

Death Denying Culture

I first came across the idea of our society being a “death denying culture” as a student in sociology many years ago and I have reflected on this concept many times during my experiences through adulthood. Generally, as children we are shielded from unpleasant topics and conversations about death and dying, and these topics are not eagerly initiated by parents until absolutely necessary. When children do begin to understand that death exists, often following the loss of a pet or an older relative, we offer assurances that although death is inevitable, it is not a topic that we should give too much thought to while we are still living. As we age and experience more death in our lives, whether close to us or even in the news and media, we might find ourselves experiencing emotions that are difficult to process. While tears and sadness are often expected, we might also feel more complex emotions such as guilt, remorse or regret. The grieving process requires emotional work and in a culture that tends to value pleasurable activities and instant gratification, it is understandable that contemplation of death and dying is generally avoided. At the same time, as a culture we have moved away from providing physical care to dying loved ones in our homes towards paid caregivers in hospitals or alternate settings which makes death even easier to avoid and deny while we are off busy living our lives.

So how does this impact upon our ability to grieve when we are faced with the death of a loved one? If we have always been discouraged from thinking about or preparing for death, we are left without strategies to deal with it when it does happen (and it will). We may not want to burden our friends or families with our emotions because we have been taught that talking about death is uncomfortable and is best to be avoided. We also may question whether we are even grieving in the proper way as when a death occurs it does not arrive with clear rules and expectations. As a result, we might feel that we are alone in our grief and that others cannot possibly understand the pain that we are experiencing. There are many ways that we can provide support and understanding to those experiencing death in our lives and communities. What I have learned by talking to people who are dying and those who have experienced the death of a loved one is that what I say mattered less than my willingness to say it. By being open and comfortable talking about death, I have learned that the grieving and bereaved want to be able to talk about their feelings, the memories of their loved ones and how to keep living while doing the emotional work involved in grieving. ““Those who learned to know death, rather than to fear and fight it, become our teachers about life.” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1985).