

## PREFACE: A THANATOLOGICAL ODYSSEY

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My early encounters with death, like those of other youngsters in the United States, were sporadic and ephemeral. My first encounter with death occurred 63 years ago, when my beloved dog Scrappy was killed by a truck in front of my home. Scrappy was more than a dog, he was my pal. My grief was painful. The death of my dog and the later demises of other pets over time were traumatic experiences. With the help of playmates, I created a pet cemetery for deceased pets and other dead creatures that we found, and that served to foster notions of confronting death collectively and of ritualistic obligations to the dead. At one point, I considered converting a storage shed next to the pet cemetery into a “chapel” for funeral services. My interest in death had become more than casual.

One of my classmates in the third grade was the son of a mortician, and he often brought tombstone catalogs to school. I befriended him, and he let me look at the catalogs. They were imposing, with protective pages of tissue paper between the compelling photogravure pages of tombstone illustrations. I was fascinated by the images of marble and granite markers, and I remember them vividly even today.

The occasional deaths and subsequent funerals of family friends and distant relatives introduced me to human death. Early in my primary school years, my grandparents, over the objections of my parents, took me to the funeral of a family friend who had died. My parents were of the death-denial generation; they believed that children should be shielded from death and that the funeral experience would traumatize me. Those in my grandparents’ generation, however, felt that people should confront death and learn to accept it as a natural and inevitable fact of life. I found the funeral experience, including viewing the body, to be informative and insight inspiring rather than traumatic. Like many individuals of my generation, I did not experience death in my immediate family until adulthood. However, while I was in high school the accidental deaths of several schoolmates gave death a very realistic presence for me.

Growing up during World War II gave me an even more sobering perspective on death, with the large numbers of

combat deaths sustained by the U.S. armed forces. Family friends and neighbors received telegrams telling them of the deaths of sons or husbands with dreadful frequency. The ultimate tally of dead from the war, on both sides, especially as a result of massive bombing attacks such as those on German cities and the atomic bombing attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, demonstrated megadeath of almost unfathomable proportions.

My intellectual interest in death, however, was not piqued until I was in college. Early in my college career, I read Evelyn Waugh’s novel *The Loved One*, with its dark and biting, satirical but compellingly amusing account of a dog cemetery and a human cemetery. Some years later, I read other popular books on death, such as Leroy Bowman’s *The American Funeral* (1959) and Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death* (1963), which proved to be informative, if not entertaining. After college, a tour of duty in the army as a military police officer provided me with training in the investigation of violent death, such as murder, and an assignment as company commander of a military police detachment (making me the de facto chief of police) at Camp Rucker, Alabama, gave me some firsthand exposure to violent deaths from automobile and airplane wrecks as well as suicides.

Early in my graduate school training, I encountered an article in a sociological journal that seized my attention. In 1958, William A. Faunce and Robert L. Fulton published an article titled “The Sociology of Death: A Neglected Area in Sociological Research” in the journal *Social Forces*. Suddenly, I (and some fellow graduate students) realized that death and dying are proper topics for scholarly investigation. One of my professors whom I had told about the article dismissed it as having little in the way of professional promise because the topic was too “doleful.” One of my graduate student friends, however, shortly thereafter undertook to write a master’s thesis on the funeral home as a work system.

By the time I had finished my graduate work, my scholarly inclinations led me to study and teach the sociology of work and occupations as a major specialty. But the study of work encompasses the study of death-related work, among other types of vocational endeavors. I ultimately

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developed an interest in funerary work, and that interest has persisted for the remainder of my career.

In 1968, as a new department head at Western Kentucky University, I inaugurated a new professional journal titled *Sociological Symposium*. As the name implies, each issue was to be a theme issue. The first issue of the journal was devoted entirely to the study of death and dying. It was very well received. Later in my career, when I came to Virginia Tech University, I had developed a more focused interest in the study of death and dying, and over a period of several years, I authored or coauthored a number of papers and articles on such topics as cryonics, last wills and testaments, taxidermy as a thanatological art form, thanatological crime, and symbolic communication between the living and the dead. As a result of my death-related scholarship, I developed a course called “The Sociology of Death,” which I have now taught for 25 years, invariably to very large classes of 130 to 300 students. The exploration of death and dying has come to occupy a place of significant centrality in my scholarly agenda, and I have addressed various death-related topics—such as military combat death and execution—in some of my books and articles.

A number of extended trips to various countries in Southeast Asia (including living in two such countries, the Philippines and Taiwan, on visiting teaching appointments) afforded me opportunities to observe and study death in other cultures. I arrived in Taiwan during Ghost Month, observed funerals and cemetery behavior, and conducted a detailed study of geomancers (*feng shui* practitioners) who select grave sites for deceased persons.

In the late 1970s, I founded the journal *Deviant Behavior*, for which I served as editor in chief for 13 years. During that time, the journal published many articles that addressed various types of death, including murder, suicide, and execution.

As I reached middle age, death began to take its inevitable toll on my family and friends. Within a few short years, I lost my grandfather and grandmother, two maternal uncles, and, in 1979, my father, who died unexpectedly after surgery. Within this general time period my wife lost her grandfather, her father and mother, and her older brother. In recent years, a number of my old friends, dating back to high school, have passed away, as have numerous professional colleagues. Even several of my former students have died. As we age, death ceases to be a stranger and increasingly intrudes in our lives.

A few years ago, I served as editor in chief of the four-volume reference work *The Encyclopedia of Criminology and Deviant Behavior*. My involvement in the development of that work led me to the belief that a new reference compendium in the area of thanatology would be both timely and useful to scholars. I also felt that, rather than an encyclopedia of short and concise entries, this compendium should take the form of a collection of detailed and comprehensive essays that provide suitably informative contexts for the topics being discussed. This two-volume handbook is the result of that inspiration.

This effort has consumed the better part of 2 years and is the product of a sizable group undertaking. In this regard, a number of individuals have played signal roles, and they must be recognized and acknowledged. Rolf Janke at Sage Publications shared my original vision for the development of this compendium and greatly facilitated the process of review and contractual acceptance of the handbook as a Sage publishing project. Much appreciation goes to Rolf for adding the handbook to the Sage agenda. Sara Tauber, Rolf’s assistant, has been the liaison person at Sage throughout the development of this work and has provided invaluable assistance in handling and processing entry manuscripts, overseeing many of the attendant administrative details, and troubleshooting on various problematic details of the project. Many thanks go to Sara for her efforts.

The copy editors for this project, Judy Selhorst and Linda Gray, have done an outstanding job in smoothing out the lumps and bumps in the chapters, as well as polishing and perfecting the narratives presented. The entries reflect their careful attention to detail, and I am most appreciative of their fine efforts. Diana Axelsen has served as the production editor for the handbook and has been its guiding hand as it has moved through the final stages toward publication. She has energetically pushed the project along on schedule and has creatively ensured a finished product that is attractive in design, nicely crafted in format, and impressive in appearance. My gratitude and thanks go to Diana for producing such an excellent set of books.

My four associate editors—Charles Edgley, Michael Leming, Dennis Peck, and Kent Sandstrom—all signed on early, when the handbook was barely out of its conceptualization stage, and contributed to the final plan for, and outline of, the work, thereby lending their names and good offices to the effort. Once the project was under development, they served above and beyond the call of duty, reviewing, editing, and guiding the entry manuscripts to perfection, through multiple revisions in some instances. It was challenging and labor-intensive work, but they accomplished the task with professional aplomb, making no complaints or excuses while maintaining a cheerful mien in the face of my ongoing exhortations to accelerate their editing pace. The result is a set of outstanding essays that are interesting, informative, and insightful. I owe these colleagues a commodious supply of gratitude for their splendid effort.

My assistant editor, Watson Rogers, did unstinting duty in all sorts of capacities—library researcher, computer technician and consultant, editor, author, and chief cook and bottle washer, to mention but some of his many roles. His contribution to the project was very significant, and I thank him for his tireless and creative efforts.

The more than 100 contributing authors are to be especially commended for producing such fine essays in the face of very pressing time constraints. Their work invariably exceeded my expectations and forms a comprehensive body of thanatological knowledge that will serve scholars in the field for years to come.

A number of individuals provided clerical assistance in the preparation of the handbook. Brenda Husser provided valuable computer and word-processing information and advice. Lou Henderson assisted with the computer processing of manuscripts. Barbara Townley typed some of the manuscripts and helped format some of the graphics that accompanied them. I thank them all for their invaluable services. Diane Hawk expended much time and effort in typing manuscripts, developing graphics, printing out finished entries, and discharging a wide array of clerical responsibilities in connection with the project. I am very much indebted to her for her extraordinarily helpful assistance.

Patty Bryant took on a prodigious workload as managing editor and labored mightily, sending and receiving thousands of e-mail messages, typing manuscripts, dealing

with telephone traffic, proofreading, filing, developing lists and outlines, running the “mail room,” handling a vast array of administrative details, and coordinating interaction with more than a hundred contributing authors and associate editors, plus the editorial staff at Sage. She accomplished all of this within the context of a grueling work agenda and a very demanding time schedule, all the while maintaining a cheerful composure and an optimistic and encouraging outlook. In this regard, she very much served as a role model for me on the project. She made an enormous contribution to the handbook, and I am extraordinarily indebted to her and owe her much love and affection in repayment.

—Clifton D. Bryant

