Though hardly new, Death is in the news over the past several years. It seems we have rediscovered or uncovered this bare-essential fact of life. While Philippe Aries could state as late as the 1970’s that ours was a time in which death had become “shameful and forbidden,” this order has been rapidly changing. Now governmental agencies and private foundations are spending hundreds of millions to study it. The medical literature is brimming with articles on the discontents of the hospital death and the goodness of the hospice or home death. Near-daily newspaper and popular magazine accounts bring this view to an ever-increasing audience. We listen to NPR radio programs on death and watched Bill Moyers, among others, present it to the mass television audience. Parents and children, husbands and wives, doctors and patients are speaking of the ‘great matter’ in a more candid fashion than anyone can remember.

This all speaks to a major change of attitudes in our culture. The course we are about to take reflects this change; it will give us the time and place to think critically about what is going on. In so doing we will look at current and past representations of death, we will consider such questions as what constitutes a ‘good death’ and what makes a hospital death problematic. We will spend time discussing death in and through medical literature, fiction and poetry; visual representations and music. And, if you are willing, we will share personal stories of loss. All of this is a reflection of the notion that the better we know ourselves, specifically our attitudes concerning death and dying, the better we will be able to understand and help others - and ourselves - in times of crisis surrounding the death of a patient or loved one.

**Course Requirements:**

- Weekly readings and discussions based on these readings. In addition, each student will be expected to write a one-half to one-page *reflection* on each week’s reading – or some personal reflection on suffering/death stimulated by the reading – prior to that week’s class time. This will be collected each week. (Note that a *reflection* is not meant to be a polished piece of writing; rather, it may be written within 10 to 15 minutes of concentrated effort.)

- The first 20 to 30 minutes of each class will be devoted to a student presentation/discussion of a short reading – from any source – on our topic. (Three possible sources, *Kitchen Table Wisdom, How Can I Help?, and The Oxford Book of Death*, are listed below.)

- For a letter grade there will be a 10-15 page paper or a class-related project approved by course instructor due by the last day of class.

Any student who so desires will be paired with a hospital chaplaincy resident, and provisions will be made for visiting patients in the hospital together. The time commitment to, and depth of, this experience is left to each student.
The Retreat: On the weekend of April 10-12, a two-day retreat will be held at Green Gulch Zen Center, beginning with dinner Friday evening, ending with lunch on Sunday. We will engage in discussions and practices designed to give us a more keen awareness of our sense of life and death and how we deal with our own and others’ suffering and mortality. The goal is to provide a structured opportunity to explore, integrate, and deepen individual learning from the class. Attendance cannot be mandatory but is strongly requested.

Look
Look me in the eye –

Most of
I mean all of –

Why make such a fuss

Are going to –

I mean
Look me in the eye.

-Rick Fields
The Death Course: Suffering, Old Age, Death, and Medicine

Spring 2009

Note: All classes will be held on Wednesdays from 5:30-7:30PM (or 6 to 8:00) in 104 Dwinelle

The retreat will be the weekend of April 10-12

January 21  Introduction – discuss themes, writing exercise, ?show part of Marin Monsen’s film

January 28  What is Death?

In class: film excerpts from Wiseman’s “Near Death,” “King Lear,” and “Stand By Me”
“Pronouncing” (from “On being a doctor”)]

February 4  How We Die I

Reading: Sherwin Nuland, How We Die
Thomas Laqueur, "Closing Time" [review essay of Nuland] London Review of Books, August 18, 1994
Joanne Lynn and Joan Harrold, “Learning about specific illnesses,” Chapter 9 in Handbook for Mortals

February 11  The Hospital Chaplaincy and Hospice

Guest: Rev. Peter Yuichi Clark, Chaplain, Alta Bates-Summit Medical Center
Reading: on chaplaincy and hospice
Margaret Edson, W.t. [may hold for future meeting]

February 18
Suffering and Dying
Reading: Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych” and “Three Deaths”; David Rieff, Swimming in a Sea of Death
“The Dart,” from the Salla Sutta
“Death of Socrates” in Plato’s “Phaedo,” 115b-118b
Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, excerpt

February 25
The “Good Death” I – Physician-assisted suicide (PAS), euthanasia
Joanne Lynn, “Where’s the Outrage?” in The Exchange, a publication of Americans for Better Care of the Dying
U.S. Supreme Court decisions NY vs. Quill and Washington vs. Glucksberg
“California Compassionate Choices Act” - various news reports.
Richard Selzer’s, “Mercy.”
The Oregon experience.


March 4

**The History of Death**

Reading: tba

Guest: Thomas Laqueur, Professor of History, UCB

March 11

**How We Die II** – of various causes, end-of-life symptoms and management of these with palliative care

Guests: Claudia Landau, MD, PhD and Sheira Freedman, MD

Reading: *Handbook for Mortals*; Rabow and Pantilat, “Care at the End of Life” (chapter from *Current Medical Diagnosis and Treatment*).


March 18

**The “Good Death” II** – Disability and “quality” of life; “futility”

Reading: Lonny Shavelson, “The Slippery Slope: Euthanasia for the Disabled” from *A Chosen Death*, Chapter 4 (pp.105-157), Simon and Schuster, 1995

The cases of Elizabeth Bouvia and Mark O’Brien

Terry Schiavo articles:

George Annas, “‘Culture of Life’ Politics at the Bedside – The Case of Terri Schiavo,” NEJM 352, 1710-1715, 2005.


Harriet McBryde Johnson, “Hey, Wait a Minute: Not Dead at All. Why Congress was Right to stick up for Terri Schiavo,” Slate, March 23, 2005.

March 25

Spring Break

April 1

**Where We Die: Death in the Hospital**

Guest: Sharon Kaufman

April 8

**Truth-telling and Hope; Telling the “Bad News”**

Reading: Hippocratic Corpus, “Decorum,” XVI.

Thomas Percival, “A Physician Should be the Minister of Hope and Comfort to the Sick,” from *Percival’s Medical Ethics* 1803

Thomas Addison, excerpt from *Glomerular Nephritis*, 1948

Kelly and Friesen, “Do Cancer Patients Want to Be Told?” *Surgery* 27, 822-826, 1950


Judge Jacob Turkel, “Remarks on Telling the Truth or Lying,” *Medicine and Law* 4, 91-93, 1985

Antonella Surbone, “Letter from Italy: Truth Telling to the Patient,” *JAMA* 268, 1661-1662, 1992

Edmund Pellegrino, “Is Truth Telling to the Patient a Cultural Artifact?” *JAMA* 268, 1734-1735, 1992


Arato, et al. v. Avedon, Supreme Court of California, 1993

John Stone, “Talking to the Family”

Raymond Carver, “What the Doctor Said”

Donald Hall, *from Without*

Rick Fields, from *Fuck You, Cancer*

April 10-12

**RETREAT at Green Gulch Farm**

The retreat begins at dinnertime Friday, April 10 and ends with lunch on Sunday, April 12

April 15

**Cultural differences in End-of-Life Care**

Guest: LaVera Crawley, Research Associate, Stanford University Center for Biomedical Ethics

Reading: Crawley et al, “Palliative and End-of-Life Care in the African American Community”
April 22 and 29  **Imaging Death**  
Guest: Beth Dungan, Art Historian, Director of Adult Education, SFMOMA  
or -  
**On Suicide**  
or -  
**Aging/Old Age and Death; How long do you want to live?**  
- Alcestis; “Fortitude;” Saramago, Death With Interruptions; Thomas Nagel, “Death;” Ionesco, Exit the King; Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality;” “What if it works?  
or -  
**Student presentation(s)**  

May 6  
Wrap-up  

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**Required Reading:**  

The Course Reader  

Sharon Kaufman, *And a Time to Die: How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life*  
David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*  
Sherwin Nuland, *How We Die*  
Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”  
Margaret Edson, *W&t*  
Joanne Lynn and Joan Harrold, *Handbook for Mortals: Guidance for People Facing Serious Illness*  
Euripides, *Alcestis*  
Ionesco, *Exit the King*  

**Recommended Reading:**  

Ram Dass, *How Can I Help*  
Rachel Remen’s *Kitchen Table Wisdom*  
Sandra Gilbert, *Wrongful Death*  

**Films:** Moyers on Death; Notes from the Edge; Wiseman’s Near Death; Cancer in Two Voices; Wild Strawberries; The Dead; W;t; Flatliners; Ikuru; Steambath; The Deep Sea; The Diving Bell and the Butterfly; The Self-Made Man; Dying Wish; The Bridge; Fortitude