

Dead Souls in the Classroom

by Bryce J. Christensen



“**T**hanatology” or “death education” now competes with driver’s ed and “social problems” for the attention of the nation’s high schoolers. First introduced on America’s college campuses in the 1960’s by such luminaries as Edgar Jackson, Richard Kalish, Robert Kastenbaum, and Herman Feifel, death education has, like many other dubious pedagogical experiments, trickled down to the secondary and even elementary schools. Some states now require instruction on “death and dying” as part of the health curriculum for the public schools.

But what do sophomores learn from their solicitous death instructors? Daniel Leviton, professor of health science at the University of Maryland and one of the founders of the discipline, has provided a revealing outline of the “goals for death education.” First in his list of 12 objectives is the educator’s task of “remov[ing] the taboo aspect of death language so students can read and discourse upon death rationally without becoming anxious.” If nothing else, the jargon tells us that we have indeed wandered into a world of death, a region of credentialed corpses and academic putrefaction. It gets worse. Leviton declares that death educators “promote comfortable and intelligent interaction with the dying as human beings.” Children are to learn the medical physiology of death so that they will “grow up with a minimum of death-related anxieties. Anxieties are too often based upon irrationality and myth rather than fact.”

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Disabused of the mythology and taboos of the past, armed with a catalog of facts, students can “understand the dynamics of grief and the reactions of differing age groups to the death of a ‘significant other.’” Through the power of modern science and sociology, the death educator will banish the horrors of the tomb and help students “work toward an easy dying.” Of course, students won’t achieve this “easy” exit from life without learning “the importance of pain reduction for the dying person.” “Pain,” after all, “is a priority issue for the dying.” (*Priority issue?*)

But then, since neither morphine nor mortuaries come free, death ed will also “educate consumers to the commercial death market.” In practice, this may mean visiting a funeral home to price the funeral packages. During a death-ed field trip, students may even be encouraged to try lying in one of the sample coffins.

With the dark myths of the past dispelled, the technical fortifications against pain reviewed, the dollars and cents added up, what’s left for the busy death educator? Oh, there will always be one or two annoying kids in the back of the room with bothersome questions about the *meaning* of death. Leviton admits that “the death educator can provide no answer concerning status after death.” Not to worry, death ed can serve Good Causes on Earth without worrying about Heaven or Hell. Take pacifism, for instance. The death educator can help students “recognize that war and other holocausts are related to feelings of personal immortality and omnipotence. War might be avoided if we realize

that it may be ourselves or children who would be killed or mutilated as well as an amorphous 'enemy.'" The modern shibboleths of "pluralism" and "tolerance" will likewise find their way into the work of the socially-motivated death educator who helps students understand that "death means different things to different people" and that "style of dying is individualistic." In the death-ed pastiche of medical fact, pop psychology, and modernist cant, the final cliché is "different strokes for different folks."

So completely does the cult of individualism govern death ed that instructors are to "assist the individual in developing a personal eschatology by specifying the relationship between life and death." Except for the medical and financial facts, death ed offers no "right answers"—certainly not in funeral ritual or "personal eschatology." Death educators are to help students "catalyze and synthesize attitudes and thoughts concerning death in a more positive manner," but they cannot say which positive mental attitude is to be preferred while waiting for the undertaker. Just recite a few slogans borrowed from Dale Carnegie next time you pass the cemetery.

Short on specifiable content, death ed joins the list of classes ("Media," "Creative Writing," "Personal Relations") offering refuge to students fleeing the rigors of mathematics, Latin, or chemistry. Trouble is, though, that despite all the tax money devoted to it, despite the impressive credentials of its proponents, despite the slick packaging of its curricula, despite its popularity with progressive educators, death ed doesn't *work* very well, not even by its own standards. Reported surveys have shown that while death education may reduce anxiety about death among some, it actually exacerbates fear of death among others. Similarly, surveys show that death ed does not reduce the number of students prone to suicide. For death educators, such problems simply signal a need for "more research."

But let the entire federal budget be devoted to research in thanatology, and the grave will still refuse to yield up her secrets to the clean, well-lighted classroom. So long as it remains in thrall to scientific rationalism and modern sentimentality, death education will remain a noxious lie meant to flatter the Imperial Self. According to this lie, death poses no overwhelming threat to the individual ego, but instead becomes simply one more event to be managed and planned according to personal preferences and scientific measurement. Students are encouraged to think of death as one more *subject*, mastered by study and calculation, not as a humbling mystery that exposes the vanity of human ambitions. Seeking to explain human mortality, death educators end up explaining it away.

Then again, perhaps it is too much to expect any teacher in the public schools to resist rather than accede to the prevailing cultural attitudes toward death. In contemporary America and Europe, that prevailing attitude is denial. "Everything goes on," writes French historian Philippe Aries, "as if neither I nor those who are dear to me are any longer mortal. Technically, we might admit that we might die. . . . But really, at heart we feel we are non-mortals." Aries puts it emphatically: "In our day, in approximately a third of a century, we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that

social observers have not failed to be struck with it. It is really an absolutely unheard of phenomenon. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden." "Death," Aries writes elsewhere, "has become a taboo, an unnameable thing . . . [I]n the 20th century, death has replaced sex as the principal prohibition."

Neither Hollywood murder movies nor death education invalidate Aries' observation. Indeed, by turning death into a histrionic spectacle on the one hand and an academic exercise on the other, moviemakers and pedagogues alike isolate death from everyday life. In the popular imagination, death has ceased to define the universal human condition and instead has become the professional specialty of actors, morticians, doctors, and now teachers.

Death has disappeared from the fabric of everyday life in part because it occurs less frequently now than in the past. Although life expectancy figures from earlier centuries can be misleading if the statistical effects of high infant mortality are forgotten, the numbers can still provide suggestive comparisons. Life expectancy in 1850 in Massachusetts stood at only 38 years for males and 41 for females. Even in 1900, national life expectancy stood at only 46 for males and 48 for females. Our grandparents' generation experienced death as a frequent intruder. At a time when many women died in childbirth, colonial and 19th-century Americans understood well the precarious balance between life and death. When epidemics and malnutrition were common, infants and children also lived in the constant shadow of death.

In this century, however, the American death rate has declined sharply. A white male born in 1983 is now expected to live 72 years, a white female 79 years. The annual mortality rate for the American population stood at only 9 deaths per 1,000 people compared to 21 per 1,000 in Massachusetts in 1865. The decline has been especially striking among women and children. As late as 1935, 6 mothers died in labor for every 1,000 births in New York City. In contrast, in 1983 only 8 American mothers died in childbirth for every 100,000 births. Among infants, the mortality rate has fallen from 141 per 1,000 in 1900-04 in Massachusetts to a nationwide figure of just 11 per 1,000 in 1983.

Even when grave illness does strike, modern medicine fosters persistent hope for a cure. "With the advancements in therapeutics and surgery," Aries notes, "it has become increasingly more difficult to be certain that a serious illness is fatal; the chances of recovering from it have increased so much. . . . [E]veryone acts as though medicine is the answer to everything. . . . Caesar must die one day, [but] there is absolutely no reason for oneself to die."

Growing reliance upon the life-prolonging powers of medicine has also changed the setting where death finally does occur. Until this century, Americans typically died at home, generally with family members (children included) gathered around the deathbed, often joined by a priest or clergyman. Family members washed and prepared the body for burial, kept vigil over the dead body, carried the coffin to the church, and quite often dug the grave. Now all of these tasks are performed, more efficiently, by professionals. The body is typically taken directly from the hospital to the

funeral home to be seen by family members only when embalmed and cosmetically prepared for viewing.

The modern professionalization of death has not only distanced the family from the dead, but has also reduced the visibility of religion. In many cities, nine out of ten funerals are now conducted out of funeral homes, not chapels or synagogues. Buoyed up by technocratic confidence, modern men and women look to the future with scant regard for the lessons of history. Wyndham Lewis anticipated this development in his denunciation of "youngergeneration-consciousness" in 1932. Lewis found it dangerous that "'Youth' Propaganda" was teaching the young "to repudiate all ancient forms of cult or ritual in favor of progress and Modernity." In the same vein, George Orwell complained about 20th-century writers who were trying to create "a race of enlightened sunbathers, whose sole topic of conversation is their own superiority to their ancestors."

The affluence of the modern world also fosters the myth of immortality. Harry Armstrong remarks that "the general economic and social condition of a people has a considerable influence on their attitude toward death. The general rule is that the more affluent they become and the more creature comforts and satisfactions they enjoy, the more they fear and dread their ultimate fate." Greater affluence affects not only attitudes toward death but also emotional responses. Allan Kellehear of the University of New South Wales reports that "the higher the [social] class, the less emotion expressed for the deceased." In contrast, Aries finds among "the lower classes . . . death is still something real and serious. . . . In them, we recognize vestiges of the traditional death."

But why worry that only the poor must now acknowledge their mortality? Why not blithely enjoy our technical progress and affluence until the lights go out? The truth, always understood by poets and moralists, is that only by contemplating death can men recognize the boundaries and significance of life. Pondering death often has the paradoxical effect of turning men away from egotism. So literary

critic Joseph Schwartz, paraphrasing the novelist Walker Percy, concludes: "The certainty of death is the very condition of recovering oneself."

Unsurprisingly, surveys find that death is least frightening to those with a sense of "extended self" that includes other people. Meditation on death can extend the self by reminding the living of debts to departed ancestors and of the obligation to make like sacrifices for the next generation. Richard Weaver accordingly stressed the importance of "belief in the continuum of (the human) race." "Those who have no concern for their ancestors," he reasoned, "will, by simple application of the same rule, have none for their descendants."

Arguably, the nation's "birth dearth" springs in part from the widespread denial of death. Immortals, after all, need not rear a successor generation. It is noteworthy that as the fertility of American Catholics—once known for their large families—has fallen to below replacement level, requests for memorial masses for the dead have also declined markedly. Death education of the modern sort not only does not reverse this breaking of the links between generations but actually accelerates it. For Professor Leviton, it is encouraging that after a death-ed class, students show "an increase in preference for an educator rather than parent to teach children about death."

Perhaps this generation can be shaken out of the illusion of immortality only by crisis, calamity, or war. But perhaps some can still be reached by the sober witness of faith. Such witness will not come from death education. Rather the task falls to those of us who profess faith in God, regardless of our career choice. In this task, we can hardly hope to inspire others to make a pilgrimage toward eternal life without pointing out that we are currently living in the shadow of death. Few can acknowledge that shadow without pain and distress. But in the end, it is far worse to deny that shadow by retreating into the neon illumination of modern culture. For, as T.S. Eliot understood: "Life you may evade, but Death you shall not."



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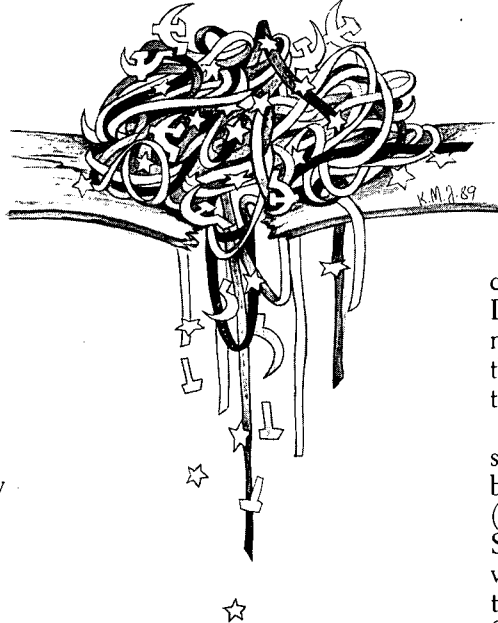
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National Insecurity

by William R. Hawkins

"Diplomacy is utterly useless where there is no force behind it."
—Theodore Roosevelt



Inside the National Security Council

by Constantine C. Menges
New York: Simon & Schuster;
418 pp., \$19.95

The Presidency and the Management of National Security

by Carnes Lord
New York: Free Press; 207 pp.,
\$22.50

From the elevation of arms control to the opening of talks with the PLO, the course of American foreign policy in recent years has led some to wonder why Ronald Reagan was once considered such a contrast to Jimmy Carter. The cycle is best seen in Central America. In 1980, the question was whether El Salvador could survive a Communist insurgency. The Reagan Doctrine's support of the contras shifted the strategic balance. The question then became could Nicaragua survive an anticommunist insurgency. But these days, leftist demonstrators once again chant, "Nicaragua is now free. El Salvador soon will be." Soviet aid flows to the Sandinistas (and on to guerrillas, terrorists, and drug runners throughout the region), while the contras starve.

Reagan's defenders blame the Democratic Congress. The Boland amendments and Speaker Wright's plots with the Sandinistas come readily to mind.

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Yet the most powerful enemies of President Reagan's policies were within the executive branch at the Department of State. Reagan tolerated George Schultz as secretary of state, a man who in championing the appeasement policies of the Foreign Service worked tirelessly to subvert the President's policies—and in the last two years, succeeded.

This is the message of Constantine Menges and Carnes Lord. Both men served on the National Security Council staff (Menges, 1983-86; Lord, 1981-83). The NSC is supposed to keep the President in control of foreign policy. However, in the struggle between the NSC and the State Department, the NSC is short of resources unless the President stays involved in the process and imparts to the NSC his authority to deal with the bureaucracy. Reagan did not do this. Given the record of George Bush and James Baker during this period, matters are unlikely to improve.

The Menges and Lord books are complementary. Menges relates with details that make the blood boil the

constant intrigues hatched by the State Department, while Lord does an organizational analysis, proposing reforms throughout the foreign policy apparatus to increase presidential authority.

Menges had senior NSC staff responsibility for Latin America. He had been a Latin America CIA specialist (1981-83). He firmly believes that if the Sandinistas are not removed, Mexico will eventually fall and the US will face the unaccustomed danger of a large, Soviet-armed enemy on its own border.

Menges recounts seven major attempts between 1981 and 1986 by State to substitute its own program for Reagan's. State wanted a negotiated settlement that would ratify Communist control of Nicaragua and provide US economic aid in exchange for a Sandinista promise not to pursue revolutionary activity elsewhere. State opposed any attempt to remove the Sandinista regime or require it to adopt democracy as being contrary to this formula. Of course, without pressure there was no reason for the Sandinistas to make concessions.

That the State formula was contrary to Reagan's program was revealed whenever the President discovered what State was doing. The President always said "no" (often displaying considerable anger), ordered State plans halted, and sent personal assurances to friendly Central American governments. Yet he left the conspirators in place to try again, and they quickly learned to operate behind the President's back—and to block all attempts to inform the