

Montserrat 100S

## **ENDINGS: THE MEANING OF DEATH**

College of the Holy Cross, Fall 2014

Section 01: T/R 11-12:15, Stein 522

Section 02: T/R 12:30-1:45, Stein 522

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“If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.”

-- Viktor Frankl (1959), *Man's Search For Meaning*, p. 88.

### **OVERVIEW**

What is death, and does it mean the same thing to everyone everywhere? When medical technologies can keep our bodies alive indefinitely, is there ever a right time to die? How does the inevitability of death shape how people live? Is it possible to laugh about, or even in the face of, death? What is it like to have a job that immerses you in grief and death? This course has two purposes, the first of which is to address questions like these in an exploration of how people experience and give meaning to death. Drawing from popular media, history, anthropology, and especially sociology, you will learn to view death as a social process and give thought to your own past, present, and future encounters with death. The second purpose of this course is to assist you as you adjust to the intellectual demands of undergraduate coursework. This means that in addition to learning substantive material, you will receive explicit instruction about how to read, write, speak, study, and interact with professors and peers in academic contexts.

Our course is part of Montserrat's *Self Cluster*, whose theme for the year is “Bodies, Selves and Societies: The Challenges of Our Age.” We will weave this theme throughout our discussions, focusing especially on the intersection of self and society and the relationship between death and identity in the late-modern West. Beyond academic considerations of the self, this class will encourage you to think about who you are, who you want to become, and how you can use your time at Holy Cross to facilitate your own self-development.

## GOALS

### By the end of this course, you will have:

- Greater experience reading, writing, and thinking like a scholar.
- Familiarity with Holy Cross' library system and extensive practice finding relevant books and articles.
- An understanding of how to generate an empirical research question.
- Substantive knowledge of a birth- or death-related topic you are interested in.
- An understanding of how death's meanings are a product of particular historical circumstances.
- A familiarity with the dilemmas of dying in the contemporary United States and the institutional conditions that give rise to those dilemmas.
- An introductory knowledge of palliative care, funeral direction, and the politics of physician-assisted suicide.
- A chronicle of your own thinking about death, college, and the pursuit of a meaningful life.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

### Books.

Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Beacon Press 2006/1946).  
Allan Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge University Press 2007).  
Katy Butler, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (Scribner 2013).  
Sheri Booker, *Nine Year's Under: Coming of Age in an Inner City Funeral Home* (Gotham 2013).

\*Additional readings are available on the course Moodle page. These are designated with the letter "M" in the course schedule below.

### Films. (Available for rent on iTunes or Amazon)

*Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality* (Directed by Patrick Shen 2005).  
"The Suicide Plan," *Frontline*, Season 31, Episode 4 (A PBS Public Affairs Series, 2012).

Please also pick up a ring-bound Moleskine Folio Professional Binder (available from Amazon).

## REQUIREMENTS AND SCORE BREAKDOWN

10% In-class participation  
5% Course portfolio  
15% End-of-life planning essay  
15% Social history précis  
15% Weekly journal entries, scored three times during the semester  
40% Research proposal on the topic of your choice, submitted in stages (see below)

**In-class participation.** Montserrat courses are seminars, which means they are light on lecture and heavy on conversation. They are designed this

way to cultivate your independence, curiosity, and unique voice as an incoming college student. Although I will spend time framing and facilitating each class, you shoulder much of the responsibility for discussion. I reserve high scores for students who:

- Think actively and honestly about what we read and discuss.
- Make comments and ask questions that are informed by assigned material.
- Listen to and take seriously other students in the class.

Participation also means attending Montserrat-related events and contributing to the intellectual culture on our campus. See page 9 for a list of required and recommended events.

**Course portfolio.** A portfolio is a collection of work meant to display knowledge, skills, and creativity in a particular area. You will work throughout the semester to compile a portfolio for this course. Your portfolio will contain all of the work you've completed this semester, including your weekly journal entries (see below).

**Social history précis.** One of the most valuable skills you will need during the next four years is the ability to read like a scholar. This assignment is meant to help you develop that skill. Early in the course, we will read a challenging text on the social history of dying. Each of you will be responsible for teaching parts of that text to your classmates. You will then submit a précis (or concise summary) for your assigned section.

**End-of-life planning essay.** As you will learn in this course, advanced medical technologies can complicate end-of-life decision-making, particularly when a person cannot speak for him or herself. Nonetheless, few people take the time to articulate end-of-life preferences when they are young and healthy. In this 2 to 4-page essay, you will think through your own end-of-life values, specify what types of medical intervention you would want to receive if you were to become critically ill or injured, and outline your preferences for a post-death ritual.

**Weekly journal entries.** Deep learning requires that you develop a meaningful connection to the material. In service of this goal, I'd like you to set time aside each week to reflect on the ideas we're exploring in class and record your thoughts. Each journal entry should be:

- Typed
- Single-spaced
- At least 250 words
- Written in grammatically correct, complete sentences

What you write about is up to you, as long as your topics are tied to the course material. You can write in whatever voice (personal, professional) you're most comfortable with. The purpose of these entries is to encourage reflection and to create a meaningful record of what you're learning.

Each time you complete a journal entry, print it out and put it in your course portfolio. *Bring your binder to class every Tuesday.* I will collect and comment on a few students' entries (randomly selected) each week. By the end of the semester, I will have scored your portfolio three times.

**Research Proposal.** Your lengthiest assignment in this course is to propose an empirical, birth- or death-related research project that you will carry out during the second half of Montserrat next semester. The proposal requires you to choose a topic, identify and review some relevant literature, and develop a research question. You will work on this project in stages and submit four separate assignments over the course of the semester. The project constitutes 40% of your final score but is broken down as follows:

Topic (5%)  
Annotated bibliography (15%)  
Rough draft, including research question (5%)  
Final draft (15%)

Additional details for all of these assignments will follow later in the semester (see the course schedule below).

## **OFFICE HOURS**

Need guidance on an assignment? Feedback on a rough draft? Want to talk about something that we read about in class or that you saw in the news? Drop by during office hours! You don't need an appointment. I look forward to talking with you one-on-one.

## **ATTENDANCE & PUNCTUALITY**

Attendance is compulsory. More than a few absences will jeopardize your participation score and make it difficult to earn passing grades on assignments. Please also be mindful of all starting times, timelines and deadlines. Lectures and discussions begin promptly at 11:00 and 12:30, and you should arrive to each class having completed all of that day's assigned readings. I do not accept late work, schedule make-up exams, or accept electronic assignments except in cases of emergency. If you experience an emergency that prevents you from meeting any of the course requirements on time, notify me immediately in order to make necessary arrangements.

NOTE: Thank you for reading the syllabus carefully. Send me an email with the subject heading "I read the syllabus" so I know that you completed the assignment.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

I will sanction and report to your Class Dean any and all cases of plagiarism, cheating, and collusion. According to Holy Cross' policy on academic honesty, these are defined as follows:

“**Plagiarism** is the act of taking the words, ideas, data, illustrative material, or statements of someone else, without full and proper acknowledgment, and presenting them as one’s own.

“**Cheating** is the use of improper means or subterfuge to gain credit or advantage. Forms of cheating include the use, attempted use, or improper possession of unauthorized aids in any examination or other academic exercise submitted for evaluation; the fabrication or falsification of data; misrepresentation of academic or extracurricular credentials; and deceitful performance on placement examinations. It is also cheating to submit the same work for credit in more than one course, except as authorized in advance by the course instructors.

“**Collusion** is assisting or attempting to assist another student in an act of academic dishonesty.”

Please see the full policy for details ([www.holycross.edu/catalog/academic-honesty-policy.pdf](http://www.holycross.edu/catalog/academic-honesty-policy.pdf)). If you have any questions or concerns regarding academic integrity, come see me.

**IMPORTANT DATES**

- Sept. 11 Mandatory Self Cluster event: “Plant a Seed, Change the World: HC Alumni's Contributions to the Environment”
- Sept. 25 End-of-life planning essay due
- Oct. 9 Social history précis due
- Oct. 21 Research topic due
- Oct. 23 Mandatory Self Cluster event: Coffee House and Open Mic Night
- Nov. 6 Annotated bibliography due
- Nov. 25 Rough draft of proposal due
- Dec. 4 Evening fieldtrip to Graham, Putnam & Mahoney Funeral Parlors
- Dec. 9 Final proposal due
- Dec. 11 Course portfolio due

**SCHEDULE**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Assigned Texts</b>
Thursday, Sept. 4	<b>Welcome</b>	No reading today
Tuesday, Sept. 9	<b>The meaning of life, suffering &amp; death</b>	The course syllabus, in full <i>Man’s Search for Meaning</i> , Preface-p. 58 (or ending with the line “Set me like a seal

		upon thy heart, love is as strong as death.”)
Thursday, Sept. 11  <i>Mandatory Self Cluster event</i>		<i>Man’s Search for Meaning</i> , p. 58 to the end of Part I (p. 115 in my text).
Tuesday, Sept. 16  <i>Receive end-of-life planning essay assignment</i>	<b>Dilemmas of dying in the late-modern United States</b>	<i>Knocking on Heaven’s Door</i> , Ch. 1-6
Thursday, Sept. 18		<i>Knocking on Heaven’s Door</i> , Ch. 7-11
Tuesday, Sept. 23		<i>Knocking on Heaven’s Door</i> , Ch. 12-15
Thursday, Sept. 25  <i>End-of-life planning essay due</i>		<i>Knocking on Heaven’s Door</i> , Ch. 16-20
Tuesday, Sept. 30  <i>Receive social history précis assignment</i>		<i>A Social History of Dying</i> , Historical Contexts (See handout for your specific chapters)
Thursday, Oct. 2	<b>Death and dying in historical perspective</b>	<i>A Social History of Dying</i> , Historical Contexts (See handout for your specific chapters)
Tuesday, Oct. 7		<i>A Social History of Dying</i> , Historical Contexts (See handout for your specific chapters)
Thursday, Oct. 9  <i>Social history précis due</i>		Review all of <i>A Social History of Dying</i>

<i>Receive topic assignment</i>		
Tuesday, Oct. 14 Thursday, Oct. 16	<b>FALL BREAK</b>	--
Tuesday, Oct. 21  <i>Topic assignment due</i>  <i>Receive annotated bibliography assignment</i>	<b>Reconsidering the role of grades in your college education</b>	(M) "Grades: Can you perform without the pressure?" Ch. 2 of Inge Bell's <i>This Book Is Not Required</i>
Thursday, Oct. 23  <i>Mandatory Self Cluster Event</i>	<b>Workshop: conducting library research</b> -- meet in Dinand's Scalia Computer Lab	No reading today
Tuesday, Oct. 28	<b>Physician assisted suicide</b>	(M) "Assisted Suicide: Pro-Choice or Anti-Life?" Hastings Center Report by Richard Doerflinger  (M) "Assisted Suicide Is Not Voluntary Active Euthanasia" by David T. Watts and Timothy Howell  (M) "Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide Policy in the Netherlands and Oregon: A Comparative Analysis" by Kant Patel
Thursday, Oct. 30		"The Suicide Tourist" (Documentary)
Tuesday, Nov. 4	<b>Workshop: writing an annotated bibliography</b>	No reading today
Thursday, Nov. 6	<b>Death Denial</b>	<i>Flight from Death</i> (Documentary)

<i>Annotated bibliography assignment due</i>		
Tuesday, Nov. 11		(M) Chapters 3 & 4 of <i>Staring at the Sun</i> by Irving Yalom
Thursday, Nov. 13 <i>Receive research proposal assignment</i>	<b>Palliative Care</b>	(M) “Letting go: What should medicine do when it can’t save your life?” by Atul Gawande  (M) “The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine” by Eric Cassell
Tuesday, Nov. 18	<b>Death &amp; Humor</b>	(M) “Jokes that follow mass-mediated disasters in a global electronic age” by Christie Davies  (M) “Whatever Gets You Through Today: An Examination of Cynical Humor Among Emergency Service Professionals” by Alison Rowe and Cheryl Regehr
Thursday, Nov. 20	<b>Workshop: writing a research proposal</b>	No reading today
Tuesday, Nov. 25 <i>Rough draft of research proposal due</i>	<b>Undertakers’ worlds</b>	<i>Nine Years Under</i> , Chapters 1-3  (M) “Emotional Capital and Professional Socialization: The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me)” by Spencer Cahill
Thursday, Nov. 27	<b>THANKSGIVING BREAK</b>	--
Tuesday, Dec. 2	<b>Undertakers’ worlds, cont.</b>	<i>Nine Years Under</i> , Chapters 4-6

Thursday, Dec. 4 <i>Evening Fieldtrip to Graham, Putnam &amp; Mahoney Funeral Parlors</i>		<i>Nine Years Under</i> , Chapters 7-10(M)  “Funeral director determined to grant bombing suspect his final right” by Wesley Lowery
Tuesday, Dec. 9 <i>Final research proposal due</i>		<i>Nine Years Under</i> , Chapters 11-15
Thursday, Dec. 11 <i>Course portfolio due</i>	<b>Seeking wisdom during your college career</b>	(M) “Wisdom and Knowledge” and “Pursuing Wisdom in the Academy” Ch. 5 & 6 of Inge Bell’s <i>This Book Is Not Required</i> .

### **MONTSERRAT EVENT SCHEDULE**

<b>Date, Time &amp; Location</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Required or Recommended?</b>
September 11 <sup>th</sup> Hogan Ballroom	“Plant a Seed, Change the World: HC Alumni's Contributions to the Environment”	<b>Required</b>
October 23 <sup>rd</sup> Wheeler Dormitory’s common area, 7:30 PM	Coffee House, Open Mic Night	<b>Required</b>
November 6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> and 13 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup> , 8:00 PM Fenwick Theater	Cloud 9 (Theatrical Performance)	Recommended
November 13 <sup>th</sup> , 8:00 PM Hogan Ballroom	Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson delivers the annual Hanify-Howland lecture	Recommended
December 4 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> , 8:00 PM & December 6 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> , 2:00 PM Fenwick Theater	God of Carnage (Theatrical Performance)	Recommended