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<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v49/i26/26b00501.htm>**OBSERVER****Bringing Ideas About Life and Death to the Classroom**

By S. BRENT PLATE

Sometime in late September or early October of 2001, I announced to my classes that my companion, another professor at the college and the woman I have loved and lived with for the past eight years, had been diagnosed with cancer. I explained that I would be missing several days of class over the next month because of medical treatments.

I initially said that for pragmatic reasons, so the students wouldn't be surprised to show up and find a stranger leading the class. But their gasps and unusually hushed silences revealed to me that I had already brought a stranger into the class. I realized that no one sensed that the world of the classroom was connected with any other world, that teaching about Hindu cremation ceremonies in my religions classes did not necessarily trigger the students' own responses to death. I, being a young and idealistic teacher, had assumed the opposite. Now that I had my students' attention, I figured I'd better do something with it.

Of course, those "other" events of September 2001 made my task a little easier. In fact, on the very day that my companion was diagnosed with cancer, the World Trade Center towers collapsed. While she was having a biopsy, nurses kept running in and out of the room talking about planes crashing into buildings. We went home in a daze, turned on CNN, and spent most of the rest of the day in tears.

Somewhat ironically, I'd already spent a good bit of my life meditating on death. Like many young proto-intellectuals in the latter half of the 20th century, I had read the existentialists in college. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Camus all gave their versions of the meaning of life and, perhaps more importantly, death. I remember sitting in the hallway of a youth hostel in France during my college's study-abroad trip, staying up late to finish Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*. I tried to grasp what he meant by death as a focal point for what he would call a genuine "anthropological contemplation." I slowly understood that he was saying that a self-awareness and acceptance of our own death is what makes us authentic individuals. Although I would eventually find the individualistic emphasis of existentialists somewhat problematic, at least they were attempting to foster a courageous vision.

Such readings had influenced my intellectual and professional development in several interrelated ways. In the first place, they had helped me see how our modern technological society attempts to cheat death at every turn through what I call a "consumerist immortality." We simply purchase our way around death by buying things that make us look younger or go faster -- more horsepower, fewer wrinkles. It's all a mode of escape to keep death out of our personal lives. As Ron Grimes, a professor of religion and culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario has suggested in *Deeply Into the Bone: Reinventing Rites of Passage*: "With

death held at bay, most of us expire unprepared, relying on professionals to do the work; they do it *to* us and *for* our families. In contemporary North America, death knowledge is professional knowledge, not personal knowledge."

The literature of the existentialists and my frustrations with North American denials of death had also led me to my vocation of teaching religion at the university level. I found that teaching the myths and rituals of religious traditions offered a place to educate young minds about the plural meanings of life, and about how we might come to terms with the often-unspeakable idea of "death."

But it wasn't until my personal confrontation with death that I realized just how much the two different approaches toward death -- one theorizing about it, one living in its midst -- are deeply connected. All has gone relatively smoothly and my companion's prognosis is now quite good. Yet amid our shared tears, she and I have struggled toward deeper expressions of grief because of our previous readings about death. She teaches Latin American literature and film, and her own presentation in the classroom has also changed because of her cancer diagnosis.

While our students at first seem reluctant to watch films or read literature with "depressing" topics like death, they seem to have a different attitude toward it when they realize their professor's relative proximity to it. And for our part, through our processes of grief, anger, and depression, we gradually began to "do" what we had previously read about, intellectualized, and taught: We oriented our lives toward the certainty of death. It may or may not be death from cancer, but death will come nonetheless.

As a result, life itself has taken on renewed meaning. Not in some Polly-annaish way where "God's in Heaven and everything's gonna be OK." But, by finding avenues through which to express our emotions and thoughts, we are learning what it might mean to not go gently into that good night. And that has encouraged us, who feel that teaching is a "calling," to bring experiences of life and death into our classrooms.

For example, in my teaching I now emphasize much more the importance of religious practices, rather than "beliefs," for it is in the performance of ritual that we are able to embody meaning, to combine theory and practice. Usually, when I ask for an initial definition of the word "ritual," my students answer, "routine," quickly followed by "boring." They've been raised on marketing slogans that would have them believe that they think for themselves, and that participation in any prescribed set of actions indicates they are lesser beings.

But in the past year, I have introduced the topic of ritual by showing images of makeshift shrines and memorial sites around New York City in the aftermath of September 11: all those "boring," "unproductive" symbols, like candles, poems, flowers, photos, mementos, people standing around for hours and doing nothing except being together or maybe singing and praying. Students now find such gestures quite moving.

In fact, my students are teaching me that they desire to find connections between the world of the classroom and the world of suffering, grief, and anger beyond its walls, but those connections must be made in stronger, more creative ways. What the studies of literature, philosophy, film, and religion can offer are observations on life and death, giving their readers and viewers a chance to live vicariously -- to have a chance at a "trial run." Novels and films, like religious myths, recreate the world and offer it back to us in a renewed form.

As part of a course on "Myth and Ritual on Film," I screen Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line*, in which the

death of the matriarchal Antonia is set within an environment of cherished friends and family. Such viewings are an antidote to the individualistic death promoted by the existentialists, and challenge us to review our own thoughts on the power of communal ritual.

Seeing Antonia's death or reading about King Lear's death is undoubtedly not the same as having one's mother, brother, or companion die, but with exposure to those stories and images we become less startled by death and better equipped to deal with the pain and the loss. I am not talking about intellectualizing death, but of being offered the chance to find and make meaning of it when it becomes an actuality in our lives. Myth and literature become written on the body, and their inscriptions provide a locus for future meaningful action. A film like *Antonia's Line* has convinced students that there is such a thing as a "good death" and this does not negate a happy ending. They are struck by the possibilities of placing death within a communally oriented structure and making it personal, not leaving it to the professionals.

Ultimately, my students will each have to face the lived situation of dying in their own way and time. My job is to offer some preliminary approaches.

S. Brent Plate is an assistant professor of religion and the visual arts at Texas Christian University and the editor of Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader (Palgrave, 2002).

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