REL 264i-02: Dying, Death, and Afterlife
Spring 2015
Instructor: Donald Heinz

Class Times: MW 4-5:15
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Required Text not carried by Chico State Bookstore
DeSpelder and Strickland, The Last Dance. ORDER USED from Amazon: 7th or 8th edition. NOTE: The AS bookstore will NOT be carrying this text, since it might cost you as much as $140. On Amazon, you can get the earlier editions for about a penney, plus $4 shipping. Order it right away.

Course Description and Goals
“An study of the religious, ethical, spiritual, psychological, and socio-cultural dimensions of dying, death, and afterlife. Reading and discussion of issues surrounding dying (dying as one's last career, patient-centered approaches, spirit/body relationships); death (definitions, religious meanings, ritual practices); and afterlife (religious conceptions, relation to the human quest for meaning).”

The goals of this course are the following:

Basic understanding of how religion in general and also particular religious traditions connect themselves to the great human questions about dying, death, and afterlife.

Basic literacy in how “death systems” work, particularly in the United States, and also how they vary from one society and culture and religion to another.

An awakening awareness of your own mortality and its challenge to the meaning of your life.

Some recognition of the moral dimension of end-of-life issues, including the medicalization of death in modern societies, and of the range of deaths from “natural” to homicide and suicide, to accidents, poverty, and war.

Advances in your critical thinking and writing skills and in your sensitivity to the spiritual, cultural, and social world in which you live.

General Education
This class meets the Area E Learning for Life area requirement. It also participates in two pathways, Diversity and Global Studies. This section also meets the Writing Intensive (WI) requirement, which involves “learning to write and writing to learn.”

Diversity Pathway: Difference, based on culture, race, gender, class, biology, geography, shapes who we are and how we live together. For example, do gender or ethnicity or class influence human dying or death, grief and mourning, funerals?
Consider the unique way of mourning expressed when Jews “sit Shiva,” or the famous exuberance of a New Orleans Black funeral. Do you think the AIDS epidemic led to funerals taking on new kinds of “cultural work”? Has the recent Ebola epidemic altered traditional ways of handling mourning and our responsibilities to the deceased? Can we widen our understanding of the human condition by paying attention to “difference” and avoid taking offense at it?

Global Engagement Pathway: Explore some ways in which peoples in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia construct cultures of death, dying, and afterlife and express their worldviews through religious practices. What is there to learn from the ways in which death, funerals, and mourning are “politicized” in the Middle East? What is unique about the art of dying in Tibetan Buddhism? Why is honoring the ancestors so important in China? How do the Mexican Days of the Dead express the material culture of death and human mortality? How is that Hinduism in India came to practice a belief in reincarnation? Why is cremation the rule in India while strictly forbidden in the Middle East?

Required Texts
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Course Requirements
Attendance and Participation
Reading and writing assignments you will mostly do on your own, but participatory learning happens in class. Don’t even think about missing this class. Unless you think you may be dying, but then the need for involvement is even greater. I will take attendance daily and host frequent in-class activities to spur you on in your responsibilities and make it likely you will pass (ok, by pass I don’t mean die, which is the first thing you’d think of in a death and dying class). I promise a safe classroom environment in which you can freely express yourself on volatile and existentially gripping issues. If I could figure out how, I might install the technology that blocks all use of your digital devices, so that only your mind, spirit, and emotions will be in play. This means 75 straight minutes at play in the fields of the Lord instead of on facebook. Each day someone will use their remote to lock the doors, so no one will be tempted to come late or leave early. Pounding on the door from out in the hall trying to gain admission is a purgatorial embarrassment, though good training for entrance into the afterlife.

Homework and reading assignments
Brief 1-2 page homework assignments (or in-class quizzes) will help you keep up with the readings and insure that they actually pass through your mind. Turn these in on Blackboard prior to the beginning of class.

Unpacking life, composing death
You will be writing a couple personal reflection papers, some briefer, such as “Death and me” or your personal “Advance Directive” regarding healthcare (35% of Americans have done so) or “A little death I’ve experienced,” and a longer submission on your own fully-realized funeral, with your choice of dying this semester or in some more comfortable future.

Worksheets
Do research and fill in the appropriate data on assigned topics, eg which societies/religions/cultures practice cremation, which don’t, and which are mixed?

Fieldtrip
During a normal class period we will go on a field trip to a local funeral home. You will meet a real live funeral director, ask him anything you’ve always wanted to ask, decide between cremation or earth burial and pick out your urn or casket, resist being creeped out by the embalming room, and find out how much it’s all going to cost. (Getting buried in your yard is illegal in CA, but who will know if ashes are scattered in Yosemite—actually that’s illegal too, but the Pacific is still wide open.)

Tests
You will take a mid-term and a non-cumulative final, including both objective and essay components. Study guides available on Blackboard will help you prepare.

What’s up
This could be a two-page field report on an event or topic connected to some dimension of death, dying, or afterlife.

What else about this course
Class preparation
Do the readings on time. Come to class loaded for bear. Get all assignments done on time, so you don’t penalize yourself. All your writing should count as formal writing.

Office hours
You can always find me during my posted office hours to talk about the course, your progress, and general topics in Religious Studies. You can also expect an answer when you contact me by email, preferably through Blackboard. I would be very glad to get to know you better and to talk about life, as well as death.

Academic ethics and dishonesty
Evidence of academic dishonesty will result in an F grade for the course and a report to Student Judicial Affairs for further action, even including expulsion from the university. Always cite your sources in written material you hand in.
Blackboard
Assignments, readings, updates, announcements will appear on Blackboard. So will materials that I use in my presentations. And guides for exams. Check Blackboard for this class daily.

Students with certified disabilities
Please notify me of any special needs relating to your disability within the first two meetings of the course. I will make every effort to facilitate your success and accommodate special needs. You may be required to show documentation of your disability. You can find information on services available at Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) at http://www.csuchico.edu/arc/

Like the class?
I and all my colleagues would love to talk to you about our department, Comparative Religion and Humanities. If you have special interests in religion or spirituality, including the roles of religion in culture, politics, and society as well as in one’s personal life, I would love to hear about them and discuss them with you.

DD Course Outline
Spring 2015

W Jan21 Introduction to Religious Studies and to this course
Religious Studies classes deal with religion as an existential dimension of human life and with world religions as specific traditions of being religious. Our courses also include academic ways into religion, such as textual studies, theology, philosophy, ethics, the humanities, and the social sciences.

This course on death, dying, and afterlife could find itself in many different academic departments, but its location in Religious Studies is meant to suggest that in all times and places religion and religions have occupied themselves with death, dying, and afterlife as religious questions (and answers) about the meaning of life.

So whether we’re talking about death or the meaning of life, the persistent problem, in the view of many religions and many philosophers, is that we don’t get it. Somehow our perceptions on reality, or the lenses through which we view the world, are smudged and we don’t see clearly. Consider these two rival poems in Zen Buddhism:

Our body is the Bodhi-tree
And our mind a mirror bright
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour
And let no dust alight.

There is no Bodhi-tree
Nor stand of a mirror bright
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?
Hmmm....

So, why did you choose this class? Have you ever experienced the death of a friend or family member? Do you have any experience with suicide? Do you have in mind an ideal age to die? Have you ever attended a funeral? What do you hope to get out of this course? Are you too young to become familiar with death?

We will re-visit this famous quote, below, from the English philosopher Bertrand Russell. It’s a real downer, but not unique to him. The Russian novelist Tolstoy, an Orthodox Christian in his own way, wondered if every assertion of human meaning runs the risk of negation by the transiency of human life. So here’s Russell’s quote:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.

**M Jan 26 Read textbook, Last Dance 1, Attitudes Toward Death: Climate of change**

Getting started: Have you thought about your own view of death, or the views of friends and family? Many Americans live their lives in “death denial”; how about you. To stimulate your thought, what do you know about movements called Death with dignity/Compassionate choices/Aid in dying/Assisted suicide? Which do you think is the best term?

**Class debate:** In November 2014, a 29 year-old California woman named Brittany Maynard chose to end her life through the provisions of Oregon’s death with dignity law. She had been diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer a short time before and moved to Oregon because she did not want her life prolonged and for other reasons. Oregon was the first state to make “assisted dying” legal.

Before class, google this case and discuss it with your friends. Form an opinion and then take the witness stand in class.

Each year one or two Chico State students die. Accidents? Suicide by train?

**W Jan 28** How do world religions handle death and dying?
**READ textbook: The Sacred Art of Dying, chapter 2, Hinduism.**

Not many Westerners have visited India or know much about Hinduism, but you may have thought about reincarnation. Or are planning on it. Besides this chapter, google cremation, reincarnation, and karma, and compare what you come across with this chapter. How would you distinguish the essentials of a Hindu culture of dying from Western religions you may be more familiar with—or with an agnostic posture.

*Write a 1-2 page paper* in which you discuss *reincarnation* (or the migration of souls). First, what is it? Second, what does it seem to mean for Hindus? Then, imagine how it could or would work for you (Might you be the product of a previous existence? What does the way you are living your life portend for a future existence? What kind of karma are you accumulating? What would you like to come back as?) Finally, do you think this is a good system of meaning?

**M Feb 2 Read textbook: Last Dance 5, Death Systems: Public Policy**

*Death System* is a term that describes how a given society and culture deals, or not, with all kinds of dying and death, from accidents to disease to homicide and suicide, to war and violence, including the processing of death through law, medicine, grief and mourning, funeral homes, religious beliefs and rituals, burial and cremation. It is important to take something that seems highly personal and individual and subject it to a structural analysis. Responses to death may be less individualistic and more organized than you think.

Imagine, define, visit, critique, analyze the many dimensions of the American death system and interview, if possible, people going through it.

Most Americans, including most college students, are more likely to think about life in psychological terms rather than in sociological or anthropological terms. This chapter pushes you to think about death not as a deeply personal thing that happens to you or a family member, but structurally as something that is handled by an entire social system and culturally as something that fits into an entire worldview. As such, your own death will require “cultural work” if it is to be properly commemorated.

**W Feb 4 Read textbook: Sacred Art of Dying, 3, Buddhism.**

Are you on speaking terms with your own mortality or mostly in denial when it comes to death and dying? *Memento mori* is the medieval Latin admonition: Remember that you have to die. The Buddha said: “Of all mindfulness meditations, that on death is supreme.” Memento mori alludes to the entire theory and practice of reflecting on one’s mortality and on the transient character of human life and indeed of all earthly goods and pursuits.

But a university is not a senior citizens’ home; consider the average age of your classmates. Is this the time when you should be thinking about death, or should you save that until later? Indeed, Chico State’s motto is not memento mori but carpe diem—seize the day, eat, drink and be merry. Should there be a time for everything and college is not the time for memento mori? A very common theme today is “aging as a spiritual journey,” which sees in aging a new time for new reflections apt for the time, including memento mori. What if all of life is to be like this, a practice run for your final journey?
Write a 1-2 page paper on “My Death.” But you are free to argue that thinking about death and mortality should be reserved for old age; or that it belongs on the agenda for every time and every season in human life. Use the following checklist to help you write a more thoughtful and comprehensive paper:

**How to go about writing My Death paper**

Ask yourself:
When I think about death, it’s usually because:
My most significant experiences with death are:
The thing that worries me most about death is:
The main reason I don’t want to think about death is:
For me, death is/is not a religious issue because:
For me, afterlife is:
If I had to name 3 “little deaths” I’ve experienced, I’d say:
Of those three, I think I still have “unfinished business” with:
If I had to write my obituary today, I guess I’d have to say:
  My most significant accomplishments are:
  I’m most sorry for:
  I always wanted to, but never got to:
  I most want to be remembered for:
  What gives my life the most meaning is:
  The one photo that would capture the essence of me is:
If I had to choose one moment, or time in my life, that would constitute eternity for me it would be:

M Feb 9 Read textbook, Last Dance 2, Learning about Death: The influence of sociocultural forces

Memento mori or death denial? Discuss the common assertion that our society is death-denying and assemble the evidence, pro and con. What role do video games, films, and Young Adult Fiction play in coming to terms with death? Is the fault in our stars? How are the signs of death structured into American culture? If a college student dies during the semester, does anybody notice? If there’s a death among family or friends at home, will you drop everything and rush home? Will your instructors understand?

W Feb 11 READ textbook: The Sacred Art of Dying, 10-11, Christianity and Islam.

You may know much more about Christianity than Islam; or you may know next to nothing about either of them. Compare the chapters on Christianity and Islam; then write a 1-2 page paper comparing and contrasting these two Western religions.


What adds up to a *good death*? Is there an ideal time, an ideal place, ideal circumstances? Is it the summation of a religious quest? If so, how do Christianity and Islam differ?
If you try to define a good death in secular terms, as many do, what are the ingredients? What conclusions can you draw from current definitions?

How long would you like to live? Is this a statement about how long it’s going to take to achieve a good death or an attempt to hold on to life?

Write a 1-2 page paper describing your idea of a good death

Think about your family, interview your friends, google films and books, including “Young Adult Fiction,” watch the news, listen to music, view contemporary art and assemble evidence for the kind of good deaths Americans are conceiving, idealizing, practicing for, achieving. Will there be a religious underpinning to your good death? Can you think of people, famous or not, who seem to have achieved a good death? Might you end up helping your parents some day plan a good death?

W Feb 18 READ textbook: The Sacred Art of Dying, 4-5, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

Have you ever thought there might be a process or a spiritual journey expected of the dying just prior to death and a corresponding process expected of the living as they ritually move the newly deceased onto the next world.

**Ars moriendi** is a Latin phrase suggesting there is an art to dying. You spend your life practicing. Minimally, it once meant that you conduct yourself on your deathbed so that in the contest for your soul between God and the devil God will win. Whew! But it can mean much more than a single scene. From Zen Buddhism’s standpoint, all life is life after death if one dies artfully before dying. Christian monastics think this way after they take their vows, which are a dying to self.

Less dramatically, the art of dying and the art of living blend together. Together they seem to include, ideally at least, ideas about constructing a life, then accepting aging and dying as a last career, then writing the last chapter of your life and finishing the story. What book, what legacy will you leave, by which you will be remembered.

Medieval Christianity paid careful attention to the art of dying, but that tradition is mostly lost, including among Christians. But the Western fascination with Asia has gained new attention for the art of dying practiced in Tibetan Buddhism. One learns how to enter into the death experience prior to dying. But the community also learns to send the newly dead on their way to the next world. The *bardo* state of the newly dead lasts 49 days, and during that time readings and rituals from the Tibetan Book of the Dead guide the soul on toward reawakening or rebirth. The dying moment itself is to be filled with beauty and peace, as everything in life is summed up in this moment. (What are your chances in our culture?)

Write a 1-2 page paper describing the art of dying in Tibetan Buddhism and imagine how an art of dying could become characteristic of American culture.

**Consider the following: THEMES IN THE ART OF DYING**

*Death rituals as rehearsals for getting it right*
*What happened to the art of dying?*
*Overcoming death as forbidden and banished*
Appropriate death = version of a good life
Coaching, coaxing, cheering the dying on
Great deaths as models for everyone to follow, to see how it’s done
Imagining dying as a last career or writing the last chapter of your book
Imagine dying as a role to play, for which you have to rehearse
How does American culture define what you’re up to in your dying and how much support can you expect?
Can dying be a moment of freedom and existential choice, or is it always going to be something that happens against your will, something that you suffer? Could it ever be a unique achievement? A last stage of growth?

M Feb 23 READ summary chapter in textbook, The Sacred Art of Dying, 14:
Dying before Dying
If you think about it, the art of dying implies an art of living. One way to think about this whole course (and your whole life) is constructing a life and achieving a death. Or to move backwards from the end: constructing a death by unpacking a life. Either way, it implies how you are going to put yourself together. For that agenda, you may draw on your own psychological depths, family life, society and culture, religion and spirituality.

W Feb 25 Read textbook, Last Dance 6, Facing Death: Living with Life-Threatening Illness
The medicalization of death, at least in economically advanced societies, refers to the likelihood that your dying may in part be defined by nurses and physicians, by institutions like hospitals or assisted living homes or hospice, and even by American laws and judges. Medical practices and legal constraints may mean you will have to think through, put in writing, and struggle to achieve the goals of your advance directive. That is a medical and legal document in which you stipulate the circumstances that will define your dying—eg no resuscitations, no medication, no artificial feedings. Perhaps you may also try to achieve a “death with dignity” that could include “aid in dying” or “physician-assisted suicide.” (But not in California)

M Mar 2 Read textbook, Last Dance 7, End-of-Life Issues and Decisions
Then Study: Five Wishes
A national version of Five Wishes was introduced in 1998. It includes a living will and a durable power of attorney for health care, as well as addressing matters of comfort care and spirituality. More than 18 million documents have been distributed by a network of over 35,000 partner organizations worldwide. An online version called Five Wishes Online was introduced in April 2011 allowing users to complete the document using an online interface or print out a version to complete by hand.

Wishes 1 and 2 are both legal documents. Once signed, they meet the legal requirements for an advance directive in most states. Wishes 3, 4, and 5 are unique to Five Wishes, in that they address matters of comfort care, spirituality, forgiveness, and final wishes.

Wish 1: The Person I Want to Make Care Decisions for Me When I Can't
This section is an assignment of a health care agent (also called proxy, surrogate, representative, or health care power of attorney). This person makes medical decisions on your behalf if you are unable to speak for yourself.

**Wish 2: The Kind of Medical Treatment I Want or Don't Want**
This section is a living will—a definition of what life support treatment means to you, and when you would and would not want it.

**Wish 3: How Comfortable I Want to Be**
This section addresses matters of comfort care—what type of pain management you would like, personal grooming and bathing instructions, and whether you would like to know about options for hospice care, among others.

**Wish 4: How I Want People to Treat Me**
This section speaks to personal matters, such as whether you would like to be at home, whether you would like someone to pray at your bedside, among others.

**Wish 5: What I Want My Loved Ones to Know**
This section deals with matters of forgiveness, how you wish to be remembered, and final wishes regarding funeral or memorial plans.

_Study “Five Wishes” and then Write a 2-page Advance Directive._ In class we will hear many of them read and debate the legal and bioethical and religious questions they raise. Will you donate your organs? Will your family fight over your directives?

**W Mar 4** Watch the film “Dying in Oregon.” Oregon is one of only five states in which aid in dying (or death-with-dignity, or physician-assisted suicide) is legal.

**M Mar 9** Google hospice and learn something about it, how it functions in the US, who’s eligible, etc. The hospice movement; Would you become a hospice volunteer? If one of your parents were terminally ill, would you encourage him or her to seek hospice care? How does hospice work anyway—is it a place or a process?

**W Mar 11** Mid-Term

M Mar 16 and W Mar 18 Spring Break

**M Mar 23** Read textbook, Last Dance 3, Perspectives on Death: Cross-cultural and Historical

One kind of culture is _material culture_, and death leaves material deposits across cultures. How much do you know about how death is experienced in other cultures, other countries? Our dying and death practices leave a cultural residue, from art and music to tombs and cemeteries to festivals. If you look for the material culture of death in the United States, is there much to see? What does this mean? Make a list of cultural artifacts that derive from American death practices.

Sometimes music or art from other venues is imported into funeral rituals. Think about what you might choose for your funeral (or wedding) if you were to die now. A recent survey of British funerals came up with the five most popular songs chosen for funerals: Monty Python’s “Always look on the bright side of life” (sung at
crucifixion scene in 1979’s Life of Brian); Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,” Robbie Williams’ “Angel,” and Celine Dion’s “My heart will go on.”

W Mar 25  The film “La Ofrenda” depicts the Mexican Days of the Dead. What do you make of it? Is this rich cultural tradition beginning to wash out? A recent news report suggested Mexican or Hispanic teen-agers were more interested in Halloween than in the Days of the Dead. But wait, does your own experience of Halloween have much to do with the dead? Are you on terms with any ghosts?

M Mar 30 Read textbook Last Dance 13, Risks of Death in the Modern World
Write a 1-2 page paper on some loss you have experienced (prom, didn’t get into Stanford or Berkeley, you suspect your parents like a sibling better than you, someone turned down your marriage proposal, you didn't make the team).
OR, write a 1-2 page paper on how or whether you are likely to be touched by risk taking, accidents, disasters, violence, war, or terrorism.
Consider the following Death Risks
Insane crime? Cool hate?
Does America glorify war and militarism? In the media? Funerals? “Fighting for freedom”? National ideologies? “Our country’s service”?
Where are CA earthquakes in your mental map? What thought do you give them?
What changes has AIDS brought about in the American consciousness? Is the scare over?
What is your most risky behavior?
Why do you think you engage in it?
Do guns produce/depend on a culture of violence?

W Apr 1 Read textbook, Last Dance 8 Understanding the experience of loss
Grief, the psychology of loss; stages of grief theory.

M Apr 6 Read textbook Last Dance 9 Last Rites: Funerals and Body Disposition
Earth burial (Judaism, Islam) or cremation (Hinduism) or both ok (US and Europe, including Christianity): Which method have you witnessed? Which one would you choose? What is influencing you? More importantly, what role do you have planned for yourself at your funeral? Have you ever been to a funeral? See one on TV? What strikes you about it? Start thinking about your funeral paper.

W Apr 8 Read textbook. The Sacred Art of Dying, 6, Chinese Attitudes Towards Death
Mourning is the cultural processing of loss. In Chinese piety, death is a time to venerate the ancestors. Are there proper ways to mourn in the US, or is it mostly “you get a one-day bereavement leave from work”? Confucius laid out for Chinese traditions regarding the veneration of the ancestors strict mourning responsibilities to be acted out by the son—how he is to weep, what he is to wear, what to eat. He can break his fast after three days. The period of mourning is not to exceed three
years! If your father or mother were to die, what roles would fall to you to play? If a Chico State student were to die, would it trigger any behaviors from students or faculty on campus?

Think about mourning in times of epidemic. In West Africa, as in many places in the world, there are defined burial and mourning duties. Can these be abandoned when there is an epidemic? The most important duty of a Liberian family is properly burying. So what happens when one hears it intoned: “Of your whole entire family, no one is here to represent you? Your mother gave us a role to bury you. She tried her best, but she was alone.” In many places, the Western press reported, the virus was transmitted quickly and quietly—through tender acts of love and kindness.

M Apr 13 Read textbook, The Sacred Art of Dying, 9, Hebraic Attitudes Towards Death

Worldwide Judaism is known for its special and attentive style of mourning. How does Jewish religiosity lead to reciting the kaddish prayer often during a year of mourning and “sitting Shiva” at the home of the deceased for seven days following burial? Do you think it would be a good idea if other people emulated these Jewish traditions? Can you make up mourning rituals over night or do they take ages to develop and be accepted? Does the pace of American culture allow for extensive mourning rituals? If not, does this contribute to our denial of death?

W Apr 15 Funerals: What are rituals for, what “cultural work” do they do? Describe rituals you’ve been a part of, not necessarily dealing with death. Describe a famous ritual (baptism, getting your driver’s license, wedding, graduation?) or funeral you’ve witnessed or heard of.

Write a 1-2 page paper carefully describing Jewish mourning rituals. Some people might say that Jews are good at mourning just as they’re good at weddings. Would you like to copy them? If you’re Jewish, do you already know these traditions well?

M Apr 20 Funerals: Write a 4 page paper describing your own funeral. You can imagine that you are dying this semester or at some advanced age. Pay attention to this checklist to help you write a thoughtful paper:

Checklist for writing your funeral paper

Will you have specific mourners in mind who need to be comforted, or cheered, or have a good laugh remembering you?
What “cultural work” do you want to get done through your funeral?
If ritual is a “way of paying attention,” what do you want those who mourn you to pay attention to?
What parts of your life do you hope to “channel” or unpack through your death ritual?
What, if any, role do you see for a clergy-person, “spiritual master,” ritual expert, or MC?
What role does your belief or disbelief in the afterlife play in your funeral?
What would be a good epitaph for you, as a kind of theme or topic sentence for the whole ritual?
What role, if any, does hope play in your funeral?
Will there be a “crisis of meaning” at your funeral? Spiritual deprivation? Missing pieces? Or will everything be tidy, wrapped up?
Will your funeral ritual register that a “moral being” has passed?
What role, if any, will religion or spirituality play?

W Apr 22 Funerals: Sharing funerals with class: what it was like for everybody when I died.

M Apr 27 Read textbook Last Dance 14 Beyond Death/After Life
NOTE: As we begin this last module in the course, “Beyond Death/After Life,” keep in mind the following questions and issues:
  Heaven, Hell, Religion, Morality, Meaning, Depth
Why do humans want to “up the ante” in life by extending its significance?
Are heaven and hell the “depth dimensions” of morality and meaning?
What is the proper place, after death, for Hitler, Stalin, MLKing, Mother Theresa?
Why does death produce metaphysical pain and leave us unsettled?
Is there sufficient depth of mourning in easy “celebrations of life” that have come to characterize the modern funeral?
Do shallow definitions of life produce shallow ideas of death and afterlife?
Can you think of heaven as the translucent upper level of your existence? The entry point where ultimate meanings shine through?
What are you inclined to conclude from Near Death Experiences (NDE)?
Would your life be any different if you believed/didn’t believe in an afterlife?

The Buddha thought that questions about life after death are the wrong questions to ask, especially before one is fully awake. Nirvana is what is left when ignorance and illusion have passed away, when desire and attachment are gone. Of course the liberation that is nirvana is incomprehensible and unthinkable. Are you awakened?

But we will begin asking things anyway. Which term do you prefer, afterlife or beyond? When I proposed this course for the university curriculum many years ago, two social scientists on the curriculum committee objected to the inclusion of “afterlife,” since it’s not empirically demonstrable, and insisted I stick to “death and dying.” What do you think of this way of thinking?

Some say that Hitler and Stalin and Gandhi and MLKing needed to go somewhere after death, if life is to make any sense at all.

Some say that mortality produces metaphysical pain and a cosmic itch that must be scratched. How about you?

Can you guess what percentage of Americans believe in an afterlife? How many Europeans? What gives? We will poll the class to decide the question. Or, each of you will be required to argue the opposite of your own position in order to exercise your imagination.

What do you know about NDE (near death experiences), in which people seem to stop being alive and journey to some other life. Do you think the many accounts of such experiences prove, or suggest, an afterlife?
The afterlife is thought of by many believers as a religious revelation. Many scholars are more likely to call it a religious construction, that is, a humanly constructed idea under religious auspices. Critics may call it “pie in the sky by and by” and insist with Freud that it's a comforting projection of benevolent parents in the sky or with Marx that it's the opiate of the oppressed or with many atheists or agnostics that it's simply preposterous and wishful thinking.

You have a choice of two different 1-2 page papers to write.

For paper #1, you look up several of the following books on Amazon and discuss the books and the amazon readers’ response to them:

- Mike Dooley, The top ten things dead people want to tell you. (This is kind of a formula book that you need not take too seriously, but might find amusing.)
- Eben Alexander, Proof of heaven: A neurosurgeon’s journey into the afterlife. (This was a very popular book by a neurosurgeon who spent an entire week somewhere or other and woke up to write about it.)
- Jeffrey Long and Paul Perry, Evidence of the Afterlife: The science of near death experiences. (This is one of the more recent books on NDE. What do you think such experiences suggest or prove?)
- Todd Burpo and Lyn Vincent, Heaven is for real: A little boy's astounding story of his trip to heaven and back. (A hugely popular book, and then a film.)
- Robert Bell, Love wins: A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person whoever lived. (An evangelical pastor astonishes and angers his congregation by writing a best-seller that claims that hell is incompatible with a Christian God in whom love triumphs.)

Or, you could write paper #2, in which you choose the happiest or most fulfilling moment of your life and project it into eternity as what heaven will be for you. This idea is based on “Afterlife,” a two hour Japanese film lauded by critics. Newly dead people are summoned to a surprise venue and instructed that they have three days to choose their happiest or most poignant or powerful memory and describe it. This then will become the memory they carry into eternity, that in fact will become eternity for them, after it has been “produced” or filmed by the staff, who also happen to be dead and apparently themselves had been unable to come up with a single memory of their own.

Even if the film gets really slow, the concept is brilliant, even breathtaking, and existentially gripping and provoking if also severely problematic in its assumptions. To get into the film, we might divide the class into groups of three—one to be the newly dead person, another in the role a bartender/therapist/minister/or best friend of bartender/therapist/minister or best friend who keeps pushing and interrogating the first student to move the process along and overcome resistance, and then the third student will be charged with jumping in to argue that it can’t be done.

If you choose this paper to write, you might make it easier on yourself by narrowing the field of choice: before entering college; or last semester; or a spiritual moment, etc.
W Apr 29   World religions and the Afterlife

Using your textbook The Sacred Art of Dying and this website (http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/) show how various Western and Asian religions view the afterlife and what role it plays in their worldview. **NOTE:** When you use the website, type in at the end the religion you want to find out about, eg Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. So what you type into your browser would look like this: http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/Buddhism.

Is there anything in Christianity (or secularism) to compare with the Tibetan Buddhist sign-posted journey to the next world?

M May 4 Heaven: the mother of all metaphors

Imagine heaven as the root metaphor for transcendence and mystery and the beyond without which literature, art, and human existential reflection would be impoverished, religion made shallow. Entertain this thought: afterlife is the translucent upper level of earthly existence through which the light shines. In which case, make sure your life is always pointing two directions: down and up.

W May 6 Purgatory, reincarnation (transmigration of souls)

But would your life be any different if you did or didn’t believe in an afterlife? Does hell really get your roommate to behave?

**Write a 1-2 page paper** on purgatory, the Roman Catholic teaching about a mid-way between this life and heaven. Google it. Talk to Catholic friends. If you grew up Catholic, consider how often you heard it discussed. Does it make sense? Is it a good idea? Is it a rational attempt to deal with the fact that when you did you probably haven’t yet traveled as far on the road to your own self-realization (or to God) as you might have? Does it provide some order in the universe and perhaps make things more fair and sensible?

M May 11/W May 13 Finals