On the Significance of Death in Culture & Communication Research

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Death? Why this fuss about death? Use your imagination,
try to visualize a world without death! . . .
Death is the essential condition of life, not an evil.

--Charlotte Perkins Gilman

When embarking on my final project as a graduate student, I received questions at the beginning from members of my dissertation committee who asked me the question that people since that time continually ask me – "why study death?" After a presentation of my proposed research at my first committee meeting, one woman immediately asked, "Why are you doing this?" "What does it have to do with communication?" For the moment I was stumped. Prior to this I took the answer to this question for granted. It seemed plainly obvious that it had everything to do with communication. Like doctoral students are apt to do, I scurried to find an answer that would sufficiently placate their inquiring minds. I, of course, wanted to just get it done. By the time of my dissertation defense, I was surprised to be asked the same question again. Nevertheless, I still had not arrived at an answer that I thought was sufficiently detailed and explanatory enough, despite the fact it passed the muster of the committee. Having spent several years since then continuing my research on death and dying, I still maintain that death has everything to do with scholarly research in culture and communication. Several of the reasons for this contention are offered in the remainder of this piece.

Why concern ourselves with death? It is meaningless to, as our positivist friends would, seek to understand death in order to mitigate its ultimate occurrence. While, undoubtedly, the

scientists of our era and following will do all in their power to prove me wrong, our knowledge production about the phenomenon of death – from the empirical to the social – will not free us from the grip of the reaper. Why then do we take great pains to understand this inevitability? Why would we spend our time thinking about that thing which provides so much uncertainty for us? Why spend the time contemplating the dark regions of the dead – the nursing homes where the old go to decay and die; the hospital trauma wards where, despite the elaborate machinery and technology keeping a loved one "alive," the one in the bed already knows she is really dead; the cold morgues and funeral homes where quickly decaying flesh is poked at and sliced up, awaiting the filling of their cavities with fluid to mask death's sting; or frighteningly overgrown cemeteries where the dead are disposed of one beside (and often upon) the other; the cemetery park where manicured lawns, high fences and pavement conceal the dark lifelessness and isolation revealed by it? Are we masochists? Demented? Abnormal?

The relevance of death to the study of culture and communication hinges on one's definition of each of these two terms, and, such definitions are plentiful in scholarly literature. More often than not, definitions of culture are framed in terms of "structures" or "systems." Whether it is the perspective of the scientism of August Comte, Ferdinand de Saussure, or Claude Levi-Strauss, or the mechanistic view of Clyde Kluckhohn, Talcott Parsons or contemporary neo-Specerian, evolutionary assimilationsists William Gudykunst or Young Yun Kim, definitions of culture that rely on such metaphors are limiting. They conceive of culture as a set of boundaries that determine certain forms of behavior and offer a play-book for how human beings seek to "fit in" or adapt to cultural environments so as to overcome the communicative barriers of difference. But, human behavior – despite certain restrictions placed upon it by such structures and mechanisms for homeostasis – is largely unpredictable. Not

completely random – but, unpredictable to any degree of useful certainty. Before giving an alternative definition, a discussion of how I conceive of communication may help make this clearer.

Communication is most popularly conceived of in terms of instrumentality and utility. The "information processing" model of communication reigns supreme. In this model, "senders" "encode" messages that are transmitted via some medium to a "receiver" who "decodes" the message and provides feedback to the sender. It serves the purposes of efficient transmission of useful information. This neo-Aristotelian approach to communication that seeks to achieve maximum fidelity of understanding between senders and receivers is, like the previous definition of culture, limited. Much – if not most – communication serves no purpose at all and has no use-value – gossip, chit-chat, self-talk, nonverbal expression and the like. To the instrumentalists such expressions are considered to be "noise" – that which gets in the way of "effective" communication.

Yet, this noise isn't noise at all – it *is* meaningful. Communication is the process of sense-making – the manner in which individuals and groups synthesize their environment in a way that is meaningful, that makes-sense. Communication so conceived is manifest in observable expression – expressions of how one or many people have gone about the process of working out the process of synthesizing "data." This leads us back to our definition of culture. Culture is expression; the variety of ways in which humans exhibit their synthetic processing of the world in meaningful ways. To study such expression is to study and understand culture itself which is dynamic, relational and co-constituted through difference. Each of these elements make up what is popularly termed "ecology." To go one step further, communication and culture are the manifold ways we conceive of and experience the two necessary conditions of conscious

awareness – time and space. Following the ideas of the immanent cultural philosopher, Jean Gebser[1], cultural differences are manifest in the way that different groups of people synthesize time and space; evidence of which is found in cultural products, expression, or, in the terms of Husserlian phenomenology, “the things themselves.” As Gebser scholar Eric Kramer notes,

> There is nothing “behind” expressions, which include architectures, religions, philosophies, modes of transportation and communication, entertainments, and so forth. Dimensions pervade all contingencies. Expressions like rituals, sciences, high ways, art works, utensils, and leisure activities all present styles of configuring space time—moods or modes of being.[2]

Given these definitions, how does death fit into the purview of culture and communication?

First, reflecting back, we remember that culture is manifest in various forms of expression that communicate human meaning; that meaning is constructed through difference, and that culture is formed through a need for connection that is achieved through social interaction. When we consider this point, we find that death, as it is the counter-pole of life, is a fundamental aspect of culture and communication. This is to say, life as a whole is meaningful only in the face of death. To the degree that we busy ourselves with decisions of how to live in the world, we do so because of the realization that this life as we know it, will no longer be. Is it any wonder that the experience of life which provides us with the most significance is that which is transcultural – that which happens to everyone regardless of our race, class, culture, nationality or any other means by which we distinguish ourselves one from the other? So, we can say in the first instance that given that culture and communication are those human actions that provide meaning, the reality of death is the necessary condition for such meaning.

Moving from life as a general phenomenon of conscious existence to how we live it in everyday experience, we see death lurking in the shadows of each move we make – each relationship we form and break, each decision rendered, every tool and technology we devise to get by, each value that dictates for us what is the "good life." Life, or, better yet, living, is shaped by how we view that moment when we will cease to live. For the modern Western individual obsessed with structured time that has an identifiable beginning and a certain determined end, life is lived-for achievement. One must get from point A to Z in the most efficient manner possible because, one day, time will be "up." The past-present-future oriented, temporally-obsessed person living a life of anxiety and compulsion for his finite existence is insignificant in the face of an infinite amount of time. "Like sand in the hourglass, so are the days of our lives" the old soap-opera theme goes. The days of our lives, like the bounded and predetermined sand in the hourglass, no matter how numerous, are nothing compared to the seemingly endless numbers of grains of sand that exist on the earth and in the universe.

On the other hand, the Indian woman who believes in the transmigration of souls or reincarnation in which life is cyclical such that death is not finality, achievement in this life – whether in the form of status, wealth or power – is of little consequence, for what one doesn't do in this life will be done in the next, and the one following ad infinitem. Of course, every momentary decision of life – whether to eat pizza or a salad, to go the library or watch TV – is not done with the conscious thought of death. Yet death's imminent possibility and inevitability makes possible and necessary those decisions of life – determining the reasons for such decisions, their value and consequence, and the bearing they will have on the social world in which we are engaged.

So, not only is death the fundamental definition of conscious life, it is the experience that guides, influences and/or determines what forms our lives will take and the relationship our lives will have with the lives of others. Perhaps even beyond the event of death, our beliefs about what lies after it are as well a significant factor in how we spend our time between the date of our birth and that of our death. The Apostle Paul, trying to convince his followers to undertake a life of sacrifice, purity and godly devotion, and to convince others to assume the same lifestyle because of the nature of the afterlife, rightfully concluded that, "if there is no hope of eternal life, then we are in this world, most miserable," for what lies beyond death is significant for life and how we live this life determines the one following.

Oppressed people throughout history, from the ancient Israelites to African slaves in the Americas, to the countless others in the third world, have managed to have meaning in spite of their circumstances in their relationship between their oppressors, because of the connection they have had with others who were oppressed; the shared realization that though in this life they may have trouble, in the next their chains would be exchanged for freedom, their joy for pain, their lack for plenty. It is here we understand the communicative significance, for example, of the Negro slave spirituals which, whether sung or hummed, provided ease, emotional release and communal connections. Their pain was eased and they could live another minute hour or day because of the shared understanding they all had that these spirituals signified a hope that was, in their minds, nonetheless certain.

To this point I have dealt with the significance of death in culture and communication research somewhat abstractly, showing that the very nature of "life" and "death" relate to everyday life, which is, essentially communicative. I turn from the abstract then to more tangible examples of the relevance of death to what might be considered more traditional areas of

research undertaken by scholars of culture and communication. Two areas (among many) stand out: the area of rhetoric and that of mass media.

Despite our short memories as communication scholars, the field of communication has its basis in the Greco-Roman conception and practice of rhetoric. It is rhetoric that essentially spawned the most pervasive aspect of human culture and communication – hermeneutics. This is to say, with the idea that human communication is not the expression of ideal forms – of Truth – emerges the fundamental need for *interpretation*. Rhetoric began as a way of interpreting communication and, though its original relevance was related to the development and maintenance of the city-state, as a means for conducting political debate and enforcing law, rhetoric describes the general process of persuasion. This persuasion is not limited to the contingent contexts in which it is applied. It is, fundamentally, any attempt to persuade someone regarding a particular interpretation – to convince others to share our perspective, to see the world as we see it from our limited vantage point. That is, we seek to persuade others that our limited horizon is not limited at all, that it is essentially, reality.

Such aims are clearly exhibited in a variety of expressions that emanate from the experience of death. Those considered here briefly are threefold: a rhetoric of time and space; a rhetoric of remembrance, and the rhetoric of social control in the context of death-related events. As mentioned earlier, people experience and conceive of time and space quite differently.[3] Insofar as aspects of death and dying express ways of configuring time and space, certain practices place a premium on a single configuration – hoping to persuade us, if by force of law or violence, to conform to this singular mode of experience. In the West, the conception of time as linear with a beginning and an end, and incremental divisions of the space in-between into quantifiable, measurable units, is expressed in two significant ways. First, it is manifest in what

Gebser calls "temporal anxiety" – the experience that one is quite literally, "running out of time." As alluded to earlier, this experience is related to the belief that death is finality. As such, the time in-between is to be "used" with this in mind. Essentially, one must "accomplish" all he or she can in the space between birth and death. This is manifest, among other ways, in the process of "development" and "achievement." Children are raised these days to believe they must make the most of this time, thus value is placed on progressive, incremental development towards such a final goal. Children begin at the earliest of ages learning how to use a computer so they are ready to go to a good college that will further prepare them to be "productive" in a new electronic, information society.

Pregnant mothers play Mozart in earshot of their developing fetuses in the hopes that the child will start this life one step ahead of the rest. Young people and teenagers spend less and less of their summer time at recreational camps or simply "wasting" time playing. Today parents spend countless dollars to send their kids to math camps, computer camps, free-enterprise internship programs and the like – all so their child will gain a competitive edge in fulfilling the "American Dream." This American dream has come to be synonymous with the mantra and guiding principles of a capitalist economy to get all you can, can all you get and then sit on the can. After all, it is true – he who dies with the most toys…Wins!

Given the primacy of life, time, we have no time to die – no time for the dead and no time for the dying. Time devoted to funerals and other services surrounding death have steadily decreased from a week or sometimes more to an average of three, sometimes two, days at present. The practice of holding "wakes" is declining as family members and funeral professionals prefer the increasingly common, one-hour "viewing" that takes place before a funeral. Clergy emphasize the need to get funerals done quickly and funeral directors aid in

making the rituals of death "efficient." After all, we will be docked pay if our time card at work is not punched before our one-hour lunch break is up.

As we move from time to space, we see the same rationality applied. "Space" and nature are material products subject to human control. Space serves human endeavors and progress. Such conceptions fly in the face of those who regard nature as integral to human meaning, who see little distinction between the human and natural worlds. Thus we continue to see the decline of "sacred" space – especially those occupied by the dead. Where such places were at one time places of worship and communion, they are, in a highly industrialized world, simply property that has instrumental value at the expense of the sentimental. People rarely visit the graves of loved ones anymore and when they do they certainly don't make a day of it. Cemetery owners routinely dig up graves, remove and transport bodies to other locations or lose them without the knowledge of their family members. The government spends millions of dollars and countless hours in court arguing that they should be able to transform the sites of the dead into highways, parking lots or government office buildings. And, they usually win!

Perhaps more tangible, the rhetoric surrounding memorial services or celebrations of the dead is more compelling in shaping our attitudes and beliefs about death and what takes place around the dead. In eulogies, "authorities" – be they clergy, government officials, family members or friends – seek to persuade us to believe that the deceased was the best person who has ever lived. "Let's remember the good things, the good times" they say. "That's who this person *really* was." They seek to persuade us about the nature of the afterlife with the clichéd pronouncements that "Uncle Jack is in a better place," "Grandma is no longer in pain," or "Cousin Joe is in heaven and you will see him again one day." Some transubstantiate with the dead as a way of appealing to us to do certain things. "If Johnny were here today he would want

you to…" Such appeals have persuasive power over the psyche and our behaviors not because they have ample evidence to support their claims, but because of the emotional nature of the setting, and the ethos of the speaker.

On a different note, purveyors of funeral "etiquette" push "expert" propaganda about the "proper" way to feel and, more importantly, act in the face of death. Such behaviors, codified as "respectful" behavior, persuade us to hide our emotions at all cost and say things that are only "polite" and acceptable in what should be a "dignified" ceremony. In effect, such rationality-hustling, social-control pimps effectively convince us to lie to ourselves and others – to be and act contrary to our own system of beliefs and values in order to create and maintain a favorable impression amongst those gathered at the funeral – including the dead.

But let's quickly move on. When we turn to the area of media we find that death served as the impetus for the first mass medium. From the time that human civilizations transitioned from nomadic life to permanent communal settlements, the meaningfulness of death was marked by the living. Whether a pile of rocks and sticks, vast pyramids or large blocks of granite stone with linguistic inscriptions, people throughout time have erected mediums signifying the death of a member of the human community. Such mediums served a variety of functions – as a place of contemplation for the living looking forward to their certain future – a place in which they could maintain a continuing connection with the ancestral community. It was also the center of religious and spiritual life. It was this function that marked such mediums, and the spaces they occupied, as the precursor to contemporary urban life. Lewis Mumford correctly makes the point that the city of the dead antedates the city of the living.[4]

The primary purpose for permanence was our fore-parent's passion for their dead. People in these early times knew, seemingly instinctually, that it was important not only for their

dead to be “properly” buried in the soil, but that their bodies were marked and recognizable – a visible sign of where they were. This is to say, the ancient cities of the dead were spaces for worship – of both deity and ancestry (which in some societies coincided). The germ of the modern city began in these cities of the dead as the central place for ceremony and ritual. It was a place where one could commune with ancestors, be enlightened and reinvigorated. It was a place one could continually be reminded of the teachings of their relatives, contemplate one’s own life and eventual death, where they would, in turn, take their place amongst those gone on before them to the mystery of the life following.

It is not difficult to see the continued significance of symbolic behavior, ceremony, ritual and community centered around the experience of death. The obituaries scattered daily throughout local, national and international newspapers announce one’s death to the masses. Large monuments for collective groups who have died in war, heroic efforts, or tragic circumstances attest to the lives of those who have died, sustaining memory and connecting people across time and space. We gather in our homes, around the television, now on the Internet, on flower-covered medians in the middle of intersections, at a cemetery plot, at one of the aforementioned monuments or a piece of unmarked ground to contemplate the lives of those who die. We connect with others gathered and shared, if, but for a moment, to experience identification with the dead and the living – with the spaces they occupied in life and those they now take up in death. Death is largely responsible for our shared symbolic world, as well as personal and collective identity as we bond ourselves with our neighbors, families, friends, cultural group, race, nation or any other collective so devised.

Not only does death provide an impetus for mediation of both the human and natural worlds we share; we consequently find that death makes up the central content of popular forms

of mass communicative forms of expression. Looking at such popular forms of media, we find that death is a continually tapped source for entertainment of all genres. Television and media violence experts often cite the umpteen millions of violent images and deaths young people have viewed prior to adulthood. Not delving into the debate over the "effects" of such depictions of death, what significance do mediated images of death have for the scholar?

Media, whether television, film, or video games, are mythical productions. This is not a judgment regarding the truth or falsehood, the accuracy or fidelity of the representation in its approximation of "real" life. Rather, myths are the irrational imaginings – the ways of representing the awareness of the psyche (souls, not mentality). Such representations are expressions of how we make sense of death as a culture. They are mass purveyors of our beliefs about death, dying and the afterlife. It is interesting to see the parallels in the popular mood of the American public with the forms of representations of death most often depicted.

In the beginning of wide-spread television use, the American attitude was one largely of fear – fear of death, of dying and the means by which it would occur. This attitude pervaded this era of war, conflict, economic depression and high mortality rates. The images of death most popularly illustrative of the pervasive view of death at the time were in the genre of science fiction, exhibited chiefly in the show *The Twilight Zone*. Here the American fear of death and the hereafter was generally expressed; the topic the subject of the majority of the show's 156 episodes that regularly featured the most feared character – *Mr. Death*. Yet the show also explored another arena – technological innovation – essentially, the means by which we would conquer death – which would introduce us to a new era of television programming about death and dying.

The late sixties and seventies were times of technological progress. After the horrors of war and internal political turmoil, Americans decided that optimism was more appealing. New medical advances began to delay death. Military technology helped lower the risk of death in armed conflicts. There was a drastic increase in public discourse on issues of life and death from abortion to euthanasia to stem-cell research. Again, television expressed the same sentiments throughout this era. Shows like *Trapper John, M.D.*, *Doctor's Hospital*, and *Marcus Welby, M.D.* were the rave and expressed the popular feeling that hospitals were places people went to get better, not to die – signified by Welby's name (Wel-be). Doctors made house calls. They came to your hospital bedside with a healthy dose of good cheer as they prepared to send you on your way free of all that ailed you. During this time which lasted through the nineties, death was virtually erased from view. When we saw death on television it was usually momentary and insignificant. There were few scenes of funeral preparation or cemeteries, family members spending months grieving or family conflicts over the deceased's wishes regarding his burial or allocation of material assets. In short, on television, people just died.

Primarily because of the extreme dissociation and detachment resulting from years of denial and the popular myth that emphasizes life over death, we, towards the end of the last century and into the new, have renewed our search for meaning – meaning to be found in personal relationships, collective identities, and connections with the dead. The magic is slowly creeping again out of the box. We see this exemplified in a host of new television programs from *Six Feet Under* to *Crossing Over With John Edwards* and others. For the first time, television executives are finding an audience willing to confront, to some degree, the harsh realities and details that follow death. The *ER's*, *Guideon's Hope*, and *MD's* have replaced the optimism of earlier medical dramas with the trauma of death, pain and loss.

But, it is not only our collective mood expressed in such media. They also sell us a particular view or belief about death and, in particular, the afterlife. *John Edwards* purports to commune with the dead and give comfort to the living that their loved ones are safe and doing just fine. *Six Feet Under* depicts the deceased in various states of appearance, but nevertheless, they are all aware, free from all the trappings and drudgeries of everyday life and able to continue to be involved in the social affairs of the living. Such a view of death is only one among many. But, it is what we who still struggle with our fear and denial want and, more importantly, need. Is it any wonder that almost all reports from those who have momentarily died clinically or have had near-death experiences are relatively positive? In media, as in life, we cannot bring ourselves to refuse the belief in our own immortality – the existence of an afterlife that is relatively pain-free and not to be feared. The possibility of our soul's transmigration and reappearance in another life or life-form seems implausible to our rational minds and, the possibility of a hereafter of eternal pain and torment is down-right frightening. And, the thought of simple annihilation – the destruction of embodied personality – is unthinkable, if not equally as horrifying.[5]

Space does not permit me to discuss the countless other ways in which the experience of death is a prominent aspect of understanding culture and communication. We could talk about social interaction in ritual, the significance of the body, the communicative nature of the corpse, emotion, interactions between doctors and their dying patients or families, relations between the young and the old, cloning technology, computer-mediated funerals and memorials, the way our fear and denial of death are expressed in euphemistic language, and the list goes on.

My defense of this particular area of research has not been an exercise in locating communication as supreme in the competing field of regional ontologies. Indeed, the experience

of death defies reduction to a single, limited perspective of explanation and is necessarily interdisciplinary. Yet, what should be understood is that as culture and communication are central to the ways in which we live, so too is death to these areas of culture and communication.

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[1] Jean Gebser, *Ever-Present Origin* (Ohio UP, 1985) 9.

[2] Eric Mark Kramer, *Modern/Postmodern: Off the Beaten Path of Anti-modernism* (Praeger, 1999) ix - x.

[3] Elizabeth Ströker, *Investigations in Philosophy of Space* (Ohio UP, 1987) 1-20.

[4] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harvest, 1961) 6-10.

[5] Corliss Lamont, *The Illusion of Immortality* (Continuum, 1935) 51-61.