

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Western civilization unfortunately has become one in which death is culturally denied and defied much to the detriment of those who participate in it. Although there has been a good deal of interest in death related subjects recently, for far too many people, death remains something to be learned about by studying rather than through the process of living and growing, older. The very fact that there are many books, articles, journals, and even courses on the subject of death attests to the fundamental condition of denial in our present social setting. That so many people must go out of and even against the mainstream of social activities and concerns to learn about, discuss, and reflect upon death illustrates but one of the harmful consequences of social denial. Talk about death, a cart of life and an inevitable fate for each of us, is, more often than not, regarded as being morbid, a sign of illness (more likely social abnormality than a physical disease) rather than as one of the many activities entered into by healthy people who wish to integrate, in a balanced way, all of life's experiences into their own. Therefore, society's general interest in not wishing to know about or talk about death makes those who do social rebels, if not outright outcasts.

Another consequence of refusing to think about and accept the reality of death and the probabilities of the various modes of dying is that many of those who do avoid it are left poorly prepared to deal with that reality when it does come. Not wanting to think about the deaths of our loved ones leaves us in shock when we are confronted by them. We lose precious time, never to be recovered, as we fight against our psychological defense mechanisms of denial, in order to accept what is actually happening and to make the most of the present time to improve conditions and relations for our loved ones. There are many, people who are critical of the way they acted while some loved one was dying and later wish that they had acted differently but claim that they were simply unprepared and didn't know any better or couldn't think of anything else to do. Moreover, there are those who are, when confronted with the sudden, and thus of course unexpected, death of a loved one, filled with feelings of guilt and wishes for more time to have shown their true feelings toward the now departed one. Such feelings of shock, unpreparedness, regret, guilt, and hopelessness can be partially alleviated only by doing more for our loved ones while they live and this is made possible by realizing and accepting that we will not be with them for an infinite amount of time. As humans, we are finite and cannot enjoy one another's company for a continuously prolonged time. Knowing that any occasion we are with someone could just be the last might instill certain intensity within it that the pretense that we will always have another day, another time, drains from each meeting and parting.

Denying that others will die is but a reflection of the more fundamental denial each of us makes that we will someday, one day, and any day, surely die. Yet none of us knows for sure that we will have another day. No one alive can tell or accurately predict the future. Tomorrow is promised to no one. And still we act as if it were and when it

becomes obvious that it isn't we are placed at a disadvantage because we were not prepared for the inevitable eventuality of our own demise. Events overtake us. We react feebly. We waste much of the precious little time given us coming to accept what must be and then making the most, the best, of it, of life. For some, unfortunately, it isn't until death is upon them that they begin to understand what life is all about, what the truly important things are, what matters most, and then they begin to live.

The predominant denial in our popular culture of the possibility of mass death and even the total annihilation of our species by our weapons systems has left an entire society ill prepared to take effective measures to deal with such events and to make them less of inevitability. So horrible a thing to contemplate is avoided and being avoided grows more probable and thus more horrible and all the more to be avoided. This vicious, self-defeating cycle can only be broken through a realistic appraisal and acceptance of what it means to be living in an age with nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of tremendous power. But it is a power won from our unceasing quest for mastery over nature and our very success leads us to believe mastery over death might be possible. We think less and less of death, but not to think more of life, only to spend more time in less thought and in more routine actions.

Refusing to accept that death is our inevitable end, we come to see any death as evil and to be fought against. We refuse to distinguish the natural deaths from the unnatural ones that are rightfully to be challenged and avoided. We have created institutions that continuously refuse to let people die and force some of them to proclaim that they have a "right to die" or at least the right to refuse attempts by others to keep them alive when all that means to a healthy minded and realistic person is that they are having their dying prolonged, much to their pain and suffering, and in violations of their rights, values, and dignity.

The selection in this collection is intended to provide insight and education, insight into the ways in which people die, handle the dying of others, and survive the death of loved ones. Knowing these things hopefully will help others to grow and develop a healthier attitude concerning death. They might then be better prepared to handle the deaths of their loved ones but only if they have come first to accept their own finite natures.

Other selections are included to focus attention on some ethical issues involved in the way we deal with the dying and the dead. The personal and social decision making processes will hopefully proceed better if a greater amount of thought is given to these issues of the rights of the dying, the deceased, children, and incompetent patients.

Finally, there are some selections that are intended to encourage reflection on death related matters that permeate an entire cultural setting. More thought is needed on what way exactly death is to be envisioned and dealt with, on what a "natural death" is, and how to avoid the nuclear tragedy that would deprive us all of any natural death and destroy the meaning of our lives and deaths themselves.