to science?