Book Review/Compte rendu

Glennys Howarth, *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2007, 312 pp. $29.99 paper (978-0-7456-2534-8), $71.99 hardcover (978-0-7456-2533-1)

While the contemporary academic study of the social construction of dying, death, and bereavement can be traced back to the 1960s in the United States and the United Kingdom, "death studies" is a relatively new field of study. In her book, *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction*, Glennys Howarth makes a contribution to the emerging field of death studies by examining the social construction of dying, death, and bereavement in traditional, modern, and contemporary times. (Howarth hedges, appropriately given the current lack of consensus, on the label for the contemporary era, alternatively describing the present as late modern, high modern, or postmodern.) Starting from the premise that "Our experiences of dying, death and bereavement are embedded within our social and cultural worlds" (p. 2), Howarth examines these experiences as arising from the intersection of social structure and individual agency, objectivity and subjectivity, collectivity and individuality. The fundamental question is "how societies [and individuals in these societies] make meaning when confronted with mortality" (p. 15). She explores the shift from structure to agency, from the social to the individual, and from collectivist to individualist cultural frameworks. This examination of changing social constructions of and responses to dying, death, and bereavement historically from traditional to modern to postmodern times is a recurring theme in this book and provides a very useful organizing framework that generates interesting discussions and insights.

Howarth argues that in traditional times, societies typically defined death as familiar, expected, "tame," inevitable, beyond human control, and ultimately under supernatural control (whether divine or evil). In the traditional era, death typically took place in the home and community and religion played a central role in defining death, constructing meaning in the face of death, and shaping the social response to death. The priest was assigned an important part in the social response to death and the focus of priest and survivor alike was primarily on the soul of the deceased and on the afterlife.

In modern times, Howarth argues, death was redefined as a social problem, as an unexpected intruder, an enemy, and as a risk to be managed by science and medicine. The relatively successful management of this risk removed death from everyday experience, and it came to be expected (and accepted) only in old age. Death was denied, distanced, sequestered, and hidden in institutions, and the old and the dying were marginalized and avoided. The medical doctor replaced the priest, science and medicine displaced religion, and male professionals displaced female laypersons (who traditionally were largely responsible for the practical matters of birth and death). The hospital and the funeral home replaced the dying individual's home, and the focus shifted from the soul and the afterlife to the body, its present life, and temporal matters (such as passing on property to survivors).

In late modernity, Howarth suggests, increasing disaffection with medicine, science, and materialism increasingly resulted in death being defined as a personal issue. Secularization continued to undermine organized religion but ironically resulted in an increased emphasis on spirituality, individually chosen, and on the individual search for meaning and identity in the face of death. In this late modern or postmodern era, the emphasis has shifted from the priest and medical doctor to the psychologist, grief counselor, and funeral director, and from the soul and the body to the psychological "self." In the postmodern era, collectivist definitions and responses to dying and death have been replaced by an emphasis on individual responsibility for making healthy choices to reduce risk and for "forging own identity and making meaning" (p. 89) and making sense of life in the face of one's own mortality. In the postmodern era, Howarth argues, death has been socially constructed as a personal issue.

Howarth explores the notion of the good and bad death as socially constructed in traditional, modern, and postmodern times. In the traditional era, the conceptualization of the good death was oriented to the next life and to religious rituals designed to facilitate the best possible outcome in it. In the modern era, Howarth suggests that the good death is defined as occurring in old age facilitated by individual acceptance and hospice/palliative care. In the late modern era, the good death is defined as one under individual control and issues such as the living will, assisted suicide, and voluntary euthanasia are increasingly emphasized as means to empower the dying individual. In contrast, Howarth argues that the notion of the bad death in late modernity refers to sudden violent death that undermines the sense of security for survivors, leads to a sense of meaninglessness, and creates posttraumatic distress. In other words, bad death threatens "ontological security" and social stability (p. 174).

Howarth examines the late modern emphasis on the young healthy body and notes the "inevitable failure of the body project" as age, illness, and dying change the body, undermine the self, and lead to a "need for individuals to reconstruct their biographies and self-identity to make new meaning in life" (p. 181).

Finally, Howarth suggests that the modernist view of grief, as a linear and time-bound process of adjustment that unfolds in stages and is "resolved," is being replaced by an emerging cultural script which emphasizes the continuing bonds between the living and the dead, with the dead being integrated into the lives of the living through memories and memorializations and an "on-going process of negotiation and meaning making" (p. 209). Ironically, despite the the book's organization around the contrast between traditional, modern, and postmodern social constructions of dying and death, Howarth argues in the conclusion that the contemporary response to dying and death involves a rich tapestry of traditional, modern, and postmodern social constructions, and that the boundaries between life and death, living and dead, body and soul, individual and collective are being increasingly blurred. Grief, Howarth suggests, does not end and the living do not forget the dead. The dead live on in memory and have consequence for the living.

Death and Dying is interesting and provocative. It provides a useful and welcome analysis of various social constructions of dying, death, and the process of making life meaningful in the face of death.

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