DEATH TALK:
FACING DEATH, DYING, AND GRIEF IN THE U.S. TODAY

First-Year Seminar FYSEM UA 723
New York University

Draft syllabus — some changes will be made

Spring 2021, Thursdays 3:30pm -6pm
Office hours: tbd
or by appointment

Stéphane Gerson
stephane.gerson@nyu.edu

It has long been said that death has been hidden from view in the modern West. Most people now die in hospitals or old age institutions rather than at home. Older rituals of grief and bereavement have grown marginal or corporatized, making death and bodies and grief less visible in our daily lives. Our media culture privileges youth and vigor rather than aging and death. Certain deaths, such as a child’s, are almost taboo because they contradict our prevailing beliefs about progress, happiness, the sanctity of childhood, and the elimination of risk. All of this has eroded the traditional ideal of the Good Death: a well-managed, communal death at home, a death that is anticipated, a death in which the dying have a living role, a death that doesn’t rupture the bond between the living and the dead.

And yet, in recent years, there has been a noticeable change in the U.S.: rituals, preparations, connections with the dead and their corpses, acceptance of the mourning process, and a growing willingness to talk about death. There is a surge of memoirs and novels, poems and essays, journalistic investigations, movies and albums, works of history, sociology, and anthropology. And then came the Covid-19 Crisis, with its unfathomable number of victims, people dying alone, interrupted burial rituals, and complicated grief for so many people.

Throughout this semester, we will seek to understand relationships to death, dying, and grief in the U.S. today. We will weigh the proposition that, responding to new threats and anxieties, new risks and forms of collective death, and also to longings for autonomy, community, and a richer life, we are witnessing a return to a certain Good Death. Might this ideal be taking new forms in modern times?

Goals

1. Explore recent works on death, dying, and grief to cultivate our emotional intelligence and refine our understanding of the world in which we live.

2. Acquire or perfect scholarly skills: close readings for form and content; clear, well-organized analytical writing at the service of an argument; revision; providing and receiving feedback; and oral proficiency.

3. Create a scholarly, empathetic community.

Most class meetings will be divided between discussions of our readings and clinics devoted to the analytical skills above.
COURSE EXPECTATIONS

1. This course rests on your commitment, i.e. curiosity, close readings, intellectual engagement, and willingness to test and share ideas. This entails:

   (a) **Preparation**: Please read our assigned texts carefully, annotating them, thinking of questions we might discuss in class. **Always** bring your readings to class — either books or article print-outs. You will need them during our discussions. If you do not bring your readings, you will be considered absent.

   (b) **Presence in class**: Unexcused absences will count against your participation grade. If you need to miss class due to an emergency, please email me **ahead of class**.

   (c) **Punctuality**: Always arrive on time; this is essential.

   (d) **In-class participation**: Be ready to reflect on the readings, make considered arguments, and respond with respect to what others say [20% of course grade for all of the above].

2. **Use of phones and computers is not permitted.** I will explain why in class. You may bring an iPad or similar device to read PDF’s although I recommend that you print relevant readings. Should you require an exception, please speak to me.

3. **Weekly reading assignments prior to each class**: Please email me the following (in the body of the email, not as an attachment) **before 1pm each Thursday** [10%].

   (A) A paragraph answering the following questions: What did this week’s reading(s) argue or teach you about contemporary relationships to death, dying, and grief?

   (B) One question you’d like to discuss about the week’s reading(s). This question should be analytical rather than factual: something you deem important, perplexing, worth discussing in class.

4. **Mini-essays**: On February 18 and March 11, instead of writing a paragraph, pose an analytical question about the reading(s) and answer it in a thoughtful and well-organized mini-essay. You should make an argument in answer to your question and support it by quoting from the reading(s). Footnote your references. Length: between 700 and 800 words total. Email these mini-essays **as Word attachments** before 1pm the day of class [20%].

5. **Analytical paper** about one contemporary text (or other artistic/intellectual production) about death, dying, and grieving — from the U.S. or elsewhere. You will be expected to analyze the text closely, present a clear argument, support it with analysis, draw from at least three secondary sources, use footnotes, and format your essay using the Chicago Style. You may work on a text we read in class or else another one; you may also put two texts in conversation. Length: 3,400-4,000 words (neither more nor less, not including notes).

   A. **Discuss your paper ideas with Stéphane in person by Friday Feb. 27.** Make an appointment to schedule a meeting.

   B. **Email Stéphane a two-page proposal** that includes your topic (and why it is important), your main questions, and your sources. Explain what you have already accomplished, and what needs to be done and when you will do it. Include a bibliography of at least
three secondary sources (books or articles, not Wikipedia or the like). **This is due on Monday March 8** (as a Word attachment).

C. **Email your writing tutor the first draft of your final paper**, not outlines or rough notes, by **Friday April 3**. Afterward, meet with your tutor (30 mins.) to discuss this draft by **April 9 at the latest**. In this course, we are fortunate to have help from the **Undergraduate Writing Tutors Program**. Writing tutors are curious, well-trained peers who will help you become better writers. The tutors will read the drafts of your final papers. Then, during individual conferences, they will encourage and challenge you to strengthen your writing, clarify your ideas, and improve your command of grammar. By asking you questions about your draft, they will prompt you to rethink and revise your drafts. Late submission of drafts and missed conferences with tutors will have an impact on your grade.

D. **Share a complete draft with the class by Saturday April 10**. Upload Word document on NYU-Classes and email it to your writing tutor. No extensions except for dire circumstances [20%]

E. **Receive feedback on your paper during one of our three workshops (April 15, 22, and 29)** and then make an appointment with your writing tutor for a second meeting, to discuss your revisions.

F. **Submit the revised, final version of your paper**, taking into account all the feedback you’ll have received, by **Thursday May 13**. Email it to Stéphane (alone) as a Word attachment, highlighting in your email the main revisions you have undertaken since our workshops [20%]

6. **Participation in our workshops**. At the end of the semester, each one of you will (a) present a complete draft of their paper to the class; (b) read and comment upon the drafts of every other student (i.e. preparing questions and suggestions); and (c) write and deliver a constructive response to one other student’s draft. You will email this response to *that student alone* the evening before class by 7pm (800-1,000 words) and then present it orally in class the next day [10%].

**Academic integrity.** As an NYU student you belong to a community of scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise academic integrity include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the expectations spelled out on [http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity).
JAN. 28  INTRODUCTION

FEB. 4  THE GOOD DEATH — AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS
Allan Kellehear, A Social History of Dying (2007), pp. 6-8, 87-90, 100-102, 145-46, 213-19, and 251-53

FEB. 11  THE IMPACT OF THE U.S. CIVIL WAR
Drew Faust, This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (2008), preface, chs. 3 and 6, and epilogue

FEB. 18  OUR AGE OF DISASTERS
Rebecca Solnit, A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster (2009), part IV, “The City Transfigured,” 183-227
First mini-essay due (email to Stéphane before class)

FEB. 25  END OF LIFE

FEB. 27  Last day to discuss your final paper ideas with Stéphane

MARCH 4  CORPSES AND RITUALS
Caitlyn Doughty, From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death (2017), introduction, chapters on Mexico, Japan, and California, and epilogue

MARCH 9  Final paper proposal due (SPM)—email Word attachment to Stéphane

MARCH 11  NEW CONNECTIONS WITH THE DEAD
David Charles Sloane, Is the Cemetery Dead? (2018), ch. 5 (“Mourning in Public”)
“David Bowie: The Last Five years”(HBO, 2017), 90 minutes
Second mini-essay due (email to Stéphane before class)
March 18  No Class — Spring Break

March 25  Black Men Dying in Mississippi

April 1  Individual Phone Meetings with Stéphane — About Your Paper

April 3  Submit draft of your final paper to your writing tutor and set up online meeting
             him/her to discuss by April 9 at the latest

April 8  Death of a Child, Death of a Parent
Stéphane Gerson, *Disaster Falls: A Family Story* (2017), chs. 2, 5-6, 8, 10, 12, 17-21, and 23

April 11  Upload complete draft of your final paper (as Word document) on NYU-Classes

April 15  Workshop 1
Read the drafts of papers 1-5 and bring at least two comments/questions for each one

April 22  Workshop 2
Read the drafts of papers 6-10 and bring at least two comments/questions for each one

April 29  Workshop 3
Read the drafts of papers 11-15 and bring at least two comments/questions for each one

May 6  (Tentative): Music as Medicine at the End of Life — with Music Thanatologist Catharine DeLong (Maison française, 16 Washington Mews)
Jennifer Hollis, *Music at the End of Life: Easing the Pain and Preparing the Passage* (2010), selection

May 13  Revised Paper due — email Word attachment to Stéphane