Perspectives on Death and Dying

First-Year Seminar — Religion 181

What does life

A Discussion-Centered Course Based on These Readings:

Non-religious experiences and reflections

*The Grim Reader*, anthology:
Selections by Freud, Montaigne, Philip Larkin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Emily Dickinson, James Baldwin, Ann Sexton, George B Shaw, Boccaccio, American doctors, and many others

Readings on the nature of death and why we fear it / how we should live in the face of death / the deaths of family members / mass deaths, AIDS / mourning, burial, and cremation customs / end-of-life issues and hospice

Excerpts from *When We Die* (“The body after death”) / *The Undertaking* by Thomas Lynch, an undertaker / and “Joking with Death”

- Class discussion with Hospice nurses;
- Visits to Harrison Funeral Home and Stonewall Jackson Cemetery

Religious narratives and reflections

A modern Hindu interpretation: *Sacred Journey: Living Purposefully and Dying Gracefully* by Swami Rama. We are God eternal.

A contemporary Buddhist reflection: *No Death, No Fear* by Thich Nhat Hanh. We do not exist as separate selves, and we don’t not exist either!

Christian: Overcoming the slavery of the fear of death through Christ the Victor. Eastern-Orthodoxy, existential psychology, contemporary theology.

Islam: Life and Death in the *Quran*: selected excerpts / A contemporary Egyptian novella interpreting judgment and afterlife

Jewish writings: Traditional Yom Kippur prayers / a medieval teaching story, “The Death of Moses” / a contemporary sermon, “Death and Yom Kippur Atone” / comic fiction: Lev conducts a funeral service

Death in Films: a recent Japanese film, “Departures,” and a contemporary existential interpretation through two films by the classic director, Ingmar Bergman

The Three Questions: How does this reading portray death? Does the reading teach or imply any advice about how to live in the face of the kind of death it portrays? Is there any hope of “overcoming” (or affirming) death in any way?

Assignments: Several classroom introductions to assigned readings; 12 Journal entries addressing assigned questions; interpretive paragraphs on the religious readings; a take-home essay exam on the non-religious writings; concluding take-home essay

Participation in discussions is an important component of the course. {a laptop-free zone}