

MEDICINE & THE ARTS: HUMANISING HEALTHCARE

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 6 MEDICINE & THE ARTS – DEATH AND THE CORPSE IN DIALOGUE ON HOW WE KNOW

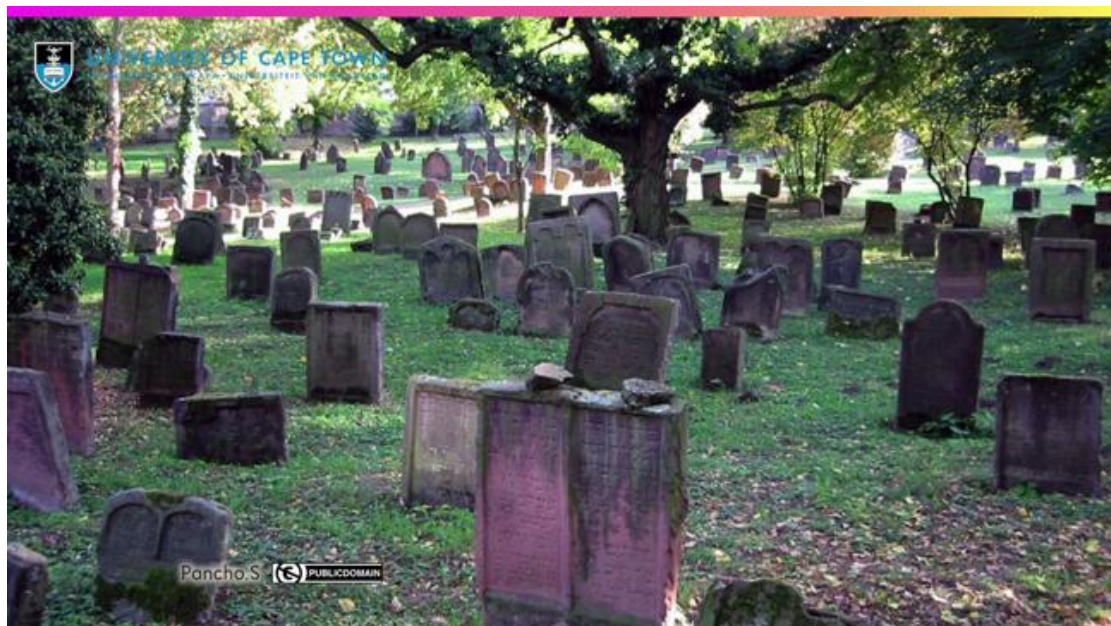
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I'm going to talk to you about death, which is not typically a subject of everyday conversation. The reason for that is probably blindingly obvious. And it has to do with the fact that death is so disturbingly, so unsettlingly profound.

Death changes everything. It eliminates life. It obliterates. It shatters. The comedian Woody Allen, in his inimitable way, captures it beautifully. "My position on death," he says, "is unchanged. I am strongly against it."

Death might not be a topic of everyday chat, but it lies at the very heart of philosophical reflection on the human condition. There is no form of life that we know of that continues without limit. All life is finite. So death is integral to what we understand by life. We cannot think philosophically about life, other than within the horizon of death.

JEWISH CEMETERY “HEILIGER SANDS “ IN WORMS, GERMANY

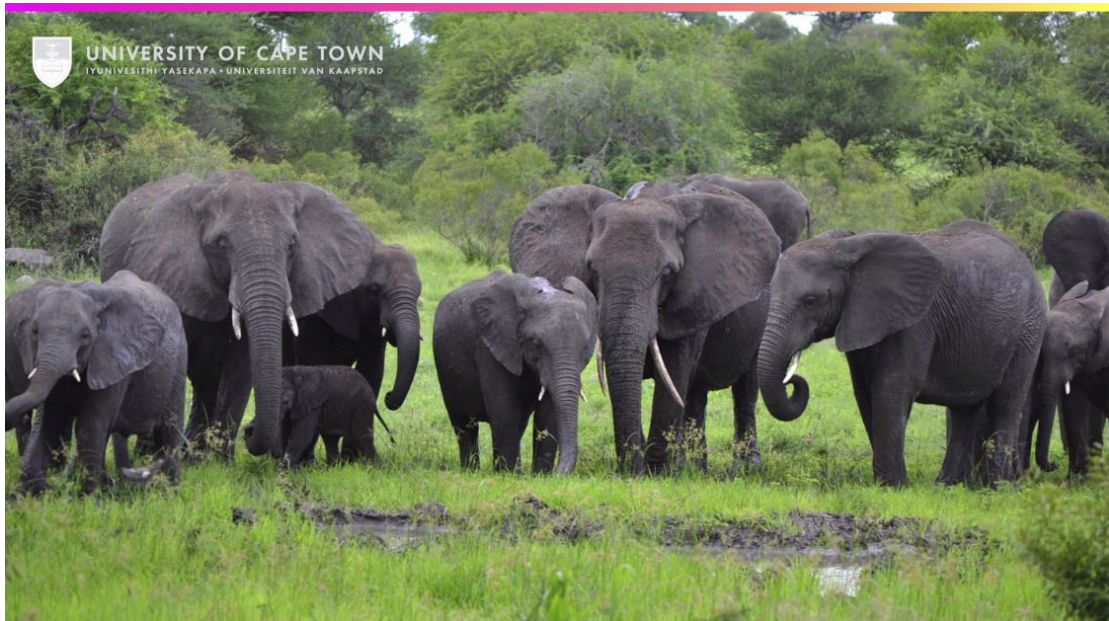


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Our species, the human species, is distinguished by exactly that pattern, that process of thought. We, we humans, are a species that ponders our death. We are that species that grapples with the conditions of our mortality.

Those animal behaviourists who study the sociality of elephants tell us and this is very interesting. It's quite recent research that's been done elephants mourn their dead, apparently. They mark a grave with leaves and branches, and they return to that place in apparent memory of the death. But in the case of the human species, the symbolic investment in death is uniquely complex and absorbing.

ELEPHANTS MOURNING

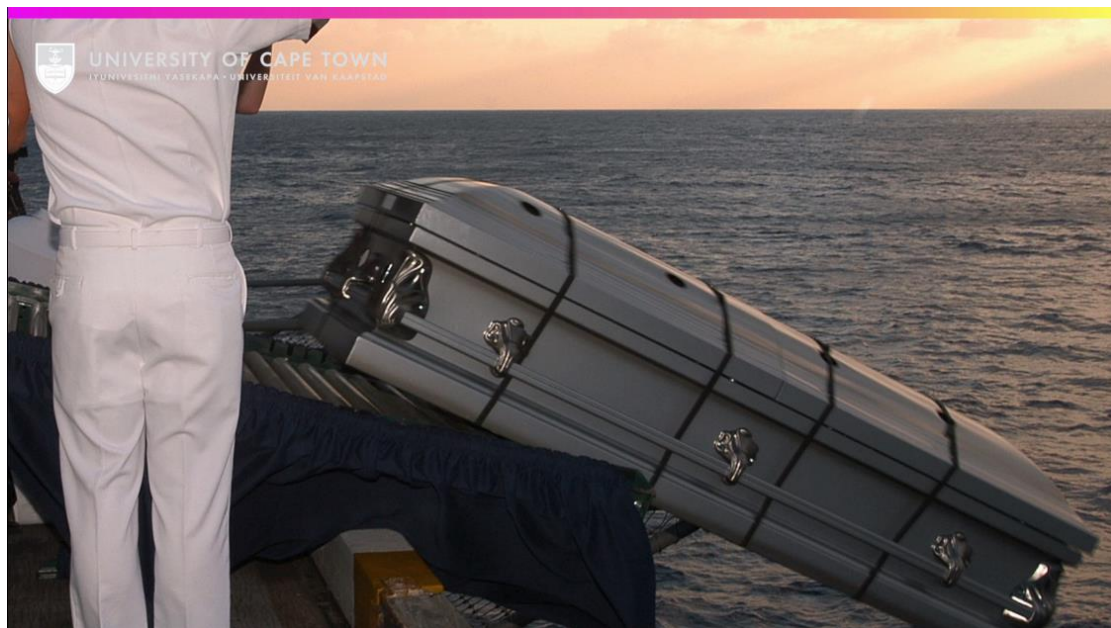


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Indeed, one could say that human society, the very idea of society, is, in a fundamental sense, a collective effort to regulate death, to promote life, and to make sense of the boundary, the transition between the two. Of course, having said that, different societies will do this in different ways. The symbolic confrontation with death may be a human universal. I would say it could be argued that it's even a condition of our human sociality, but its content is highly variable.

We can see this in the plethora, for example, of different ways of disposing of dead bodies, different kinds of funerals, cremations. One can see this in the different theologies of the afterlife. One can see it in the variety of prohibitions that attach to the lives of the bereaved following the death of someone close.

NAVY BURIAL AT SEA



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EGYPTIAN MUMMY



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That's why anthropologists, for example, have paid close attention to cultures of death, to the meanings and the rituals that attach to death, which they hold as a powerful window on how any particular society organises and understands itself.

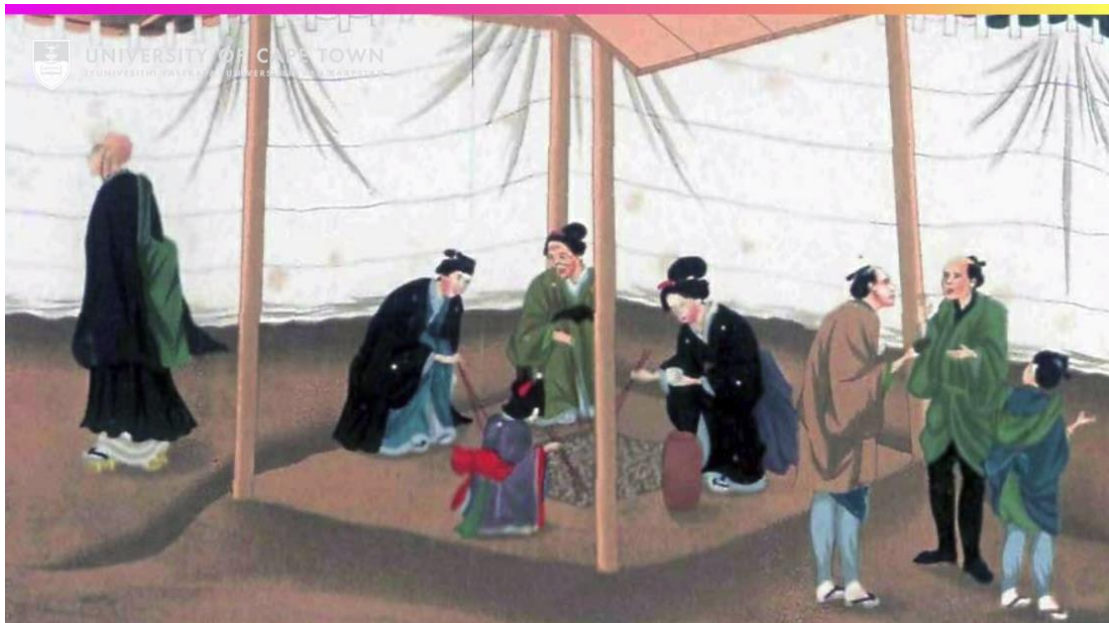
Sociologists and historians also pay close attention to the inequalities and the hierarchies of power, hierarchies of race, class, and gender that are associated with death.

FAMADIHANA (TURNING OF THE BONES) IN MADAGASCAR



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JAPANESE BONE-PICKING CEREMONY



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Who gets buried? Where? When? And how? Which deaths achieve social prominence? And why? Which fade into obscurity? Which deaths become heroic exemplars of a collective, of a nation, for example?

Both the profundity and the discomfort of death are, perhaps, most acute when we confront the human corpse itself the physical, material, dead thing. That's the point at which we have to deal with what I see as the symbolic dualism of the corpse. The moment of death is, on the one hand, the culmination of a person's life, the accumulation of that person's experiences, insights, wisdom.

On the other hand, the death is also the obliteration of that person's life. And with the obliteration comes the onset of decay as the body begins to decompose, a process that, for many of us, incites disgust. We become repelled by it. And in fact, in many societies, the decaying body is also regarded as dangerous, as a pollutant, as entirely taboo, which is the reason why the dead body itself, the physical, decaying thing, becomes so particularly emotionally charged and socially unsettling.

If that is the case, for many societies and under great variations over the time and space, if, philosophically, death is so profoundly unsettling, and if in the experience of the dead body we find ourselves both repulsed, disgusted, and alarmed, this cannot be the case for medical personnel. Their relationship to the human corpse must be different.

And I will next talk about the processes whereby that change is affected, and in particular the centrality of dissection in the socialisation of doctors.



Deborah Posel, 2015

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