



Lawrence R Samuel Ph.D. Psychology Yesterday

## Death, American Style

America's uneasy relationship with death and dying goes back almost a century.

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Many of us can personally testify that there is often a heavy cost of living longer, healthier lives. The end of life is now frequently a prolonged period carrying a heavy emotional, ethical, physical, and financial price, something that has helped make death this country's greatest taboo. Over the past century, death and sex battled it out to be the number one unmentionable in America; these two topics were most reflective of our shame and embarrassment when it comes to all corporeal matters. But death has surged way ahead of sex on a "forbidden quotient," I think most would agree; the former is now firmly ensconced as this country's leading source of uneasiness, discomfort, and apprehension. The notion of one day disappearing is contrary to many of our defining cultural values, with death and dying viewed as profoundly "un-American" experiences. The rise of the self has made it increasingly difficult to acknowledge the fact that our individual selves will no longer exist. Death and dying became almost unmentionable words over the course of the last century, topics not to be brought up in polite conversation. Although we have recently made some progress in reconciling the fact that life is a finite resource, we remain very unprepared for the approaching tsunami of death as the largest generation in history begins to die off in great numbers. Americans need to individually and collectively come to terms with mortality if we are to avert a major social crisis over the next couple of decades, I propose, something few people are thinking or talking about. I am not optimistic about this happening, and conclude that the emerging "death-centric" society will be a period of considerable turmoil, perhaps equivalent to that of the countercultural 1960s and 1970s.

The breadth and depth of death as a subject is truly astounding, its cultural history vividly illustrates. Not just the end of life, death is woven into many aspects of it, especially some of its most memorable moments. Indeed, a good number of our seminal, defining experiences have to do with the loss of a loved one; these events often stick with us for the remainder of our own lives. Death is really about life, if you think about it, a constant reminder to make the most of the time we have. The social and cultural dimensions of death and dying are equally compelling. Death is as good as any way to read the values of a society at a particular point in time, a central component of any civilization. Our cult of celebrity can easily be detected, for example, by our keen interest in the deaths of famous people (especially when they occur under suspicious circumstances, like that of Lady Diana or Michael Jackson). The death of a celebrity, such as James Gandolfini, is often the lead news headline, in fact, this just one of the ways we “contain” our fear of mortality by turning it into pop culture fodder. The popular skull and crossbones motif in fashion (inspired by the Pirates of the Caribbean movies) is another way we publicly display (and mock) death as a cathartic release for our underlying dread of it.

On a deeper level, death is a rich metaphysical stew combining elements of philosophy, psychology, religion, anthropology, and sociology; its close relationship with theories about the afterlife makes the subject yet more intriguing. Science and medicine are of course at the heart of death, so much so that some have argued that their unstated purpose all along has been to solve the “problem” of dying. Death has also served as a go-to theme in popular culture, with Americans having an insatiable appetite for the long goodbye as long as it is not their own. More than anything else, however, death is personal, highly charged with some of the strongest emotions we can feel. Fear, guilt, and, yes, happiness can be found in the dynamics of death, with only love transcending the emotional impact of losing an important person in one’s life. Grief is naturally a big part of death; that it is not just a powerful emotion but can be expressed in an infinite number of ways is typically evident when someone we know dies. That there was and is an “art of dying” reflects the (particularly American) idea that death, like life, is something to master. “Dying well” or achieving “a good death” is in fact gaining considerable social currency, with many sensibly proposing that planning for the end of life is at least as important as planning for any other stage of it. Those who have

mastered the art of dying see death not as a stranger or the enemy but as an essential, natural part of life. Death is not a separate entity or epilog to life but an integral dimension of it, in other words; such a view offers our best chance to increase the likelihood of dying well.

Meanwhile, the fact that each of us will become the dearly departed remains a major problem for America and Americans. We are entering an unprecedented period of death, this to only exacerbate the problem. Americans' fear and loathing of death poses major consequences for the future; the fact that our life spans have been dramatically extended over the last century does not make the impending arrival of death any easier. In fact, many if not most of us are dreading the day this most unwelcome guest will knock on our doors, as our youth-oriented society casts death as a threatening foe or adversary. With the biggest generation in history already in or rapidly hurtling toward its sixties, America is on the brink of becoming a death-oriented society, I contend, something that we are not at all prepared for. Baby boomers are especially unready for this day; their individual and collective deaths may become one of the most important chapters in American history. Already a topic few people like to talk about, death is especially alien to a generation priding themselves on thinking and acting young regardless of their age. Baby boomers will continue to resist their mortality, I believe, making its arrival on a massive scale over the next couple of decades nothing short of traumatic. By putting death in historical perspective, however, we are better equipped to come to terms with the inevitable, and ideally come to the realization that knowing we will die one day makes life that much sweeter.