

THEO 330 – SECTION #01 ACTIVITY (ANSWER KEY)

The University of St. Francis

Name _____

Questions Concerning the Book, "Tuesdays with Morrie"

Multiple Choice

1. What disease did Morrie Schwartz have?
 - a. **ALS**
 - b. Alzheimer's
 - c. Tourette's Syndrome
 - d. Pancreatic Cancer
2. What was Morrie's final course about?
 - a. Political Science
 - b. How to Dance
 - c. Acceptance of following whatever culture tells you
 - d. **The Meaning of Life**
3. What is the catalyst for Mitch's surrender to the corporate world?
 - a. His Daughter's Birth
 - b. His Father's Death
 - c. **His Uncle's Death**
 - d. Marriage
4. What does Morrie mean by "tension of opposites?"
 - a. Life is like a wrestling match; love always wins.
 - b. Love struggles against hate.
 - c. **The good struggle against the bad.**
 - d. Life is like a baseball game; love always wins.

5. Morrie repeatedly tells Mitch that he must create his own what?
- a. Religion
 - b. Life
 - c. Relationships
 - d. *Culture*
6. What below does Morrie continually emphasize?
- a. Love is less important than happiness.
 - b. Money is less important than liking one's job.
 - c. Money is more important than love.
 - d. *Love is more important than money.*
7. What did Morrie say is the foundation of everything?
- a. Health
 - b. Friends
 - c. *Family*
 - d. Money
8. When Mitch asked Morrie why so many people always wish they were young again, what did Morrie answer?
- a. That it's a lack of intelligence.
 - b. That it's a sign of being immature.
 - c. That it's because they are afraid to grow old.
 - d. *That it's a sign of an unsatisfied life.*
9. Why did Morrie still want to hear about other people's problems, even though he was dying?
- a. Because he liked to hear about other people's problems.
 - b. *Because that's what made him feel alive.*
 - c. Because that was what made him feel intelligent.
 - d. Because he wanted to solve all the problems in the world.

10. What did Morrie say he would do when he's dead and Mitch talked to him at his grave site?
- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| a. Laugh | c. Understand |
| b. Nothing | d. Listen |

Short Essay

1. What is the central theme in Tuesdays with Morrie (in reference to living and dying)?

The main theme in Tuesdays With Morrie centers around what one can learn about life through death. "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

"Because," Morrie continued, "most of us all walk around as if we're sleepwalking. We really don't experience the world fully, because we're half-asleep, doing things we automatically think we have to do."

And facing death changes all that?

"Oh, yes. You strip away all that stuff and you focus on the essentials. When you realize you are going to die, you see everything much differently."

He sighed. "Learn how to die, and you learn how to live."

2. What does Morrie say about people being alike?

When Morrie and Mitch discuss culture, Morrie asserts that human beings should be responsible for creating their own culture based on their personal values. Morrie maintains that no one should...

"Mitch," he said, "the culture doesn't encourage you to think about such things until you're about to die. We're so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money, meeting the mortgage, getting a new car, fixing the radiator when it breaks-we're involved in trillions of little acts just to keep going. So we don't get into the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, Is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?"
He paused.

"You need someone to probe you in that direction. It won't just happen automatically." I knew what he was saying. We all need teachers in our lives.

And mine was sitting in front of me .

"The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it."

3. What are Morrie's rules for love and marriage?

"The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Let it come in. We think we don't deserve love, we think if we let it in we'll become too soft. But a wise man named Levine said it right. He said, 'Love is the only rational act.'"

4. How does Morrie rationalize his thought that aging is growth and not decay?

In the book, Morrie tells Mitch that aging isn't just about decay but about growth as well. He rationalizes his position from a philosophical standpoint: accepting this dual view of aging enables

"It's very simple. As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you understand you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it."

Yes, I said, but if aging were so valuable, why do people always say, "Oh, if I were young again." You never hear people say, "I wish I were sixty-five."

He smiled. "You know what that reflects? Unsatisfied lives. Unfulfilled lives. Lives that haven't found meaning. Because if you've found meaning in your life, you don't want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more. You can't wait until sixty-five."

"Listen. You should know something. All younger people should know something. If you're always battling against getting older, you're always going to be unhappy. because it will happen anyhow."

"And Mitch?"

He lowered his voice. "The fact is, you are going to die eventually,."

5. What is Morrie's philosophy about money and power?

Morrie believes that money and power cannot buy true happiness.

"Wherever I went in my life, I met people wanting to gobble up something new. Gobble up a new car. Gobble up a new piece of property. Gobble up the latest toy. And then they wanted to tell you about it. 'Guess what I got? Guess what I got?'"

"You know how I always interpreted that? These were people so hungry for love that they were accepting substitutes. They were embracing material things and expecting a sort of hug back. But it never works. You can't substitute material things for love or for gentleness or for tenderness or for a sense of comradeship.

"Money is not a substitute for tenderness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have."

6. How does the point of view of Morrie and Mitch in Tuesdays with Morrie influence the reader?

The point of view between Morrie and Mitch is one of teacher and student. This frame of reference is critical in the influence it casts upon the reader.

"Mitch," he said, "the culture doesn't encourage you to think about such things until you're about to die. We're so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money, meeting the mortgage, getting a new car, fixing the radiator when it breaks-we're involved in trillions of little acts just to keep going. So we don't get into the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, Is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?"

He paused.

"You need someone to probe you in that direction. It won't just happen automatically."

I knew what he was saying. We all need teachers in our lives.

And mine was sitting in front of me.

7. In Tuesdays With Morrie why does Morrie believe it is important to “put back what we take?”

The closer he gets to good-bye) the more he seems to feel we are all creatures in the same forest. What we take, we must replenish.

Long Essay

1. How does Morrie’s view on faith change with his impending death? For Morrie, how does the concept of faith (especially his interpretation on Buddhism) help him understand and overcome his fear of death?

Determined to accept his own death and the concept of death itself, Morrie consciously “detaches himself from the experience” when he suffers his violent coughing spells, each of which comes loaded with the possibility of his last breath. Morrie derives his method of detachment from the Buddhist philosophy that one should not cling to anything, as everything that exists is transient. In detaching, Morrie is able to step out of his tangible surroundings and into his own state of consciousness, namely for the sake of gaining perspective and composure in a stressful situation. Morrie does not intend to stop feeling or experiencing when he detaches, but, rather, detaches out of a desire to experience wholly. He explains that it is only when he releases himself from a life-threatening experience that he is able to completely let go of his fear, to detach from a situation that renders him terrified and tense. Morrie does not want to die in fear or in pain and detaches in these frightening moments so that he may accept the impermanence of his life and embrace his death, which he knows may come at any moment.

“What I’m doing now,” he continued, his eyes still closed, “is detaching myself from the experience.”

Detaching yourself?

"Yes. Detaching myself. And this is important-not just for someone like me, who is dying, but for someone like you, who is perfectly healthy. Learn to detach."

He opened his eyes. He exhaled. "You know what the Buddhists say? Don't cling to things, because everything is impermanent."

But wait, I said. Aren't you always talking about experiencing life? All the good emotions, all the bad ones?

"Yes."

Well, how can you do that if you're detached?

"Ah. You're thinking, Mitch. But detachment doesn't mean you don't let the experience penetrate you. On the contrary, you let it penetrate you fully. That's how you are able to leave it."

I'm lost.

"Take any emotion-love for a woman, or grief for a loved one, or what I'm going through, fear and pain from a deadly illness. If you hold back on the emotions-if you don't allow yourself to go all the way through them-you can never get to being detached, you're too busy being afraid. You're afraid of the pain, you're afraid of the grief. You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails."

"But by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in, all the way, over your head even, you experience them fully and completely. You know what pain is. You know what love is. You know what grief is. And only then can you say, 'All right. I have experienced that emotion. I recognize that emotion. Now I need to detach from that emotion for a moment.'"

Morrie stopped and looked me over, perhaps to make sure I was getting this right.

"I know you think this is just about dying," he said, "but it's like I keep telling you. When you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

2. How does Morrie see the role of family play a role in his final journey through death? How can this be compared to the journey experienced by Mitch Albom's youngest brother Peter?

The title character of Tuesdays With Morrie has spent most of his life as a professor of sociology at Brandeis University, a position he has fallen into only "by default." He is an excellent teacher and retires only after he begins to lose control of his body to ALS, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The disease ravages his body, but, ironically, leaves his mind as lucid as ever. He realizes that his time is running out and that he must share his wisdom on "The Meaning of Life" with the world before it is too late to do so. Mitch serves as a vehicle through which he can convey this wisdom, to Mitch personally and, more indirectly, to a larger audience which he reaches after his death by means of the book itself. He and Mitch plan for the book during his dying days, deeming it their "final thesis together." He is also able to reach a vast audience through his interviews with Ted Koppel, which are broadcast nationwide on ABC-TV's "Nightline."

Morrie has an unmistakable knack for reaching through to the human essence of every individual he befriends. He is even able to deconstruct Koppel, who is a thick-skinned national celebrity. He does so by asking Koppel what he feels is "close to his heart." Love is his main method of communication. Just as he reaches Koppel through his thick celebrity skin, he reaches Mitch through his dense veneer of professionalism and greed. He sees that Mitch has surrendered his sense of self to the beliefs of popular culture and urges him to reclaim the kind, caring young man he once was at Brandeis.

In telling Mitch stories of his life experiences and personal beliefs, he teaches him to reject the corrupt mores endorsed by popular culture in favor of his personal, ethical system of values. He does not immerse himself in the media as most of America does, but instead invests himself in people and their potential to love.

Morrie also chooses to react against popular cultural norms in his acceptance of his own debilitating disease and imminent death. He has lived and loved to his fullest extent and is intent on continuing to do so as he dies. Having always lived as a fiercely independent man, it is difficult for him to rely on others for all of his basic needs, though he refuses to be embarrassed by his physical shortcomings and tries in earnest to enjoy "being a baby again." In his childhood, he has been deprived of love and attention and now that he is once again reliant on others as he was in his infancy, he thrives on the love and physical affection provided by his friends and family.

Mitch's younger brother, Peter lives in Spain after having moved to Europe immediately after graduating from high school. He is now suffering from pancreatic cancer and flies to various European cities seeking treatment. However, he continually refuses to accept help from his family, namely from Mitch, as he has, for the most part, estranged himself from them after his departure from the United States. He does not want help from Mitch or any other member of his family presumably because he has too much pride to accept it. Growing up, he earned a reputation as the family bad boy, as where Mitch had been the family's clean-cut, straight-A student. Mitch's brother is a man who does not want help from a family he has deserted and who feels that he must prove himself and his independence to them.

Much like Mitch had during his college years at Brandeis, Peter protects himself with a thick veneer of toughness. He has not asked for help from his family since his high school graduation and has no intention of doing so as an adult. When Mitch contacts him, he is very reluctant to reestablish a relationship with his brother and

leaves a curt message that he is doing just fine and does not need anyone else's help. He also reminds Mitch that he does not want to talk about his illness. But as Mitch learns from Morrie, everyone, to some degree, needs other people to survive, thus the quote by Auden which Morrie recites numerous times during his lessons with Mitch, "Love or perish." Despite his fierce independence and refusal of help, Peter also needs the love of friends and family to survive his cancer. He realizes this after Mitch is persistent in his attempts to speak with him. Mitch does not contact his brother so that he may pity or dote on him because of his cancer, but because he wants to rekindle some aspect of the loving relationship they shared as children.

The relationship that Mitch had with his younger brother was strained. "Mitch, I know it hurts when you can't be with someone you love. But you need to be at peace with his desires. Maybe he doesn't want you interrupting your life. Maybe he can't deal with that burden. I tell everyone I know to carry on with the life they know-don't ruin it because I am dying."

But he's my brother, I said.

"I know," Morrie said. "That's why it hurts."

I find us for dinner. And then I saw him as the adult who had drifted away, thin and frail, his face bony from the chemotherapy treatments.

Morrie, I said. Why doesn't he want to see me?

My old professor sighed. "There is no formula to relationships. They have to be negotiated in loving ways, with room for both parties, what they want and what they need, what they can do and what their life is like."

"In business, people negotiate to win. They negotiate to get what they want. Maybe you're too used to that. Love is different. Love is when you are as concerned about someone else's situation as you are about your own. "You've had these special times with your brother, and you no longer have what you had with him. You want them back. You never want them to stop. But that's part of being human. Stop, renew, stop, renew."

I looked at him. I saw all the death in the world. I felt helpless.

"You'll find a way back to your brother," Morrie said.

How do you know?

Morrie smiled. "You found me, didn't you?"

"The fact is, there is no foundation, no secure ground, upon which people may stand today if it isn't the family. It's become quite clear to me as I've been sick. If you don't have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don't have much at all. Love is so supremely important. As our great poet Auden said, 'Love each other or perish.'"

"Love each other or perish. ' ' I wrote it down. Auden said that?

"Love each other or perish," Morrie said. "It's good, no? And it's so true. Without love, we are birds with broken wings.

"Say I was divorced, or living alone, or had no children. This disease-what I'm going through-would be so much harder. I'm not sure I could do it. Sure, people would come visit, friends, associates, but it's not the same as having someone who will not leave. It's not the same as having someone whom you know has an eye on you, is watching you the whole time.

"This is part of what a family is about, not just love, but letting others know there's someone who is watching out for them. It's what I missed so much when my mother died-what I call your 'spiritual security'-knowing that your family will be there watching out for you. Nothing else will give you that. Not money. Not fame."

He shot me a look.

"Not work," he added.

Raising a family was one of those issues on my little list-things you want to get right before it's too late. I told Morrie about my generation's dilemma with having children, how we often saw them as tying us down, making us into these "parent" things that we did not want to be. I admitted to some of these emotions myself.

Yet when I looked at Morrie, I wondered if I were in his shoes, about to die, and I had no family, no children, would the emptiness be unbearable? He had raised his two sons to be loving and caring, and like Morrie, they were not shy with their affection. Had he so desired, they would have stopped what they were doing to be with their father every minute of his final months. But that was not what he wanted.

"Do not stop your lives," he told them. "Otherwise, this disease will have ruined three of us instead of one." In this way, even as he was dying, he showed respect for his children's worlds. Little wonder that when they sat with him, there was a waterfall of affection, lots of kisses and jokes and crouching by the side of the bed, holding hands.

"Whenever people ask me about having children or not having children, I never tell them what to do," Morrie said now, looking at a photo of his oldest son. "I simply say, 'There is no experience like having children.' That's all. There is no substitute for it. You cannot

do it with a friend. You cannot do it with a lover. If you want the experience of having complete responsibility for another human being, and to learn how to love and bond in the deepest way, then you should have children."

So you would do it again? I asked.

I glanced at the photo. Rob was kissing Morrie on the forehead, and Morrie was laughing with his eyes closed.

"Would I do it again?" he said to me, looking surprised.

"Mitch, I would not have missed that experience for anything. Even though . . . "

He swallowed and put the picture in his lap.

"Even though there is a painful price to pay," he said. Because you'll be leaving them. "Because I'll be leaving them soon."

He pulled his lips together, closed his eyes, and I watched the first teardrop fall down the side of his cheek.

Questions Concerning Introductory Material

Multiple Choice

1. *Thanatos*, from Greek mythology, is generally understood as a response to what?
 - a. The invention of life and death.
 - b. The reincarnation of deities.
 - c. *The personification of death.***
 - d. The god of the afterlife.

2. Deaths of the famous are likely to be announced on the newspaper's front page as well as via feature-length what?
 - a. Death Notices
 - b. Narcocorridoes
 - c. Elegies
 - d. *Obituaries***

3. Media experts say that the "reality violence" on TV news began with coverage of what tragedy below?
 - a. The Kennedy Assassination
 - b. The Explosion of the Space Shuttle
 - c. *The Vietnam War***
 - d. The Los Angeles Riots

4. What do some commentators call the new "porn star" of popular culture?
 - a. The TV Medical Examiner
 - b. Crisis Text 'Hot' Lines
 - c. *The Corpse***
 - d. Managed Death

5. Depictions of death in the mass media, in which the symbolic use of death contributes to an “irrational dread of dying and thus to a diminished vitality and self-direction in life” is referred to as what?
 - a. *Mean World Syndrome*
 - b. Media Overload
 - c. Communication Depression Syndrome
 - d. Secondary Trauma

6. In literature, the meaning of death is often explored as it relates to the individual as well as what/whom below?

a. The Author	c. <i>Society</i>
b. Technology	d. The Sixth Sense

7. What is an example of a homemade condolence?
 - a. *Comfort Quilts*
 - b. Colored Headstones
 - c. Cookies sent from the Funeral Home
 - d. Obituaries Written by Friends

8. Which of the following is NOT a way in which humor functions relative to death?

a. Raises Consciousness	c. <i>Discourages Empathy</i>
b. Encourages Togetherness	d. Defuses Anxiety

9. What is defined as “the study of life with death left in?”

a. Clinical Ethics	c. <i>Thanatology</i>
b. Anthropology	d. Death Anxiety

10. What has been characterized as the largest area of empirical research in thanatology?

- a. NDEs
 - b. *Death Anxiety***
 - c. Hospice and Palliative Care
 - d. Religious Impact
11. In his emphasis relevant to terror management theory, Ernest Becker addressed what?
- a. *The Need to Control Our Basic Anxiety and To Deny the Terror of Death***
 - b. Our Belief That the World Is Generally Not A Terrifying Place
 - c. Our Inability to Focus on Threats, Especially Those That Are Political in Nature
 - d. Terrorists' Behaviors
12. The first formal course in death education at an American university was held at what location?
- a. University of Miami after the Cuban Missile Crisis
 - b. *University of Minnesota in 1963***
 - c. Harvard University School of Medicine in 1960
 - d. University of Chicago in Conjunction with The Association for Death Education and Counseling
13. Which of the following factors does NOT affect our familiarity with death?
- a. Life Expectancy
 - b. Geographic Mobility
 - c. Medical Technology
 - d. *Political Decision Making***
14. Approximately how much has the average life expectancy in the United States increased since 1900?
- a. Five Years
 - c. *Thirty Years***

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- b. Cartoons that are featured on Saturday mornings contain an average of 20 to 25 violent acts per hour.
 - c. Cartoon characters have their deaths “reversed with no serious consequences to their bodily functions”
 - d. *Both B & C.*
20. According to Edgar Jackson, what value does religion play for those who are dying?
- a. It helps them control their fears and anxieties by revealing not only the tragedy and sorrow of life, but also its blessings and rich experiences.
 - b. It helps them to turn their best thoughts and feelings into constructive action.
 - c. It inspires those of faith to act as they believe, to fulfill their aspirations in life.
 - d. *All of These.*

True or False

- 1. *True* Popular music devotes significant attention to death.
- 2. *True* The disruption of survivors’ lives, their ensuing grief and coping is generally given little attention in the media.
- 3. *True* Word choices may reflect changes in how death is experienced at different times.
- 4. *False* Suicide and deathbed scenes in the media are uncommon.
- 5. *False* People who describe themselves as religious suffer more death anxiety than their non-religious counterparts.

6. False In the nineteenth century, most people typically purchased coffins and baked homemade desserts to bring to the home of grieving friends.
7. True The rapid advancement of technology and social changes has created a “cultural lag.”
8. True In general, newspapers tend to overemphasize catastrophic causes of death.
9. False Many of the manifestations of death and the dead in U.S. popular culture deal AVOID with what has been termed the postself, straying from the reputation and influence that an individual has after his or her death.
10. True By rendering death into humor and entertainment, we effectively neutralize it; it becomes innocuous, and thus less threatening, through its conversion and ephemerality in the media.

Short Essay

1. In relation to spirituality, how does our culture form the manner in which we live, as opposed in the manner we choose to live and understand death?

Our culture tells us how to define ourselves, but, being self-creating beings, we stop and ask ourselves if our culture is correct in the definition it has provided. We step aside from our culture from time to time. The human condition is that we find ourselves on the stage of life knowing we have roles to play but not knowing what those roles are, or even the plot of the story. No other animal has to live this terrible condition. Nonhuman animals have instincts by which they run their lives. For Becker (1975), “Spirituality is not a simple reflex

of hunger and fear, it is an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, has worked. suffered, and died" (p. 3).

2. Explain the following statement presented in our reading material:
"Death fears do not appear to be instinctive or universal."

It seems that fear of life's end is learned from and perpetuated by culture. Such meanings occur because death is not an ordinary experience. In challenging the order of everyday life, firsthand encounters with death are so unusual that the prospect of the experience can be traumatic.

3. According to Branislav Malinowski, what is the role of religion when coping with death?

According to Malinowski, religion provides individuals with the means for dealing with extraordinary phenomena; it functions to restore normalcy.

4. Based on all the reading materials this week, explain the concept of *detachment* and how this plays a role in one's acceptance of death.

"Take any emotion-love for a woman, or grief for a loved one, or what I'm going through, fear and pain from a deadly illness. If you hold back on the emotions-if you don't allow yourself to go all the way through them-you can never get to being detached, you're too busy being afraid. You're afraid of the pain, you're afraid of the grief. You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails. But by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in, all the way, over your head even, you experience them fully and completely. You know what pain is. You know what love is. You know what grief is. And only then can you say, 'All right. I have experienced that

emotion. I recognize that emotion. Now I need to detach from that emotion for a moment.'" (Tuesdays with Morrie)

Long Essay

1. Based on our reading material, explain how religion provides individuals with the solace they need to cope with death-related fears.

In summary, religiosity appears to serve the dual function of "afflicting the comforted" and "comforting the afflicted." Thus, for those with a high degree of commitment, religion relieves the anxiety it causes. The theoretical model suggests a curvilinear relationship between the two variables-those persons with moderate religious commitment experience the greatest amount of anxiety in each of the eight areas. In attempting to evaluate this relationship, I found that the theoretical model was supported, with only two curvilinear trend deviations (Leming 1979- 80; see Table 2). These deviations are found among the least religious group for the factor of fear of dependency in the dying process. This finding suggests that nonreligious individuals are more concerned than religious persons about being self-sufficient and independent of others, and that they find dependency even more distressing than do persons who are more religious. In terms of the fear of isolation, there does not seem to be a relationship between death fear and religious commitment.

Education, age, and religious preference did not affect the curvilinear relationship (Leming 1979-80). With the exception of the fear of isolation, persons who held the strongest religious commitment were the least fearful. Furthermore, in each of the eight death fear areas, the strength of commitment was the most significant variable for explaining the relationship between religion and the fear of death.

2. Explain the pros and cons of “neutralizing” death anxiety within our secular world, especially in regard to the manner in which the media portray death in movies, music, television and print.

Such social neutralization can help to assuage the disruptive impact of death and dying for the individual. This can occur in three related ways. First, in the context of popular culture, death, dying, and the dead are frequently reconceptualized into forms that stimulate something other than primordial terror. These phenomena may be considered fascinating, entertaining, and even humorous, depending on the social context. Bryant (1989) observes that when death is camouflaged in such a manner, “individuals can more comfortably indulge their curiosity about, and fascination with, such concerns” (p. 9). For instance, a visit to Elvis Presley’s grave, to the site of the JFK assassination, to the spot where Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were murdered, or to the Forest Lawn cemetery near Hollywood might be considered part of a vacation. Moreover, many individuals find it thrilling to be frightened by horror and death at the movies (Leming and Dickinson 2002). Also, newspaper accounts of violent or accidental deaths may engender some voyeuristic, albeit convoluted, pleasure “or some macabre enjoyment in the misfortunes of others” (Walter et al. Death, Dying, and the Dead in Popular Culture- •-47 01-I-Vol-I-Bryant.qxd 8/14/03 5:56 PM Page 47 1995:586). Similarly, many of the outrageous stories that appear in supermarket tabloids such as the Weekly World News and the Sun “appear to have no purpose other than catering to accident watchers” (Bird 1992:54).

Second, appreciation of many of the types of thanatological themes found in our popular culture requires some detachment on the part of the individual. Like spectators at professional wrestling matches, viewers of horror movies are required to suspend disbelief (Weaver 1991). Children or adolescents playing violent video games must detach themselves from the depictions of primal carnage occurring before their eyes. The quintessential example of this phenomenon is

thanatological humor. Humor functions as a type of defense mechanism, allowing people to cope with the fear and anxiety associated with death and dying (Moran and Massam 1997; Oaks and Ezell 1993; Sayre 2001; Thorson 1993). Enjoyment of this type of humor requires us to laugh at our own mortality (Thorson 1985). As Lewis (1997) notes, the appreciation of a so-called killing joke “calls for the adoption of a playful detachment from an act of violence or suffering” (p. 264).

Finally, some observers have argued that the tremendous amount of exposure to death, dying, and the dead that we receive through our popular culture may make us more accepting of these phenomena (Oaks and Ezell 1993). This saturated environment of thanatological concerns may function to inure individuals to death and dying, thus diluting or counteracting their anxiety about these phenomena (Bryant and Shoemaker 1977). Durkin and Bryant (1995) speculate that “the inordinate amount of attention afforded to thanatological themes in the tabloids may actually help to desensitize the reader” (p. 11). Similarly, Wass et al. (1991) suggest that the ubiquitous death-related themes in popular music might help adolescents confront their anxieties about these phenomena, given that death and dying are seldom discussed in the home or the classroom.

The United States is commonly characterized as a death-denying society. Americans frequently attach fearful meanings to thanatological concerns, have taboos against frank discussions about death and dying, and relegate the task of handling the dead to professionals. Nonetheless, death, dying, and the dead occupy a prominent place in our popular culture. Thanatological themes appear frequently in television programming, cinema, the print media, jokes, and recreational activities. Dead celebrities also play an important role in our popular culture. These thanatological elements of popular culture function as a mechanism to help individuals deal with the disruptive social impacts of death and dying. They help us to redefine death as something other than a

terror, and enjoyment of these themes requires some detachment on the part of the individual. It has also been argued that we may be more accepting of death, dying, and the dead because of our frequent exposure to these phenomena through our popular culture.

Key Terms	
<i>Ars Moriendi</i>	Latin for “the art of dying.” This art is thought to be acquired by the practice of right living.
Auto-Pathography	Published autobiographies about the writer’s own dying, almost always of cancer.
Bereavement	The entire grieving process, especially experienced by someone who has lost a loved one to death.
Death Anxiety	Also Angst – also known as “the fear of death,” a universal in the human condition. A substantial portion of human activity is “designed... to avoid the fatality of death” (Ernest Becker/Martin Heidegger).
Detachment	From the Greek word <i>Decathexis</i> , a cutting, separating, distancing or gradual weakening of the emotional bond when a for both the dying person and those who care for that person, ushering in the final step in the grief process – acceptance.
Dignity	The belief that all people have an intrinsic worth because they are made in the image and likeness of God. Because of human dignity, all people have a right to respect and to whatever is needed for life (shelter, food, clothing, medicine).
Euphemisms	Phrases that soften the terms about dead or dying, such as “pass away,” or “laid to rest.”
Gerontology	The study of aging.
Grief	Deep and poignant distress, usually accompanied by sorrow.
Hospice	A care facility for individuals who are terminally ill.
Magazinization	Media’s efforts to transition from cultural-entertainment to vain, shallow-entertainment vehicles.
Managed Death	The effort to control circumstances around death and dying so that it comes out “right.”
Mean World Syndrome	Depictions of death in the mass media, in which the symbolic use of death contributes to an “irrational

	dread of dying and thus to a diminished vitality and self-direction in life.”
Mourning	A process by which people express their grief after the death of a loved one.
Mortality	Death; the end of human life.
Obituary	A newspaper column containing a biographical sketch of someone who has recently died.
Re-Presentation	Representations of those aspects of reality deliberately elided by the media.
<i>Sitz im Leben</i>	Literally one’s “situation in life” from the German, the alleged context in which a text, or object, has been created, and its function and purpose at that time.
Spirituality	Refers to the ability of the person to choose the relative importance of the physical, social, emotional, religious, and intellectual stimuli that influence him or her and thereby engage in a continuing process of meaning making.
Thanatology	From the Greek word <i>Thanatos</i> , the description or study of the phenomena of death and of psychological mechanisms for coping with them.
Thanatos	From Greek mythology, is generally understood as a response to the personification of death.