

## Necrophobia & the need to desensitise death

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A number of years ago I was asked onto a talk back radio show. In the place where I lived the rural areas were suffering a terrible drought. On TV one saw images of farmers bulldozing thousands of sheep into piles so they could be burnt or buried. I was to talk with these farmers who were traumatised by such endemic death around them. I was to provide some sort of on air counselling to them.

The first farmer who called in was pleasant but stated that in the farming community death was a normal part of life. I then spoke with a woman who basically said the same. It quickly became apparent that we had grossly misjudged the reaction of the rural community to this death around them. They were not traumatised. Needless to say that was not one of my better radio appearances!



It seems that we in the 'first' world or many westernised societies have enshrined death. We have created cities where we have managed to distance

ourselves from death. Particularly from having any first hand contact with it. We rarely see dead people or animals, rarely see the killing of people or animals and really have very little first hand contact with death. The only way we have contact is to see pictures of death and dying in the press and in movies. Often when such death is shown there is a public outcry about should such images have been shown in the form they were. Indeed some will use such images of death to be controversial so as to gain free press or notoriety for a movie or art work or whatever. Perhaps we have lost the ability to live with death. Perhaps we have mistakenly sanctified life and demonised death



When we are forced to have contact with death by someone close to us dying, a whole elaborate process swings into action. The police may turn up to see that all is above board, death certificates are written, then one deals with a massive funeral industry that goes into intricate detail about the funeral and handling the deceased, embalming, the wake, burial or cremation, probate and the will, estranged family members have to get together at the funeral, and so on endlessly.

Psychologists have contributed to this death industry as well. People like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross have studied grief and dying in detail. Now we have a grief process with stages and sub-stages like denial, anger, fear and acceptance. If death wasn't scary before it sure is now, with the writing of such psychologists. "You

can't move until you have grieved" psychologists tell the public. We get them to relieve the deceased and the dying, the pain of the grief is brought to the fore. There are numerous papers and workshops on death and dying for all who want to attend. A veritable supermarket of grief.

Grief is painful and perhaps because of that we have created lives and cities where we can distance ourselves from death. Due to this lack of first hand contact with death perhaps we have made death out to be this hugely traumatic event that it isn't and thus ended up death phobic. Or one could call it necrophobia. From the Greek 'nekro' or 'nekros' which means dead body. Nekro = dead body, and phobia = fear of, thus necrophobia = a fear of death.

### The need to desensitise towards death

In westernised societies, infant mortality is usually about one percent. In some African countries it is about twenty percent. One in five children die in the first year of life in those countries. That means a lot of death that is going to be in the face of many people. Such people would be used to death.

I worked with an Ambulance Service for 15 years. In working with these men and women one quickly learns that they come into contact with the dead and severely mutilated bodies most days they work. They are then said to become desensitised to death and mutilation. They certainly are not psychologically effected by seeing such things to the same degree as the average person.

The mental health profession has defined these ambulance officers as being ill because they have become desensitised. One of the diagnostic features of Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a numbing of responsiveness. The person goes numb and does not respond appropriately to the world. For example having little response to the sight of a dead body. Indeed ambulance personnel often report having black humour. That is they may make jokes or funny comments about the deceased they are currently dealing with. This of course allows them to minimise the death in their own mind.

This could be defined as a pathological state because it is in effect a numbing response to the circumstances. However perhaps it is not a state of ill health. Instead they may just not suffer from necrophobia like the rest of society do. If this is the case then they are in fact more psychologically healthy than others who do have such a phobia. It is not a numbing of response to death but instead a lack of an over reactiveness to death.

### My personal experience

My first born son died at a young age. People say many things in such situations and over the years I noted various comments about the death of a child. One common statement is from parents who say that they can't imagine what I went through. That they would never be able to survive the death of their child. It would just be so traumatic for them that they could not cope and never get over it.

This worried me at first because I felt like I was damaged for life. But on reflection it actually has been a liberating experience for me. It has allowed me to be more realistic with my other two sons. Parents worry about their children getting hurt and in some instances this makes the parents overly protective partly because they think they could never get over the death of their child.

I have been through such a loss and realise that one can and does get over it. My child died, I grieved terribly and I got over it and got on with life. So I now know that if a subsequent child died I would get over that also. So I worry less about them in this way and are more realistic about risks they may take. Experiencing the death of my first born allowed me to demystify death and put it in a realistic context. In this sense one could say that I have been cured of my necrophobia.

