Report on Death Dying and Suffering: Global Conference.

Sponsored by Inter-Disciplinary Net, Prague, Czech Republic November 2014.

This conference was a meeting of about 45 individuals from North and South America, Europe, Australia New Zealand and Asia, representing a wide range of academic disciplines (nursing, psychology, philosophy, health sciences, media and environmental studies, theology, literature), and practitioners, (palliative care physicians, clinical psychologists, social workers).

Helene Demers and I were invited to attend this conference and to present our paper, which we consider an honor, given that it was apparent that many proposals had in fact been rejected. The three days of intense papers and opportunities for deep discussion proved to be a stimulating thought provoking time. It deepened my understanding of cultural, philosophical and literary perspectives on death, dying and suffering, and already has me reconsidering the course curriculum particularly with respect to internationalizing the curriculum. We also established many links with other conference participants. I am especially grateful to have made connections with Huai Bao whose interests overlap with some of my own (prior self-knowledge of approaching death, not uncommon in Buddhist culture) and Sukh Hamilton who has interests in children’s age-related conceptions of death, including cultural variations, and explores how this relates to their actual and expected grieving process.

Some particular themes and insights from the conference are discussed below.

One overarching theme concerned how even as adults we distance ourselves from death: we do not care for the dying, we seek instead to prevent death. In the US, 94% of terminally ill patients surveyed in the US said that they wanted to talk to their physicians about death but 7% did so. We have more euphemisms for death than for any other word. This however may be different in parts of the global south particularly in cultures facing extreme poverty. This distancing does not help the grieving process, and the importance of translating knowing into telling was present in a significant number of papers at this conference. The qualitative tradition was well represented but interestingly, one could detect the underlying tension between those on each side of the quantitative/qualitative domains with respect to research. For me, the very last presenter, an analytical philosopher who described, through stories, how he found love, hope and ultimately God, through caring for his severely schizophrenic brother, highlighted the redundancy of such struggles.

The sharing of cultural ideas of death and dying was fascinating. For example I learned that in Estonia and Germany, some dead are thought to be possessed by the devil and return to earth as demonic dead and haunt the former home. To prevent this care and attention must be paid to the funerary rites and wishes of the deceased person. The concept of Social Death, defined as the holistic disintegration of internal and external life before or after their physical death differs for individuals and varies from culture to culture.

End-of-life issues such as the right to die and euthanasia laws in various parts of the world were the focus of a number of papers. In Norway an author and musician claimed that his father had died prematurely in a nursing home after being denied food and water. Subsequent media debate framed death as a medical and politicized issue, with little reference to as spiritual, unknown and uncertain.

A series of presentations explored the death and suffering in the global south. Not only did this discussion acknowledge an apparent greater acceptance of death but highlighted the nuances of language, translation, cultural assumptions and biases from researchers’ personal and cultural experience with, and beliefs about, death. In a similar vein one presenter discussed how our preconceived beliefs and expectations regarding children’s understanding of death and consequential grief process can be counterproductive in facilitating support via an adult led and top-down models of facilitation.

The conference this year included participants whose research interests focused on suffering. What is suffering? Can meaning be found in suffering? The suffering of the elderly in residential care was compared by one presenter to the suffering endured in concentration camps. Spiritual approaches to suffering were discussed, the Buddhists four noble truths, for example suggest that life is suffering, that suffering comes from attachments and to find liberation from suffering we must follow the eightfold path. Christian traditions tend to find meaning in suffering (a part of God’s will, a lack of faith, is redemptive, the means to spiritual transformation and so on). These beliefs can lead to a sense of victimhood.

Suffering was found by one presenter to be different from pain, and relational in nature. Suffering leads to loss of relationship and its disruption is found in acts of solidarity and love. Love has meaning suffering does not.

In sum, this conference was a powerful experience and raised many questions which I had not considered previously. I am always grateful for opportunities to travel and learn. Whilst in Prague, I also visited the Pinkas Synagogue, which contains the art work of children imprisoned in the concentration camp at Terezin, (one hour north of Prague) which we also visited during our stay. This was a very powerful experience for me. The heaviness, the feeling of pain and suffering so present on the land at Terezin was immense, almost unbearable, and this was truly one of the most profound experiences I have had in my life thus far.

Thank you for your support.

Respectfully submitted,

Rachel Cooper