HON 209                  Spring 2010  
Death, Self and Society

Catalog Description: Prerequisite: Acceptance to the University Honors Program, or consent of instructor. Students participate in an interdisciplinary investigation of death, dying, and the grieving process. Topics include: The American way of death as a social institution; dying as a psychological process; how society conditions us to deny death and repress grief; how students relate to "their own death" and the death of significant others. (Offered as needed.) 3 credits.

Restrictions: Acceptance into the University Honors Program, or consent of instructor.

Course Goals, Objectives and Learning Outcomes:

This course will be an exploration of and an expedition into that dark, uncharted, tabooed territory conventionally labeled "death." Sociologically speaking, what are the prescribed social attitudes toward "my own death" and how and why are these prescriptions supported and maintained? What social functions do they serve? Existentially speaking, what are the possible available attitudes towards "my own death" (for with death, as with suffering, it is not whether one dies and suffers or not, but how one lives one's suffering, how one lives one's dying). What is the relationship between one's idea of death and one's idea of oneself, between awareness of mortality and awareness of identity?

Content:
How do we humans learn of death (a philosophical-epistemological question and also a psychological question of child development)? What is death? Is it a natural phenomenon or does it require explanation in non-natural terms (a metaphysical and religious problem)? What does the history of death, of the idea of death, look like? Historically, when did the encounter with the finality of death become more socially certain than a transition to immortality (when death was just a change in life-style)? What of the atomic and ecological situation? How has the concept of death as the end of my world been affected by apocalypse as the end of the world?
How has contemporary society provided us with a framework to ignore death? How has it trained us to cultivate a fantasy mentality, a perpetual forgetfulness towards the realities of old age, death and dying? When and how did death become denied and repressed? Is it possible to re-discover the ordinariness of death? Gurdjieff has Beelzebub remark in All and Everything. “The Sole means now for saving beings of the planet Earth would be to implant again into their essences a new organ, an organ like Kundabuffer, but this time of such properties that everyone of these unfortunates during the process of existence should constantly sense and be cognizant of the inevitability of his death as well as of the death of everyone upon whom his eyes or attention rests.”

Are there significant variations in the experience and interpretation of death from epoch to epoch (an historical question), from culture to culture (an anthropological question)? Are there great differences in the quality of death? (How a society conceives of and treats death deeply reflects how it conceives of life.) Are there great differences in the awareness and fear of death from epoch to epoch (historically viewed), from culture to culture (anthropologically viewed)? If so, how are these variations to be explained? What specific social conditions tend to heighten the awareness of death? The denial of death? The fear of death? The ordinariness of death? How has death-related behavior, mourning customs, burial rites (burying, burning, embalming, etc.) changed historically?

“All disease is a socially created reality.” (Ivan Illich) What does it mean to say disease or, for that matter, death is socially created? We will examine the medicalization of death and disease perception and the medicalization of the struggle against death, as well as the possibilities of a de-medicalization of these phenomena. We will examine to what degree we are prisoners of the medical ideology in which we were brought up and socialized. What is the value of our medical values and how well founded is our overwhelming belief in the progress and superiority of modern medicine?

Required Texts:
Thich Nhat Hahn, No Death, No Fear. NY: Riverhead, 2002
Instructional Strategies:
Lecture, videos, seminar discussions, student presentations, guest speakers, field trips.

Methods of Evaluation:
1. Mid-Term #1 take-home essay
2. Mid-Term #2 take-home essay
3. Final take-home essay
4. Project #1: Arrange a funeral.
5. Project #2: TBA
6. Various "experiments"

Chapman University Academic Integrity Policy:
Chapman University is a community of scholars which emphasizes the mutual responsibility of all members to seek knowledge honestly and in good faith. Students are responsible for doing their own work, and academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated anywhere in the university.

Students with Disabilities:
In compliance with ADA guidelines, students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this class are encouraged to inform the instructor at the beginning of the term. Upon recommendation of the Center for Academic Success, adaptations of teaching methods, class materials, including text and reading materials or testing may be made as needed to provide for equitable participation.

Bibliography: