

# Why Death Should Be a Topic for Education

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## Abstract

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has reintroduced death and dying into awareness and debate, these topics remain in some sense taboo in society. From a philosophical perspective, however, death is closely related to the meaning of life and it is therefore unavoidable to reflect on it. The article attempts to show that reflections on death should be a part of education at different levels.

## Keywords

death; education; meaning of life; relationships; love

In the first edition of the Winter School of Philosophy of Education 2021, I wanted to show the usefulness of philosophical reflection on the problem of evil and the meaning of suffering in human life. These are not very popular topics in today's society because its main actors seek to convince people that all suffering, even death, can either be eliminated or at least "controlled". Therefore, death is often perceived as a "pathology" (Šiklová 2013, 12), as a "stranger" or an "enemy" (Kreeft 2012, 19 and 45) that must be fought to the last moment and kept as far away from us and out of our sight. However, in philosophical reflections death plays an important role with regard to meaningful human life, and it is therefore necessary to deal with it. In this article, I would like to point out that reflections about death – as well as about suffering – should be a part of education and self-education.

The human being is the only animal that is aware of the necessity of his own death. In the long history of mankind, death has not only been the antithesis of life, but a natural part of it. People have encountered it almost daily, not only in times of wars or epidemics, but also in everyday life when loved ones have died, and even the children have been present not only at the funeral and final farewell to them, but also at the washing and dressing of the deceased. Although death has always evoked fear, especially because of its association with suffering and helplessness, people were not afraid to talk about it, to prepare for it, whether by writing a testament, or choosing a burial place or details of their own funeral. Believers prayed that God would keep them "from an unexpected death", not to die unprepared for the passage to eternal life. Some monks had a motto *memento mori* (remember that you [have to] die) and the faithful were reminded at the beginning of the Lent: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return". According to several thinkers, the proximity of death and the awareness of the temporality of life allow us to appreciate life more, to live the present moment more fully and authentically. Death "makes life precious" (Kreeft 2012, 85).

But nowadays, in our Western culture, death is a taboo. As Umberto Eco aptly describes, it fades from our view and we push it out of our minds, even though the media are often full of it. The young generation is experiencing “that death takes place far away from us in a hospital, that people usually don’t walk behind the coffin to the cemetery, that we no longer see the dead” (Eco 2017, 168). But on the other hand, they “see them constantly blown up, crashed on the sidewalk, dropped into the sea with their feet in a cube of cement, their heads left rolling on the cobbles, their brains splattered over the windows of taxis. But they are not us and they are not our loved ones; they are actors. Death is entertainment, even when the media reports about the girl actually raped or the victim of a serial killer” (Eco 2017, 168).

In this situation the global pandemic of Covid-19 came as a shock because a lot of people had never experienced death so closely before. And so Eco’s almost prophetic words were confirmed: “And so the disappearance of the death from our immediate experience will terrify us more when the moment approaches – the event that is part of us from birth, and to which every wise person grows accustomed throughout life” (Eco 2017, 169).

If education is understood as a lifelong process preparing a person not only for a particular profession, but for life in all its complexity, then surely death education has its place in it. Its aim should be not only to help people to cope with the loss of their loved ones, but above all to adopt the right attitude towards their own death: because a human, through his attitude towards death can co-determine what death, and through it the whole of reality, will appear to him (Marcel 2013, 224).

### **Different attitudes toward death**

Although one intuitively knows that one will die (Scheler 1971, 145), one can repress the thought of death. Some people can adopt a more or less negative attitude towards death, seeing death as an enemy, a stranger, a pathology or a punishment. Others can view it in a more positive way, as “a friend” that delivers them from unbearable suffering. This attitude towards death is held by advocates of suicide (Bullová 2015, 145) or euthanasia. Death can also be a heroic act, a sacrifice of one’s life for someone or for some ideal, for homeland, for freedom, for faith. In this case, however, death is not understood as something positive, but on the contrary life is perceived as something very precious that one is willing to give up in favour of an even higher value.

Death in old age, after having lived a meaningful life filled with relationships of love and friendship, can be seen as the natural conclusion of one’s life journey. E. Kübler-Ross points out that attitudes towards one’s own death do not depend so much on age as on the meaningfulness of one’s life: “Many people believe that death is a welcome friend to most elderly people. This is only partially true. Old age is not synonymous with being ‘glad to die’. Many of these old patients who welcome death may not be in a stage of acceptance, but rather one of resignation, when life is no longer meaningful” (Kübler-Ross 1997, 107).

Attitudes towards issues related to death and dying among the general and professional public in the Czech Republic were surveyed in public opinion polls conducted in 2011, 2013 and 2015 by STEM/MARK in cooperation with the home hospice Cesta domů. In these surveys,

68% of respondents answered “definitely not” or “rather not” when asked whether end-of-life and dying are sufficiently discussed within society (STEM/MARK, Cesta domů 2015). Although people declare that they are thinking about what kind of care they envision at the end of life, they mostly do not discuss this with anyone (64%). More than one half of respondents (61%) find it difficult to talk about death because of worry and fear (84%) and many think the topic is neglected in families (59%). On the contrary, health professionals (88%) believe that death and dying need to be talked about, even by children, and even as early as preschool age (STEM/MARK 2011).

In 2021, at the time of a global pandemic that claimed the lives of over 6 million individuals, an excellent probe into the thinking of the current middle-aged generation and elderly people (many of whom have already passed the age of 80) was published in the book *Without fear of death (Pro smrt uděláno*, M. Plzák and L. Vopálenská 2021), featuring interviews about death with people of various professions – a Catholic bishop, an evangelical clergyman and a rabbi, philosophers, people working with the dying, a poet, a painter, a soldier, a biologist, etc. The variety of respondents brings a diversity of views that represent a range of approaches to death. However, most of the interviews are united by the view that the proximity of death brings the person to a deeper appreciation of relationships, to look back on his or her life and to try to find positive value in it. Although some were particularly reluctant to talk about attitudes to their own death and their views on existence after death, they admitted that they were dealing with this topic, whether in the context of the ongoing global pandemic or the dying of their loved ones.

The main reason why people do not want to think about death and to meet the dying is the fear of the suffering that accompanies dying. Much has already been done in the practical field of care – at least in some countries.<sup>1</sup> There are also Czech and Slovak websites that are very helpful for both professionals and lay people in dealing with issues related to dying and death.<sup>2</sup> However, this cannot completely remove the taboo of death. Although several books have been published in recent years – either translations of foreign books or books by Czech and Slovak authors who have experience of caring for the dying (e.g., M. Svatošová, J. Šiklová, M. Kašparů, K. Križanová, M. Hatoková) – a systematic death education is still absent in the Slovak Republic. In Christian formation, too, death is no longer spoken of as much as it once was, and the hope of resurrection (Hahn 2021, 14-15), which once helped man to overcome his fear of death and gave meaning to his life, has disappeared from homilies and from our consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Open Society Institute launched in 1994 the Project on Death in America (PDIA) with a goal to help transform the experience of dying in the United States, that supported initiatives in professional and public education, the arts and humanities, research, clinical care, and public policy, and so helped improve care of the dying. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/project-death-america-grantees-1994-2003>

<sup>2</sup> Information and consultancy sites with practical information for those dealing with death and dying: <https://www.umirani.cz>, <https://www.zomieranie.sk>

### What is death education

One of the main promoters of death education is Hannelore Wass,<sup>3</sup> who describes it as follows: “The term *death education* refers to a variety of educational activities and experiences related to death and embraces such core topics as meanings and attitudes toward death, processes of dying and bereavement, and care for people affected by death” (Wass, 2022). This may be formal education in the form of academic programmes and clinical experiences, courses, or courses included in larger units, that may take place at different levels of education. The target audience for formal education is primarily health professionals (doctors and nurses), psychological counsellors, but also children in primary and secondary schools. Informal education happens when certain life experiences (e.g., the death of a relative, a child’s friend) are used as “teachable moments” in which we answer the child’s questions related to that experience.

Formal education should be comprehensive, i.e., it should include not only the theoretical but also the practical part. In secondary and higher education, it could consist, for example, of volunteer activities aimed at service to the elderly or terminally ill. Contact with these people can stimulate conversations and raise questions not only about good death, but also about the meaning and the most important values of life. This is evidenced by many who come into contact with the dying as part of their profession, but also by volunteers in the hospital Covid wards during the pandemic (Král 2021). They testify to the fact that proximity of death can bring enrichment, more intensive experience of life, a reassessment of one’s priorities and an appreciation of the present moment (Šiklová 2013, 27).

The physician Viola Svobodová describes her many years of hospice work as a school of listening and compassion: “In no other school do we learn how to cope with our own death and the deaths of loved ones” (Svobodová 2021, 153). She said that this work has changed her life, and she takes it as a gift that she appreciates very much. The close relationship with terminally ill patients who are humble, reject deception, and want to know the truth leads to “asking questions about how we would stand in similar situations, what really matters to us, what the priorities are in our lives, etc.” (Svobodová 2021, 153). Many of them in the face of death realize that the most important thing is to mend relationships – to make peace with other people, with God, with one’s own death, and to forgive oneself. One of hospice volunteers affirms: “Dying associated with suffering and existential anguish has a profound meaning that takes place in inner conversion” (Kania in Svobodová 2021, 135). This is the reason why hospices and other places where people are experiencing the proximity of death can also be seen as places where interpersonal relationships can mature and where the original meaning

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<sup>3</sup> The professional concerns of Hannelore Wass centre around children’s and adolescents’ encounters with death, including dying, grieving, suicide, lethal violence, and the portrayal of death in entertainment media. She promoted clinical and educational programmes designed to prepare professionals and parents to help children and adolescents cope with these encounters and to transcend them. Hannelore advocated for integrating the subjects of death, grief, suicide, as well as violence prevention and integration into school curricula. Dr Wass published ten books, and over 100 articles and contributing chapters. (<https://forestmeadowsfh.com/obituaries/hannelore-wass/>)

of such human words as truth, love, honour, trust and respect can be restored (Svobodová 2021, 156).

A theoretical part of death education should offer orientation for reflection about death from the universal human perspective. Therefore, the answers of the Christian faith to the questions of life after death will be left aside, although they are relevant to many people. I will outline just a few philosophical thoughts that may indicate the direction of thinking that can be helpful in dealing with death. Theoretical knowledge focused on the medical aspects of dying, specific medical or psychological assistance to the dying which is part of the field called thanatology will be left aside. But it can appropriately complement death education focused primarily on existential meaning of death.

A number of philosophers and scholars have dealt with the subject of death and reflected the experiences with the dying.<sup>4</sup> Some of them consider reflections on death as an isolated phenomenon or as a fact of my own death, overly reductive and unsatisfactory. Such an approach overlooks the relational nature of the human being, which means that death is always associated with the rupture of relationships. When someone close to me dies it's as if I myself have died but at the same time this beloved still exists in some way. That is why E. Fink considers death to be a "social phenomenon" and the human being as co-existing. The fundamental phenomenon of human life is love, and death is co-existential with love. So for a full understanding of death it is necessary to consider both aspects of death – one's own death and the death of the other (Jedličková 2018).

Also G. Marcel sees the death of a loved one as the key experience in which we anticipate our own death. He speaks about intersubjectivity, a relationship of true love that enables two persons to exist as one "we". In such an "oblative love" they transcend the categories of objectivity and arrive at an open space where "such ways of connection, the presence of the absent, are possible, which objectifying thought does not know, but which are nevertheless accessible to interpersonal experience" (Scherer 2005, 103). The hope of overcoming death thus involves the indestructibility of the mutual bond rather than the indestructibility of an "object" (Marcel 2013, 570). Marcel writes: "Where love endures, where it triumphs over everything that tends to its degradation, death must ultimately and definitively be defeated" (Marcel 1998, 91). In a similar way, also other philosophers affirm a relationship between love and death. When someone loves for no other reason than the love itself, he found in it the meaning of life and already lives "eternity", according to Matušík (Gál, Jurštáková and Matušík 2021, 121).

There are other deeper philosophical justifications for the positive significance of reflection on death and the possibility of transcending it, but due to the limited scope of this article we will not address them.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, an excellent book of Irvin and Marilyn Yalom: *A Matter of Death and Life* (2021) offers us a rare window into facing mortality and coping with the loss of one's beloved from a famous psychiatrist and his wife.

## Conclusion

In this short essay I have tried to justify the need for death education not only for health professionals but for all, because death is a key phenomenon for meaningful human life. From this brief outline of ideas, which needs to be further developed, it follows that death education must not be only about death and dying, but should include relational education, stressing the importance of deep interpersonal relationships, that of love. These are not only prerequisites for a good death, but also for a meaningful life, for understanding the other person and recognising his or her unique value as a subject that cannot be destroyed by death. The result of such an education is then more than just the right attitude towards death and human finitude. It can also help to bring hope into life, to live more authentically and intensively the present moment and to pay due attention to relationships – to oneself, to others, even to God. It turns out that a meaningful life – which is the main precondition for a good death – depends precisely on the ability to love, to forgive and to find reconciliation. And so death does not have to be an event that robs us of our life, of our freedom to do something, but quite the contrary. An attitude towards death may be the most important expression of our freedom and a good death can be a peaceful conclusion of one's life, or even the beginning of some new existence.

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