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Chapter 5: Borders, bodies, and beliefs: death in a globalized world

Section 1. Caitlin Doughty's Cosmopolitanism in Smoke Gets In Your Eyes and From There To Eternity: Cultural Conversation and Death Acceptance

1. Introduction

This chapter is influenced by the cultural side of Caitlin Doughty's discourse. And because we cannot separate it from the literary side, this section will provide explanations as to the way Doughty uses cosmopolitanism in two of her books, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* and *From Here to Eternity*. Understanding the author's attitude towards death is essential to comprehend what she wants to transmit to her readers. In the twenty-first century, cosmopolitanism acquires global proportions, especially in the context of present cultural and political changes (Pagden 1977; Beck 2012). To discuss death acceptance and phobia, we must look at cosmopolitanism from a certain angle: that of duality between local and general and, more precisely, that of conversation, as presented by Appiah (2006) and Jeffers (2013).

This section aims to highlight the connection between the cosmopolitan attitude towards death and death practices and how Caitlin Doughty (2015, 2017) presents it as an essential element in the process of death acceptance with the help of cultural conversation. In two of her books, we witness a stance that draws its power from the positive consequences of globalization: observation, lack of judgement, and exchange of cultural information. Today's cosmopolitanism is situated on the axis of international education (Gunesch 2004) and cultural creativity (Pogge 1992, Held 2013). But the paradox is that the world has never been so unified and at the same time so divided (Boia 2000); this affirmation comprises the duality of contemporary cosmopolitanism: on the one hand, we experience the coexistence of local and global culture, and on the other hand, we sustain the preservation of local values despite our natural curiosity for the

Other (Appiah 2006). This duality plays a massive part in understanding the death rituals of other cultures without expressing any judgement when some might appear absurd to us. When we are locked in our own cultural bubble, everything outside of it is odd. When we pop it, it takes time to adjust to the novelty of something never encountered before in the modern world, such as choosing to be buried in a piece of cloth under a tree. These are the times we are living right now: of self-awareness, discovery, and bubble popping.

Cosmopolitanism is also connected to globalization (Pagden 1997; Beck 2012), and the latter might have crumbled the religious systems (Alexander 2012) on which the beliefs behind funeral rituals were based, turning death culture into something anthropocentric, atheist, challenging to contemplate without a spiritual background and even more difficult to accept when it resembles nothing we know as members of society. The barbarism we see when it comes to the death rituals of other cultures is strictly dictated by the environment that shaped our values (Doughty 2017). Fortunately, we neither have to surrender to the Other nor do we have to reject him because we can adopt the method of cultural conversation, which is essential for partial cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2006; Boia 2000). This via media of death acceptance lets us enjoy the discovery of a different ritual and allows us to delve back into our own with the help of a recently acquired cultural baggage.

When we walk a mile into someone else's shoes (even if it is on the inexorable march towards death) and try to see through his eyes something that could be revelatory (Geertz 1983), this can trigger a change at the subconscious level, a change that might ameliorate, at least for a pleasant moment, the anxiety surrounding death and the idea of mortality. We can call this attitude partial cosmopolitanism, creative communication (Imara 1986), or we can call it cultural common sense. Of all the values that cosmopolitanism puts forward, of all the principles that each of us categorizes in a personal manner (Held 2010), communication based on cultural common sense—that is neither a political nor a social principle, but merely human—can help us approach death acceptance consciously.

2. Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Conversation

Appiah (2006) writes that "conversation across boundaries can be fraught, all the more so as the world grows smaller and the stakes grow larger" (xx). However, he admits they are a pleasure since cosmopolitanism is "an adventure and an ideal" (xx). What are these stakes that he mentions? What can be so dangerous that it prevents us from conversing with the Other? This question can have many answers—some political and economic—but we should focus on the cultural implications of conversing cross-culturally.

Conversation brings about a sense of discovery and freshness that we might not be able to find within our cultural bubble. Its positive psychological effects satisfy our curiosity but might also stir up misjudgments and adverse reactions towards the Other. Perhaps these are the stakes that Appiah labels as perilous; in a globalized society, seeking and embracing otherness could be terrifying. He proposes a partial cosmopolitanism: "We need take sides neither with the nationalists who abandon all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality" (2006: xvi-xvii). This path will allow us to both rejoice in our curiosity without feeling any guilt towards our mother culture and to also amaze at other—to take the familial metaphor even further—distant aunt cultures.

Similar to what we find in Appiah's writings (1998, 2006), Hannerz (1992) describes the meaning of cosmopolitanism in terms of engaging with the Other, in having an ethic and intellectual willingness towards different cultural experiences; it is "a search for contrast rather than uniformity" (1990: 239). While we could adopt an extreme cosmopolitan point of view in seeing other cultures as being above our own (Gunesch 2004), we could also accept how Hayden describes Appiah's partial cosmopolitanism: similar to internationalism; it contains "attitudes which place the cultures and views of others on a par with one's own" (2000: 120). Here we can observe the clash between notions such as internationalism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism. While many scholars argue that globalization means cultural uniformity (Callan 2000; Jameson 2000; Watson 2000), others associate it with diversity (Scholte 2000), just as cosmopolitanism is placed in the uniformity strand (Gutmann 1993) or the diversity one (Bohman 1998; Hollinger 1995). For the sake of this study, we will place it above globalization and multiculturalism, and you will see why in the following subsection.

It is interesting to note that cosmopolitanism holds a paradoxical position in our case. On the one hand, it is in line with uniformity as it underscores the fact that every death ritual, regardless of culture, is imbued with meaning and belief in one or more entities or spirits. On the other hand, it is also diverse in that the form in which these rituals are performed varies significantly from one culture to another. Despite this diversity, however, there is always a common meeting place where authenticity and self-awareness in the practice of these rituals converge. This shared space is found in the sphere of what is truly meaningful to those who participate in these rituals. When I say "meaningful," I am not making a philosophical judgement. To me, meaning should be genuine and rooted in personal experience, not distorted or altered. The former provides an innate, emotionally-charged drive that helps individuals cope with loss and mortality, while the latter is a mere obligation without any emotional or personal significance. We only perform such rituals because they are expected of us.

Hannerz writes that global culture is "not a replication of uniformity but an organization of diversity, an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures"

(1966: 102), and he is right. In a way, the webs of significance that keep man stuck in something that he created (Geertz 2014) make up the cultural webs and networks that can neither be thrown into a remote cultural pit of forgetfulness nor can they be transformed and fashioned to look like something we, in our self-imposed cultural bubble—again, this seems to be the best image for someone who pledges loyalty to the interaction with his and only his way of doing things—are familiar with. In this sense, I believe globalization does more harm than good. Some scholars argue that it encompasses both what is local and what is global at the same time (Hall 1991), but I say cosmopolitanism is the one that does that. The former creates a superficial cultural levelling (as if we evened out a misshapen cake) that only profits the culture standing in the center. Appiah (2006) argues that we cannot escape the center because we live in a capitalist system. At its center there is Europe and the United States as a set of multinational corporations, and "the products they sell around the world promote the interests of capitalism in general" (108): the consumption of whatever inhabits the center. The latter looks at diversity, acknowledges its existence, and prefers otherness instead of alikeness. This is the cosmopolitanism that Caitlin Doughty sets forth in her books, and I like thinking of it in terms of cultural common sense. It is not a momentary cultural movement but an attitude part of something bigger and more powerful: death positivity and acceptance.

Cosmopolitanism can also encompass a sense of solidarity between cultures (Derpmann 2009)—to me, solidarity goes hand in hand with the concept of cultural common sense. Moreover, this can extend beyond the limits of offering and accepting help in times of need. It can surpass material limits. The concept of cultural solidarity holds great significance in the context of death rituals. The principle of cosmopolitanism reminds us of our moral obligation towards our own citizens as well as those of other nations. Demonstrating reverence for their beliefs and choices regarding death and the disposal of their remains is an integral part of this responsibility. It is imperative to respect and honor their preferences, be it cremation, direct burial, or the traditional Tibetan practice of sky burial, without preconceived notions or biases. This is because we are all interconnected and it is our duty to treat each other with empathy and understanding. About this, Patrick Hayden argues that "all human beings have equal moral standing within a single world community" (2005: 3). When discussing specific sensitive topics, such as mortuary cannibalism, it is crucial to set aside our personal moral compass and approach the subject with cultural sensitivity and understanding. While this practice may not align with our own personal beliefs or traditions, we must acknowledge that it holds significant cultural and spiritual value for certain communities. It is crucial that we respect and accept these differences, rather than imposing our own beliefs onto others. However, in an increasingly globalized world, it can be tempting to try and homogenize cultural practices in order to fit into a standardized network. It is important to strike a balance between preserving cultural diversity and promoting global

unity. (I do not wish to be misunderstood: I do not consider it necessary that we adopt mortuary cannibalism starting tomorrow morning, but it being practiced by a tribe in the Amazon rainforest does not force upon me any desire to change the form of my—or their—personal death practices.)

However, even if some might argue that nowadays cosmopolitanism is atheistic and anthropocentric (Alexander 2012), the world community shows resistance to these attitudes imposed by the center (Bartelson 2009) and—as I stated in a similar article (Botîlcă 2021)—it births some small islands of conservation, reinterpretation, and rehabilitation of traditional values. On this note, let us observe how this partial cosmopolitanism (call it cultural common sense or creative communication) is presented in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* and *From Here to Eternity*.

3. Caitlin Doughty. Cosmopolitanism and Death Positivity

According to Caitlin Doughty's insightful literary works, there is no one definitive path to comprehending and embracing the concept of death. Employing her unique blend of creative nonfiction, which combines elements of a travelogue, personal recollections, a declaration of beliefs, and a literary and journalistic approach infused with wit and humor, the author's global perspective offers a genuinely enlightening encounter with death. Her cosmopolitanism is not an idea or a political category (Bender 2017), nor a utopic aspiration, because it has real, immediate, and palpable implications: the inspiration that comes from other cultures (Kübler-Ross 1986) and the glimpse into the home of the Other.

3.1 Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

In *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, she brings us a memoir-manifesto in which she fights against cultural indoctrination related to death rituals and beliefs: "From the time we are born, we are indoctrinated by our specific culture as to the ways death is 'done' and what constitutes as 'proper' and 'respectable'" (2015: 68). Her revelation as to the existence of other death culture norms, considered normal and expected, happens when her grandmother Tutu dies, whose caregiver called Valerie is Samoan. Valerie brings her niece to the viewing, and, to Doughty's shock, the girl begins kissing the corpse and wails. The author admits: "To see her touch the corpse so freely made me ashamed that I had been so awkward" (231). Here is the clash of two cultures: on the one hand, we have Valerie's niece, whose culture taught her that direct interaction with a dead body is natural in the process of mourning and that expressing emotion is not frowned upon, and on the other hand, we have the Westerner who is suddenly aware that her way of doing things is not singular and that she can learn from Valerie's Samoan roots about the

freedom of interacting with death in the form of a dead body. Doughty's reaction is that of a true cosmopolitan. As Gunesch (2004) writes, she acknowledges the existence of the Other, admits the superiority of the culture in this aspect, and learns from it, finding inspiration on her death acceptance journey.

As a Romanian woman, I have oftentimes witnessed extreme displays of mourning at funerals. For me it is mortifying to watch, but for others it is a release of internal emotional pressure that outsiders cannot comprehend. This is why cultural common sense is so important for death acceptance: no matter what the Other chooses, as long as they do not interfere with the law or the ethical principles of the region they live in, I see no reason for us to despise some norms that we have not been raised into.

Another clash with a different culture that causes introspection happens when Doughty prepares the body of a Romanian woman for the viewing; her daughter reacts emotionally in a way that the modern Westerner might find odd: "At Elena's visitation the next morning, her daughter pulled her hair and howled in grief. It was a genuine, haunting sound that I wanted to take in and appreciate as profound" (121). Doughty's cosmopolitanism comes out as appreciative and non-judgmental, even if the 'haunting' nature of the Eastern-European woman's reaction might frighten and disturb one when showcased in public. What does this tell us, as readers? That Doughty wishes to dismember death phobia. She even acknowledges that "part of the fear is cultural" (133). For instance, the fear of cremation can be explained by the Christian belief that the Second Coming of Jesus will cause the rising of the dead from their graves. So, my problem—as a Christian woman—would be: How can I rise from the dead if my body is not intact, if I am cremated? However, the question is valid and shows that diversity can interact negatively with our personal beliefs. As someone who values my culture and beliefs, encountering something that contradicts my truth can be a challenging experience. In these situations, I find myself relying on the concept of cosmopolitanism, which suggests that people should respect each other's differences and refrain from imposing their beliefs on others. However, the effectiveness of this expectation largely depends on the power dynamic between myself and the other person. If they come from a cultural center with much influence, their beliefs may carry more weight and be more difficult to resist than if they were from a cultural margin. It is essential to navigate these situations with sensitivity and an open mind, while also staying true to our own values and beliefs.

From the point of view of cultural common sense, cosmopolitanism is a two-way street, and we should ideally meet the Other somewhere in the middle. Doughty is aware that her view on death is entirely secular, unlike the majority of spiritual death acceptance literature that was written at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first: "I did not want to pretend death was a 'transition' when I really thought of it as, well, death. Done. Finito. Secular to a fault" (176-177). See

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: Death: The Final Stage of Growth and On Life After Death (1986). However, this secularity does not hinder the fact that I find inspiration in her writing. Even though our religious backgrounds differ greatly, death phobia does not discriminate and affects people regardless of their religion. I might even say that, indirectly, there is a cosmopolitan relation between the author (as a representative of American culture) and the reader (as a representative of Eastern-European culture). Here, it acts as a liaison of cultural common sense: I do not judge her for not being religious, and she does not expect me to adopt her secular view. There is a tacit agreement that brings us together in the space of death acceptance, no matter the way we might get there.

Throughout the book, Doughty's journey to becoming a death industry worker reveals how flawed Western society is regarding accepting mortality and interacting with the dead body as something natural and healing. She observes how people treat cremation and viewings, disgusted by the idea of touching the body or witnessing the cremation process. She compares Western death practices with the Japanese ritual of kotsuage or "the gathering of the bones", when the family is an active part of the cremation ritual, sometimes choosing to push the machine's button themselves as a way of saying to the dead: "I am here to the very last moment". The family gathers around the ashy tray where the body has been placed and picks the bones that have not burned entirely in the machine, placing them in a container to keep them intact. She compares these meaningful rituals to "a delicate dance performed by the proper practitioners at the proper time" (23-24). The fragility of the moment requests delicacy, and only rituals based on meaning and belief can offer it. She urges us to consider other remote rituals as well, such as the Chinese practice of hiring mourners (62): "At the time of death, they were a community, rallied around ideas and customs" (63). Here, her cosmopolitan attitude peeks through the anthropocentric veil that covers our eyes. She admits that "our relationship with death was [and still is, I might add] fundamentally flawed" (64), specifically because we do not accept it as a community. However, we force ourselves to carry this fight alone, as if it were a personal accomplishment, not a communal or local one. As a modern Western society, we lost meaning, a meaning that we can find again by observing other practices and treating them with respect and admiration. I reckon that Doughty's Smoke Gets in Your Eyes can be summed up as follows: In every society, a set of death values prevails, perpetuated through the medium of narratives and myths, often instilled in children from a tender age, even before their capacity to form lasting memories. These foundational beliefs provide individuals with a cognitive framework essential for comprehending and exerting influence over the trajectory of their lives. This innate human quest for meaning and understanding manifests diversely across cultures, leading some to embrace intricate systems of potential afterlives, while others place their faith in rituals such as the sacrifice of specific animals on prescribed days to secure bountiful harvests. Yet, there are those who subscribe to the belief that

the world's culmination shall be heralded by a vessel constructed with the untrimmed nails of the deceased, ferrying an army of the deceased to engage in a cataclysmic confrontation with the deities at the apocalyptic denouement of time—an allusion to the remarkable richness of Norse mythology. However, contemporary developments evoke a disquieting sense of unease regarding the transformation of our established death values. Throughout the annals of history, there has never been an era in which a culture has diverged so profoundly from the traditional paradigms governing the disposition of mortal remains and the associated belief systems concerning mortality. This profound departure from established norms prompts profound reflections on the implications of these shifts for the human experience and our understanding of existence itself (214).

Throughout human history, death has been an inescapable reality that every culture has had to face. As a result, many societies have developed death values that are deeply ingrained in their traditions and beliefs. These values are often transmitted through stories and myths, which are passed down from generation to generation. Even young children are exposed to these tales, as they are considered an essential part of their cultural education. By providing a framework for understanding and coping with death, these beliefs help individuals take control of their lives and find meaning in the face of mortality. In other words, human beings need meaning and belief, be it in Norse mythology (which she humorously describes as "metal"—and I could not agree more), in an afterlife, or in other rituals usually labelled as pagan. But what happened to the twenty-first century? Did we lose these beliefs because of globalization? Do we feel the pressure of a god complex created by new technologies that promise us eternal life? (Doctor Ian Pearson predicts that we can merge our mind with a machine and even attend our own funeral when our physical body dies—the updated version of what inspector Clouseau does in the 1978 film Revenge of the Pink Panther, when he shows up dressed as a priest at his own funeral). Perhaps secularity will slowly overtake all aspects of our life, but we can work around it or with it to accept something that is irreversible and unchangeable: mortality. Do I not believe anymore in the afterlife? Fine, then I will find a way to cope with the finality of death: I will read more about it, I will interact with people who meet and contemplate death as part of their job, and I will have more conversations about it—open, non-judgmental—hoping that meaning and acceptance will come my way.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1986) predicted that "in the decades to come, we might see one universe, one humankind, one religion that unites us all in a peaceful world" (3). Her wish was for the future to happen under the sign of cosmopolitanism and for people to be citizens of the world, but not in a way that makes them dependent on one another or that ties them up with the uncomfortable ropes of legal or economic obligations. Unlike her, Doughty is rather pessimistic in her affirmations. The rupture we experience today might not be fixed as soon as we expected. However, stating that we have never

strayed so far from the traditional belief surrounding mortality does not mean that we should go back in time, as that is certainly not feasible, but it definitely plants the seed of cultural common sense: if I lack something, do I not cross the road to my neighbor and ask them if they can lend me some? The same might also happen here. We do lack positive death attitudes, but we can also ask for our neighbor's help, not with the intent of copy-pasting death rituals in our cultural mindset, but with the hope of finding inspiration. Seeing the normalcy with which traditional cultures perceive death might lead us to do the same, to find our own beliefs, or at least to recover those that we have lost.

3.2 From Here to Eternity

In *From Here to Eternity*, her general attitude is a critique towards Western society regarding death rituals—or lack thereof—and the impact of this empty space on both the community and the individual. She argues that "there is no one prescribed way to 'do' or understand death" (2017: 6) and takes us on a journey around the world to observe, appreciate, and be aware of the existence of different sets of cultural values that might not always appeal to the Western ones.

Some of the rituals presented in the book are outdoor cremation in Colorado, interaction with the body in Torajan culture, mummification in Mexico, recomposition in North Carolina, celebration of the *ñatitas* in La Paz, green burial in California, and sky burials in Tibet. A wonderfully large variety of rituals show us how diverse attitudes towards death can be. The critique she brings to the Western society is not only related to the intolerance towards other 'barbaric' cultures and the refusal to create meaningful conversation but also to how it treats death and mortality in its own home: "In our Western culture, where are we held in our grief? Perhaps religious spaces, churches, temples—for those who have faith. But for everyone else, the most vulnerable time in our lives is a gauntlet of awkward obstacles" (232). And this is where cosmopolitanism should intervene in the form of cultural communication because this is what allows us to experience the feeling of belonging and promotes growth in times of struggle (Imara 1986).

At the beginning of the book, Doughty confesses to the importance of taking inspiration from the Other in terms of death attitudes: "I hope that what I found might help us reclaim meaning and tradition in our communities" (6). When we seek to answer the question of mortality—and the question is usually relatively short: "Why me?"—it would be helpful to search for other versions of the truth outside our home because here, we might not always be provided with what we need.

Extending her critique towards the cultural center of the world, Doughty takes us back in time, so we can witness the moment when Jean de Brébeuf, a Catholic missionary, observes the Huron Feast of the Dead—the ritual involves cleaning the flesh off the bones and burying them in a communal grave—and admires it. However, the author believes that this admiration did not keep him from wishing globalization upon the tribe:

In that moment, standing at the edge of the pit, I'm sure Brébeuf was moved by the death rituals of the Wendat people. But it did not change his fervent hope: that all of their customs and ceremonies would be obliterated and replaced with Christian ceremonies, so they could be "sacred" as opposed to "foolish and useless". (2017:11)

The strength of one culture can overtake other five. Brébeuf's attitude could have been that of a globalist. Had he been a cosmopolitan, he would have stood at the edge of the pit, observing, appreciating, and marveling at the diversity, and he would have gone home to think of his own mortality. In relation to this, Doughty makes an affirmation that resembles what Montaigne wrote in his essay about cannibals: "We consider death rituals savage only when they don't match our own" (Doughty 2017: 12); "every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country" (Montaigne 1877: 229).

And because I mentioned mortuary cannibalism: Doughty asks us to consider the Wari' tribe, whose members practice this ritual as a form of ultimate consumption. The flesh is gently stripped off the dead body and consumed by the family of the deceased, not dictated by savageness or lack of food, but by belief and faith. The Wari' people would be terrified if they had to bury their dead deep in the ground and leave their bodies intact; only cannibalism produces the fragmentation and disappearance they desire and find peaceful. To continue the parallel with Montaigne (1877), he writes about the Tupinamba tribe, whose members see cannibalism as an extreme—and surprisingly honorable—revenge brought upon their dead enemies. He concludes that we might call these people barbarous according to our reasoning, but we (referring here to Europeans, I presume) definitely surpass them in barbarity according to theirs. And Doughty agrees: "The burial practice in North America—embalming (long-term preservation of the corpse), followed by burial in a heavy sealed casket in the ground—is offensive and foreign to the Wari'" (2015 :70). This proves that cultural relativism applies to death rituals, as well as to the diverse attitudes towards it. Death acceptance, then, is also relative to our cultural surroundings, yet another reason for which we are welcome to interact with what piques our curiosity.

For Doughty, cultural differences are not an object of debate in terms of good versus evil or moral versus immoral, and by using intertextuality, she exemplifies her stance with the help of the famous Greek historian Herodotus, who "produced one of the

first descriptions of one culture getting worked up over the death rituals of another" (7). The story is about a Persian king who called upon a group of Greeks and a group of Callatians to ask them about their death cultural practices. During the reign of King Darius, an intriguing and morally charged dialogue unfolded. Darius convened a group of Greek individuals who were in his company and posed a profound question to them: What compensation would entice them to consume the remains of their deceased fathers? In response, the Greeks unequivocally declared that no material reward could induce them to commit such a grotesque act. However, Darius did not stop there. He proceeded to summon a distinct group known as the Callatiae, who were of Indian origin and held the astonishing practice of consuming their own parents after death. Inquiring with the Greeks present and aided by interpreters, Darius asked the Callatiae what would persuade them to abandon this tradition and instead choose to cremate their fathers upon their demise. The response from the Indians was a resounding outcry against even discussing such a macabre and abhorrent deed, highlighting the profound cultural variations and ethical distinctions that prevailed among these two groups during that historical epoch. (Herodotus 1921: 51)

Doughty uses this example to show us that "revulsion at the way other groups handle their dead" (7) is not new but has been around for thousands of years. And unless something changes in our acceptance of others, the funeral industry cannot be reformed. Doughty is truly clear when she writes that we have to introduce new practices that are not so profit-oriented and include the family members of the dead more than they already do, but we cannot do so if we continue to behave like Brébeuf. "Cannibalizing your old dad like the Callatians may never be for you", Doughty explains, but "it is demonstrably wrong to claim that the West has death rituals that are superior to those of the rest of the world" because "we have fallen behind […] when it comes to proximity, intimacy, and ritual around death" (15) because of the corporatization of deathcare. Appiah's partial cosmopolitanism (and, by extension, cultural conversation) urges us to see the beauty behind these differences in death rituals and accept their existence without trying to change anything about them.

The West seems to try to explain its fear of intimacy and ritual by plopping all this on the shoulders of one word: dignity. And while dignity is supposed to be related to how you handle the body and your attitude toward it, it now means "silence, a forced poise, a rigid formality" (Doughty 2017: 102). I agree that some people like the structure and the rigidity of such a painful event because it helps them get through the day and hold everything in until they reach the intimacy of their home and can finally mourn in peace. But for others, the freedom to express their pain whenever they feel it is coming up can make the difference between denial and acceptance. Dignity as we see it now has become the norm and has left us very little wiggle room. Doughty agrees that "holding space is crucial, and exactly what we are missing" (323), which means creating a safe

space around the family and friends of the dead and providing non-judgmental support so they can grieve honestly and openly.

4. Conclusions

Coming to terms with the inevitability of death is a profound cultural journey that greatly benefits from the support of a community. It is unjust to expect individuals to confront their profound fear of mortality in isolation. Such a collective effort towards understanding and accepting mortality can manifest through a variety of means, including open dialogues, established cultural norms, and authentic interpersonal connections. The contemporary era, often marked by an overarching preoccupation with the illusion of eternal youth and invincibility, can lead to a pervasive sense of impending peril surrounding the concept of death. While it remains impossible to counter the undeniable reality of mortality, which is an integral part of the natural order and the very essence of life itself, it is eminently achievable to take gradual strides toward acknowledging and embracing this inescapable facet of existence. One pragmatic approach to this endeavor lies in engaging with the experiences and perspectives of others, even those residing in far-flung corners of the world with unique burial customs and traditions. The act of immersing oneself in such narratives can incite moments of introspection and self-reflection. These contemplative interludes, albeit brief, have the potential to encourage individuals to explore their own mortality and commence the journey of forging a relationship with what they may perceive as their ultimate adversary—death itself.

Recent literature, exemplified by works such as Doughty's, has ushered in a notable transformation in perspectives concerning both death and life. This paradigm shift offers a valuable opportunity to cultivate cultural sensitivity and foster acceptance—qualities often found lacking in Western societies—regarding the topic of mortality. The emergence of this contemporary movement, known as death acceptance or death positivity, serves as a compelling catalyst, compelling us to confront our deeply ingrained fear of death and ultimately develop a greater sense of comfort with the undeniable reality that it is an inescapable fate for all living beings. In the forthcoming section, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the diverse cultural attitudes towards death, drawing from the insights and experiences of nearly five thousand respondents. This empirical investigation holds the promise of nurturing a more inclusive and open-minded discourse concerning body disposition choices within the complex tapestry of twenty-first-century society. By shedding light on these multifaceted perspectives, we endeavor to facilitate a more enlightened and compassionate dialogue surrounding the profound and universal topic of mortality.

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Section 2. Death Attitudes Today: Survey Exploring Cultural Diversity

Introduction

In 2021, I successfully interviewed more than four and a half thousand people around the world about their beliefs and curiosities concerning death and dying. (If any of you happen upon this study, THANK YOU!) Their replies, comments, and insightful remarks make for a comprehensive and detailed report that should remind us all of the colorful cultural diversity around death.

The results you will see are classified as per region, level of education, and age group, which will help us better understand the background of our respondents and the majority of the answers.

Total respondents: **4,622** individuals.

1. Results as per region

Fig. 21. Survey results as per region

Northern America	62.7%	South America	0.5%
Eastern Europe	11.2%	Southern Africa	0.4%
Western Europe	8.5%	Southern Asia	0.3%
Australia and New Zealand	6.8%	Western Asia	0.3%
Northern Europe	6%	Eastern Asia	0.1%
Southern Europe	1.6%	Caribbean	0.1%
South-eastern Asia	0.7%	Central Asia	0.07%
Central America	0.7%	Middle Africa	0.03%

2. Results as per level of education

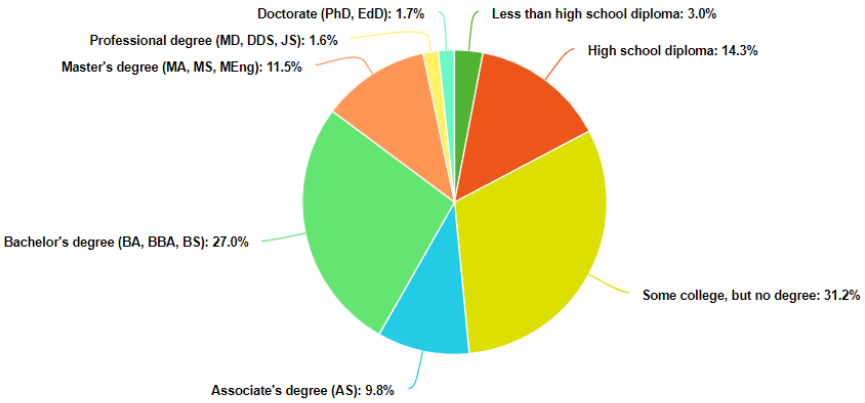

Fig. 22. Survey results as per level of education

3. Results as per age group:

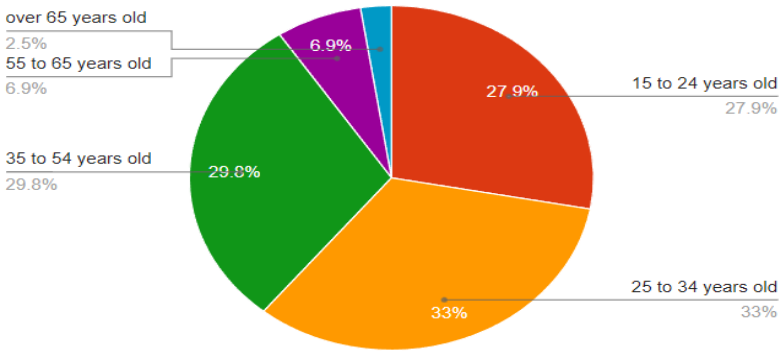

Fig. 23. Survey results as per age group

A) Yes/no/idk questions

The results in bold show the biggest “yes” and “no” percentage per question, irrespective of the age group.

		15-24			25-34			35-54			55-65			over 65		
		Y	N	IDK	Y	N	IDK	Y	N	IDK	Y	N	IDK	Y	N	IDK
1.	Are you a religious person (in your own religion)?	24.4	62.7	12.8	23.8	**68.3**	7.9	27.6	66.4	6	45.9	46.8	7.3	**46**	43.4	10.6
2.	Do you believe in life after death?	53.6	25.4	21	53.1	**26.5**	20.3	64.4	19.9	15.7	**75.5**	14.6	9.9	69.9	18.6	11.5
3.	In your opinion, is it disrespectful when people talk/write about death with humor?	**3.5**	91.8	4.7	2.5	94.9	2.6	2	**95.9**	2.1	2.5	95.6	1.9	2.7	95.6	1.8
4.	Do you believe that children should be allowed to witness the death of their grandparents?	49.8	**23**	27.2	55	17.9	27.1	58.1	17.6	24.2	57	19	24.1	**61.6**	17.9	20.5
5.	Do you believe that the modern man fears death more than his ancestors?	59.1	**30**	10.9	62.8	25.4	11.7	65.4	22.9	11.7	**70**	20	10	62.5	19.6	17.9
6.	Would you be willing to read a book that depicts dead bodies in a realistic manner?	84.9	4.3	10.8	**88.1**	4.7	7.2	86.3	3.5	10.2	75.2	**7.3**	17.4	73.5	6.1	20.4

7.	Would you be willing to read a book that discusses death with humor?	90.9	2.3	6.8	92.8	3.1	4.1	**93.6**	1.7	4.6	88.1	1.8	10.1	81.6	**8.2**	10.2
8.	Would you be willing to read a book that contains interviews with terminally ill patients?	90.9	1.3	7.8	91.5	2.5	6	**94.2**	1.3	4.4	87	5.6	7.4	85.7	**8.2**	6.1

B) 1-5 scale questions

In the survey it is specified for each 1-5 scale question that 1 is the lower end of the spectrum and 5 is the higher one. So, 1 = less, not at all, little etc., and 5 = very much, extremely, all the time etc. The yellow background shows the biggest average per question.

		15-24	**25-34**	**35-54 average**	**55-65**	**over 65**
1.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how afraid are you of your own death?	2.83	2.89	2.74	2.36	2.16
2.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how afraid are you of your loved one's death?	4.35	4.25	4.07	3.66	3.28
3.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how often do your family talk about death and/or plan their own funeral?	2.29	2.49	2.63	2.63	2.58
4.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how often do you think about your own death?	3.57	3.44	3.22	3.25	3.19
5.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how uncomfortable are you near a dead body?	3.33	3.56	3.84	4.02	4.17
6.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how willing would you be to prepare the dead body of a loved one (for example, wash it) for a funeral/viewing/ cremation/burial?	2.84	3.28	3.62	3.85	3.60

7.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with green burials?	4.33	4.49	4.45	4.32	4.35
8.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with exposing children to the funeral of a family member?	3.69	4.00	4.06	4.07	4.02
9.	On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree that today conversations about death are discouraged?	3.53	3.53	3.46	3.43	3.54

C) Questions asking for longer answers

Out of almost five thousand answers, I am choosing the ones that encompass the broad categories that one might find when reading them. I will choose ten representative answers for each question and for each age group. For this, I added a word cloud for each age group. This helps me see what words the respondents used more frequently than others. The size of the word in each word cloud represents the usage frequency. So, the bigger the word, the more frequently it was used. For each word cloud, I used the text resulting from all 4,622 answers.

1. 15-24 years old

1.1. Q: After this survey, do you have any thoughts on death phobia and how we can accept our mortality?

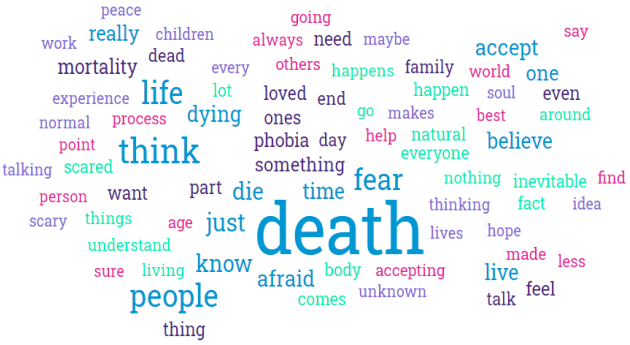

Fig. 24. Word cloud of all the answers for question 1.1. in the age group “15-24”

A1: My father died recently, and **laughing** and **humor** have helped get us through. He was 90 and his death was non-Covid related. He came home to die and that was very important to him.

A2: A mix of **getting used to/experiencing death** (in whatever form, could just be educational stuff) and not letting it consume you. However sad a thought, people die all the time, and regardless if it's a loved one or not, what matters is the memories you have with them. Some people with death phobia, including me, are worried about being forgotten, dying young and wasting your potential, fear of the unknown etc. We don't know what happens after death, nor do we know what life has in store for each of us; there is no use being scared of it ending and seeing all the joy being sucked out of you, only to die in the end anyway. I hope that made sense. Good luck with the surveys/your PhD!

A3: Because of the increase of death being shown in modern media and news, I wouldn't quite say people are scared as much as they are **desensitized**. People are able to access anything they'd like through the internet, and death isn't spoken about as a taboo thing as much anymore. I'd like to believe that views on modern death and burial would change with the times, but I still think we have a lot of growing to do before people are comfortable with that conversation.

A4: By doing what we want to do. There's this pressure from our older family members to do this and that and become something by the age of "idk" and marry and have kids etc. Personally, I don't believe in a timeline for such things. You want something, you get it. Sometimes, finances stop us. But finances can be overcome quickly with perseveration. What we should pay more attention to is ignoring the opinion of others. Because people will have an opinion no matter what. So "eff" their opinion and **do something with your life**. We can only do it once. So do it with no regrets!

A5: Children (of a certain age) need to be discussing it with families and be exposed to it. My grandparents never discussed it, and my grandad still refuses to talk about his will or plans when he passes away which makes it more difficult. My acceptance has come from **curiosity** and death related groups.

A6: Death is the only certain thing in life, yet is also the thing that people fear the most. Allowing yourself to delve into the subject, to think about your own mortality, about the nature of things, will give you the feeling of understanding, or at least getting used to the idea of death. We always think of death as a tragedy, but it can also be beautiful, the whole process of burial, honoring the memory of the persons, some cultures even celebrate the dying of the people, they believe they have been spared. People are afraid of dying nowadays because we don't allow ourselves to age, to **be vulnerable**, we live in a social media era, where we believe we are timeless and flawless, but the time that we think we have is only an illusion, nothing lasts forever. Also, because

of the medicines that we have, death occurs less often than it used to, people are rarely to die young. Claire Wineland is a person that I respect a lot, even if she is no longer here, she has danced with death so many times, listening to her can be magical. I am a religious/spiritual inclined individual, I believe it makes me feel more at peace to believe that death is just a steppingstone, an exam at the end of our lives, people are superficial, they ceased to believe in the spirit, they view themselves as a piece of flesh that when it dies, it's game over. Maybe they are right, but truly, nobody has made it back to tell us how it's like to be dead, so I guess everyone is free to believe what they think is right. We are not afraid to go to sleep and fade into unconsciousness, so why are we so afraid of death? Look up a YouTube video called "Sleeping is just death being shy."

A7: Every person has their own vision upon death. Personally, I believe there's nothing after death. And perhaps that is why I do not fear death (except for the scenario where I die in excruciating pain). I see it as a very deep sleep without dreams, as a place when you can no longer feel anything. It's only painful for the ones around you (just like being stupid). I believe that it is not death people fear, it's the sensation that they did not have the chance to live, that they had more to do in their lives, that their time runs out. In fact, I believe people are afraid of getting old, getting sick and losing their loved ones more than they are afraid of their own death.

A8: I am a (relatively new) nurse. I see death within my job, though it's uncommon as I am trying to save lives not care for them post-mortem. I fear my own death daily. I think about it often, in the shower, on my way to work, lying in bed etc. I always wonder if I'll ever get past this fear. Even after exposure in my career, I still fear it. I don't know if there's a way other than a near death experience or a strong psychedelic breakthrough that can help us accept our mortality. I believe it takes a strong breakthrough of trauma in an NDE or psychedelic experience to do just that. Unfortunately, I'm terrified to go that route, though I've seen both occur and relieve the fear of death in many.

A9: I believe that body and soul go together. A soul needs a body to contain it and in return our soul powers our body. Every energetic movement powered by electricity in our body is powered by our soul and once the body begins to deteriorate our soul is closer to being free to find a new host. Souls are pure energy and energy cannot be created or destroyed and as bodies are conduits for that energy a soul must always be in a body. Memories and personalities can be retained in that energy for a time so we will never completely lose who we are in this life when we start the next so there is no fear that we are lost when we die. I do not fear death because my soul will go on and this way of thinking has helped me. The belief was further set in stone after witnessing my grandmas passing and feeling the emptiness of energy while holding her hand. Her physical form was present but her spiritual form was not, it wasn't her anymore. The room felt empty and lifeless because it was. The soul that had given her

body life was absent. Death is never the end. I fear losing my loved ones because I crave proximity to their energy but the thought that they are still here on this planet (only in a different form to the one I knew them as) gives me comfort.

A10: I literally sometimes will stay awake the whole night because my brain has decided that if I close my eyes I'll die. I'm 23 and have regular panic attacks about dying. I've had a fear of death and dead things for years. I struggled to be in the same room as my dog after he was put down. I don't like the idea of a body being empty and I feel like I truly have a death phobia not just discomfort, it consumes my life. A therapist once told me that my anxiety responses and decisions that I make are all centered around me surviving and that bleeds into making sure I survive emotionally as well. I don't know how to accept my mortality and there's a part of me that doesn't want to because that would affect my survival. My best friend is studying to be a mortician, which is the only reason I've heard of Caitlin. All this aside, I do know that the embalming process is partly the result of the American Civil War and that the cleaning of the body by the family is an established part of funerary rites worldwide and that Australia is part of the minority that doesn't take part in those rites. I don't know if I'd still be the same if I had been exposed to death as a young person, but I do know that death scares the sh*t out of me and if I accept that I will one day die then I will die.

1.2 Q: Some tribes practice mortuary cannibalism. Should this be universally forbidden? (I am using "universally forbidden" to narrow down any other interpretations.)

A1: Kind of gross, but it's their dead, so sure.

A2: Cannibalism, consensual especially and in this case, I can only assume due to the popularity in a culture, is only seen as bad by a moral standpoint that we've had drilled into our heads. Cannibalism is only inherently bad when it is a non-consensual fetishized thin, in my opinion. Cannibalism does not actually hold any inherent bad or good moral standing. We find an aversion to the sentience people hold, in the same way we might not eat a dog or cat out of feeling bad for sentience and awareness. But at the end of the day, a death ritual honoring one that involves cannibalism is one of the more careful and understandable forms of it. While it may seem weird to others, these are people following a tradition that in the end does not hurt anyone. (And, of course, cannibalism is only harmful if the person in question had a disease that is transferrable that way, or if the brain is eaten. Otherwise, people are generally not affected at all.)

A3: I think it should be forbidden.

A4: I think this practice is only against moral law insofar as it's a practice that can be harmful to the participants (risk of disease), which in turn reflects poorly on any

sort of cannibalism. If that risk were somehow entirely averted and the entire process was consensual for people participating in these rituals (+ they had knowledge of what outside people may practice instead), I think it should not be universally forbidden. However, since we've got no way to do that (yet), then it should be banned for health reasons.

A5: Maybe not against moral law... Taboo, yes. But I figure maybe with some pre consent it would be alright? Maybe not… Disturbing to think about, but hey…

A6: Seems barbaric to me, it should be forbidden.

A7: That's just plain gross and rather disturbing to me, but still... They're isolated tribes, and they're not imposing this kind of ritual on people outside said tribe. Our definition of what is "moral" isn't the same as theirs, therefore we, as outsiders, cannot really intervene and forbid them from doing what they've always done. Is it normal, from a European person's point of view? No. But it's THEIR normal. That article (after the question in the survey, I added a link to an article that detailed the meaning of mortuary cannibalism) says they mourn the dead and eat very small pieces of them to recognize they are not amongst the living anymore. They're showing sorrow in a way that is very peculiar to me, but, at the end of the day, I think I'm in no place to judge how isolated tribes conduct their death rituals.

A8: With respect to the cultures, their practices are their own and most of the time are passed down throughout history. If they still practice it because of their traditions, they should be able to.

A9: This seems morally wrong to me. Even though the idea behind this tradition is to pay homage and respect to the dead and their family, I don't think this tradition is something that must be continued.

A10: Once you die, your body is only a body. I wouldn't personally partake, but there could be religious or social reasons to do so.

1.3 Q: In some cultures (e.g.: La Paz, Bolivia), people keep the skulls of their loved ones, decorate them, and place them in their homes as intermediaries between man and divinity. Do you believe this should be universally forbidden?

A1: Absolutely not. I think it's a really cool idea, though maybe not one I'd participate in.

A2: Definitely not. Everyone mourns in their own way, who am I to disagree?

A3: Yes. Although death shouldn't be avoided as a topic and it's not something taboo, I don't believe we should touch their body parts post-death.

A4: Yes. It is **toxic** and not healthy.

A5: Nah, if people use that to remember or even **accept death** then more power to them.

A6: To each their own!

A7: Why should they be forbidden? If that's a tradition they've held for a long time and the skulls are clean (not a hazard) then obviously it shouldn't be forbidden.

A8: This practice should not be forbidden as long as law enforcement authorities don't suspect criminal activity.

A9: Not sure. I mean, this practice brings harm to no one in particular, after all. I believe that, to a certain extent, **funeral traditions are more for the living** than for the dead. When someone you love dies, you have to go on living knowing that from now on you no longer have the possibility to make memories with them. Instead, you have to find ways to cope with the empty space they leave behind; for some it's looking at photos, for others it's decorating the skulls of their deceased loved ones. As a foreigner, I admit that seeing such a thing would bring about a certain level of discomfort. However, I also do have to admire the **relaxed attitude** and **acceptance** towards such a natural and unavoidable phenomenon. When I think about death, I feel like a feral dog knowing that it is about to get leashed. It does not seem to be the same for the people mentioned and showed in the linked article and that it something else in its entirety.

A10: No. This just seems like a way to honor the dead and to be closer to their loved ones and the spiritual side.

2. 25-34 years old

2.1 Q: After this survey, do you have any thoughts on death phobia and how we can accept our mortality?

Fig. 25. Word cloud of all the answers for question 2.1. in the age group "25-34"

A1: I really appreciated that show from New Zealand about the funeral directors. It opened my eyes to a totally different world of funerals and **celebrating the dead**. I think we are more afraid of death because there are so many ways that our society/science has worked out to avoid it. In the past people does from things that we don't now (a sinus infection, decaying tooth, cut/infections) now we have antibiotics and better care for moms and babies. So, people die less frequently and it's become more of a secret.

A2: All in all, I think this is a very complicated subject to study at the present moment. On one hand, Western neoliberal society has more open views of death and religion, not as bound by tradition. On the other hand, structures we once thought were cemented, like American prosperity, are in crisis. Let alone that climate collapse and the related Holocene extinction are ever present reminders of not only our own mortality, but that of our friends, and the mortality of the society we live in. How can we plan for death, for retirement, for our families, if we have no confidence we will even retire? Death weighs heavily on me but in our world led by apathetic or slow to act leaders, it is mostly just a sense of general nihilism and trying to enjoy the present.

A3: America's culture puts so much importance on **commodifying youth** that death isn't talked about in a serious way. It's focused on only when it's something that can be commodified as well like in the growing true-crime drama. While that's not exactly the worst thing, more down to earth topics about death should be more celebrated and normalized. Caitlin Doughty is such a blessing for opening this topic up to such a large audience and doing so with such poise and humor.

A4: Being mentally unwell, coupled with growing up with trauma and death, has **desensitized** me to a lot of death phobia. This survey hasn't really instigated any deep thought about dying or a loved one's death. My terminally ill grandmother died last year. It was hard seeing her so sick, but in the end, she found her place in her heavenly kingdom. She did a lot of good things for people and was heavy into her religion. I'd like to think it is this way for a lot of people. Not finding a religion *per se*, but in the moments before we pass, we make our peace however we see fit. Whether it is in mere

seconds or weeks/months. **Our bodies are a shell** of who we are. For some people it is all we are. Death is nothing to fear.

A5: By educating people when they're young. My dad died November 13th. It was a chosen situation, hospice was there etc. The chaplain (I'm not religious) kept trying to nudge me to take my son (6) to the other room during the final moments. I had to firmly say no and ask him to go hover over somebody else. He wouldn't let up. I believe it's taboo to teach children and let them experience those situations in the US and that creates fear and confusion. My son is not traumatized. We've had **healthy dialogue** and he has a strong understanding of what led up to his "PopPop" dying and why he chose to stop fighting and how family lives on.

A6: Death is so natural that all the **taboos** make it hard to accept it even if is surrounding us all the time! Humans aren't special. If we are able to eat chicken without remorse, we should accept the death with the same naturality as we don't think twice by buying the chicken. My only concern would be the way of dying; it can be physically painful and take too long. I live in Romania, but I am Mexican. The Day of the Dead implies respect but also some happiness and fun with the dead. Although I don't believe "they come back."

A7: Everyone dies. It's just a part of life. I think death is scary because you never know when or how until one day you just know that "this is the end for me." I have a lot of autoimmune diseases so I'm just waiting for that final one. The one that's either gonna give me cancer or debilitate me where my body slowly dies. So, I think about death quite a bit. Not in a scared way, but more of a curious fashion. What happens to my soul when I die? Do I get to come back or am I done? How many lives do we get? Do we reincarnate to other planets or species? How will my funeral be? What will my family do? I'm only 30. I have a daughter and a wife. I try to just enjoy my life and the little things and not stress over things I can't change. Death will come for us all eventually. You will be miserable if you just sit and fret about it all the time. So just go live and try to be better every day. That way, when you do die, your life will have mattered. Even if you touched one person, it matters. I want you to think about something too. What if every time we are reincarnated, (if that's what happens) we have one single sole purpose. And once you fulfil your one thing, that's it for you. Your time is now up. For example: you're at the bus stop and there is a guy sitting there crying. He is going to kill himself. But you talk to him and give him hope. He leaves and goes on to create something great. But that was the one thing you were put here to do in this life. Now your time is up. But you don't know. Now here comes another guy in a car. He swerved to miss a kid that is running across the street. But he ploughs right into you, killing you both instantly. But that was his sole purpose. But who really knows how things go? I'm very intrigued by death and the evolution of our souls.

A8: For me as a Christian (as faith, not religion) death is a part of life, it's not the end. I'm not afraid of it. But people these days are afraid of death beyond my understanding. Their behavior is not logical at all. They fear death so much and they want to preserve their lives so much, that they stopped loving, they are just merely existing.

A9: Humans almost intrinsically need some form of transpersonal world view. The very ability to be sentient and self-reflective creates an internal requirement to be able to place oneself into something grander than us and derive meaning from this. The modern world has venerated material reductionist views above most other views as a way of placing society (and therefore everyone) into a wider framework of understanding. This has led to an existential angst that cannot be resolved as spiritual perspective (which is anathema and thus rejected) is seen as a "silly" meaning. It is therefore not a surprise that staying alive at all costs has become the standard creed of ageing populations. Or that the morality of scientism has proven to be so immoral in its sacrificing of the young to extend the old a fraction more. Fear of loss is an extension of fear of death - for if there is nothing after the threshold then you have truly lost forever and the mind rebels against such infinite and complete negation of things we love. Almost like a knee jerk reaction to trauma. Those who believe in something after death can let go and sacrifice the old for the young more easily, and provide a more moral framework for society and existence. Meaning is something that humanity has striven for since the beginning - the earliest sites are religious in nature. Without a return to philosophies that infuse life, people and societies with meanings beyond the material there will be no ability to truly 'laugh in the face of death' as a culture as Marcus Aurelius would suggest doing. **The inability to smile back at death has, or will lead to the inner death of us all.** For how can we all truly show courage if we cannot be like Horatius on the bridge but instead cower in our beds at the whims of the corners of our minds?

A10: I attended Catholic schools for my entire schooling K-12. I bought into Catholicism hook line and sinker. In the 8th grade (how someone like this was teaching at a Catholic school I will never know) one of my teachers stood in front of the class and told us, "When you die there's nothing." I had never even considered the possibility because I believed so strongly in the Catholic church. However, as a queer person I was already starting to question the church. This moment I went into a panic attack. The room became silent around me. I could see people talking, but I couldn't hear anything. I can still get myself to that place if I think about death too much. This sent me on a journey to research eastern religions and ultimately, land in Paganism. My issue with death is I don't know any of the proposed ideas around it. I don't like the idea of existing forever, but I also don't like the idea of not existing forever. To me they're the same thing. **It's**

the finality of it all and the inability to change any of it. I think about death at least once a week, if not more.

2.2. Q: Some tribes practice mortuary cannibalism. Should this be universally forbidden?

A1: I have a conflicted stance on this. I believe morals are set differently based on spirituality and while it would not work for me, I am aware that other cultures do this. I think my main concern would be from a scientific question of: "Is this healthy?." There are a lot of diseases that come from dead bodies whether they were diseased at the time of death or not and I'm sure there are practices in place to protect others, but it just seems that this could cause some issues with health.

A2: Very weird but again, I don't see anything "wrong" with it as long as that person dies for the sole purpose of being eaten. (Unless they wanted to, I guess.)

A3: Um, yeah that's gross.

A4: There is no such thing as objective morality so we shouldn't forbid the practice based on our moral laws alone. We know cannibalism is extremely dangerous but, yet again, introducing our knowledge into a secluded tribe that has nothing to do with modern civilization is **disruptive** of their own microenvironment. Moreover, it would create a higher moral dilemma by **"westernizing"** certain areas and forcing people to live in a way that it is impossible to get accustomed to.

A5: Personally, I don't believe that humans should consume humans. Perhaps the only exception where I'd cast a disturbed but understanding eye on the topic would be in cases where the custom of the sea called for it for strict purposes of survival in the event of extreme circumstances. From an ethical standpoint, not to mention the health hazards, eating people shouldn't be permitted. Just because something is considered acceptable in some tribes does not make it right. Poor example but racism is abominable but still thrives today. It's something most look on as wrong (as they should) but there are some that cling to their stubbornness. Just because a select few think it is tolerable does not mean that it is.

A6: Morals are like time—we made them up. I'm not going to partake in this ritual but again this is a tradition of another culture, and their beliefs differ from my own. **What aligns with my morals is not always going to match others.** In the end I don't think we get points taken away based on our actions but on our intent. If they are eating others they cared about with the idea they are doing good and are not hiding this tradition, and it's widely known—I don't think I can have a say on whether it should be condemned or not.

A7: It's hard to answer this question because cannibalism has been the greatest of all sins in our society. Don't get me wrong, I am not especially talking about religion here but more about our society and western world... Which is how the majority of humans live. I wouldn't say I disagree if it's their culture but in the meantime I can't imagine someone doing so.

A8: It's a cultural tradition and how they were raised so I wouldn't call it immoral. ALTHOUGH it is very unsafe and often leads to very serious illnesses so maybe it isn't a good idea. Maybe properly educating them might be a good idea.

A9: It is not against their moral law, as this is something they do and have done forever. In an **honorable** and **respectful** way. I don't think I would be willing to eat human parts, but that's because I've had a lifetime to be conditioned that cannibalism is bad.

A10: If that's how their funeral practices work and it's not hurting anybody then, no, I don't think it should be forbidden either. **You do you, boo.**

2.3. Q: In some cultures (e.g.: La Paz, Bolivia), people keep the skulls of their loved ones, decorate them, and place them in their homes as intermediaries between man and divinity. Do you believe this should be universally forbidden?

A1: Each culture has their own beliefs and traditions. These should not ever be banned; it takes away some essence of people's **self-identity** and culture.

A2: I'm jealous that I don't own a skull of a loved one.

A3: If that is something that they have been taught to practice for generations as a culture, then who are we to tell them that "they" are wrong? We as Americans are brought up to believe that embalming and burning a body is "normal." What if that's weird to them when viewing us? We can say that their practice is crazy for the skulls but to them Americans filling up a body with a crazy fluid mix to preserve it might be just as crazy sounding. Everyone has the right to do what they believe is right **within boundaries**.

A4: It's not something my culture has done but I believe other cultures should not be told how to carry out traditions and so I don't think it should be forbidden.

A5: That is **awesome**!

A6: While I could not stomach this as I am a tremendously emotional and sentimental person, I don't think that it is wrong. I believe that once a person dies, the body they once inhabited is nothing but flesh. We all inhabit bodies, but I don't believe it's the bodies that make us "us." Our soul/spirit, whatever you want to call it, defines

us. Once a person has passed, they're no longer residing in the body. From that view a corpse is just a body, and it shouldn't really matter if the skull is saved as a remembrance of that individual for those still living. I personally couldn't stomach this tradition for a loved one of my own as I believe it would be too painful a reminder of the loss. I guess to each their own, though.

A7: We do not have a single, united culture so it should not be universally forbidden. So often people are persecuted for their cultural practices by others who are ignorant.

A8: People should grieve how they wish. Saving your loved ones remains, however so, isn't necessarily a bad thing.

A9: Not necessarily. It's like keeping ashes, just **more metal**. Different folks, different strokes.

A10: Not at all. Death is personal, yet universal. I respect different grieving processes.

3. 35-54 years old

3.1. Q: After this survey, do you have any thoughts on death phobia and how we can accept our mortality?

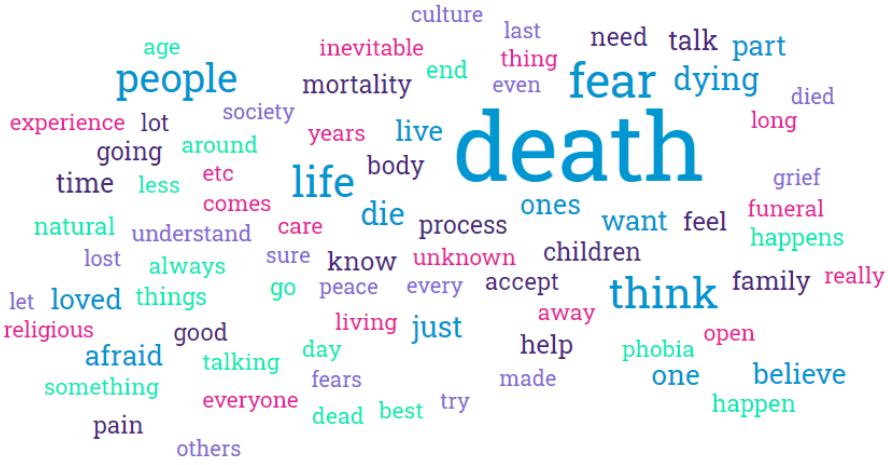

Fig. 26. Word cloud of all the answers for question 3.1. in the age group "over 35-54"

A1: I think **exposure** to death is the best way to soften the blow and reduce fear. Whether it is pets, family, wild animals, celebrities... The more we acknowledge it,

discuss it, and get as up close and personal as we individually can handle, the better we'll feel about it in the long run. I also strongly believe that time spent with the sick and/or elderly (nursing homes, hospitals, hospice), especially as children, imprints a sense of compassion and comfort with thoughts of death that nothing else can match.

A2: Well, I'm terminally ill... It's interesting how I see people are scared to talk about death especially at my age (38). I'm settled with my demise except for the unknown of when... Six weeks, six months, or six years!?

A3: Acceptance, we are all going to die. Just lost my dad, 18/01/21, terminal cancer. Talked a lot about it and his death and what he wanted. Fulfilled my promise of a home death, without pain and looked after by me. Decided to make the very best of the time he had left. Laughing right up to the end when he was wheeled out of his bedroom upright and I uttered, "Can you hear the lambs, Clarice?," before I could stop myself, I burst out laughing, God knows what the undertakers thought of me. Dad had the last laugh. **Finding the funny helps me**, life is ludicrous. Wrote a funny poem about the death of my dog too. Nobody talks about it in the UK. As a nurse/carer I have given many good deaths, satisfying, and privileged. I guess it's fear of the unknown, and the ridiculous notion that science and surgery can help us live forever young.

A4: As an animist, it appears that many people compartmentalize and avoid much of life, its phases, and transformation that occurs throughout. I wouldn't advise seeking solace or answers in a belief system, however developing a **healthy curiosity** in the natural world while questioning or attempting to **shed preconceptions** may lead to a greater appreciation for what it means to live. Both as a species among a vibrant spectrum of lifeforms, and as individuals together. P.S.: Thank you for caring to host this poll, and do check out Phillipe Aries' *The Hour Of Our Death*.

A5: As cliché as it sounds, death is as natural as birth, and both can be seen as traumatizing events, for the person in question and for the close ones. I think we live a century that promotes the fear of aging, and thus fear of death is even higher. But maybe this happens because of the very **ego-centered society** we live in. Maybe a less self-centered perspective could lead to a lower level of fear of death.

A6: Atul Gawande made a good case for **dying well**, his book had a lot of heart and humor. Having recently had major surgery (I'm fine now) the topic became more personal and I see that it is O.K. to relax into the unknown, maybe meditate because it helps with anxiety. If anything were to happen to me, my only hope is that my husband knows it's O.K. to move on and how much I love him.

A7: Compassion and respect for those dying is SEVERELY lacking. Covid-19 made this worse. Families are turned away from visiting their elderly in nursing homes as Covid patients are moved in. We are grouping the dying together away from public compassion in a criminally negligent way. Some people are afraid to leave their homes during this pandemic, others refuse to take basic precautions, siting their right not

to be inconvenienced trumps public health and safety. We are polarized between panic and narcissistic apathy.

A8: Every mind is different, and its capabilities differ widely depending on the personality or sensitivity of each person. Some people (including children) would be comfortable with talking about and participating in a death ritual (funeral). Others may be too sensitive and we do need to make allowances for both "feelings" to exist without shame and yet still find ways to be informative and inclusive. I am personally an atheist (lifelong, wasn't raised in religion). I've been contemplating my death since I was eleven. I read about other religions and philosophies which helped direct me into a good moral center without the need of dirties. I would love for there to be an afterlife of some sort but the realist in me knows only what I've seen and can actually know without speculation. I never seemed to fear death but at times welcomed it. I think for me it was the hope of an end to emotional pain. After the death of my best friend in 2018, I had a struggle with death and dying. I wanted an end to the pain; yet, at the same time I wanted to hope that maybe **our molecules would somehow collide again** and maybe we would be able to exist together again on some plane. It's what I would like to believe.

A9: I am afraid of pain and suffering that sometimes precedes death, but not afraid of death itself. I am also afraid of the grief that comes with losing a loved one or the grief my death will impose on others. I think the fear of death is the unknown of "what's next." Is it the absolute end? Reincarnation? Afterlife with a higher power? Whatever your beliefs are, it boils down to the fear of "Did I live this life well?." If we can be at peace with our time in this body, we can be at peace when it's time is through. As for the fear of someone else's death, it is so important to talk about it with your loved ones and know what will help them process the grief. For instance, I am not a fan of the "traditional" open casket funeral and would personally prefer to be cremated. But I have made it clear to my family that they should do whatever gives them closure and peace. After all, I will no longer be part of this body or world. A few years ago I had **the privilege of sitting with a loved one as she passed**, by her choice. This drastically changed my perception of death and is one of the most precious and beautiful moments I have ever experienced. My dear friend had been bedridden and on a ventilator/tracheostomy for many years. She was fully conscious and cognizant and her body had become painful. Her health deteriorated drastically and her daughter (who lived out of state) was told she needed to come ASAP. The daughter asked if I would stay with them at the hospital. The physicians gave her the options of remaining "as is" with perhaps six months life expectancy or choosing to remove the vent with full understanding of imminent death as she could not breathe on her own. She would be put under heavy sedation and pain medicine, have the vent unhooked and peacefully pass away in a short time. My friend chose to have the vent removed. It was a shock and devastating to her daughter. Because of the vent my friend couldn't speak and so we had a notepad to communicate. My friend said over and over how at peace she was to let this body go because she knew she had lived her best life. She had loved everyone wholeheartedly and did the best with whatever was in her path. The removal was

scheduled for the next morning so that she could say her goodbyes to all her children and grandchildren. When the time came, her daughter and I sat at her side and held her hands. When the meds were given, she drifted off to sleep and the vent was removed. Over the next 30 minutes we watched as her breathing slowed, her heart rate dropped and then she was gone. Again, the grief of loss was there but the fear was not. Because we knew she was at peace with the time she had on Earth. It was a profoundly beautiful moment to be at her side as she passed.

A10: I believe if we discuss our wishes and concerns with our loved ones during our lives, it will prepare us for each other's deaths. I was never taught to fear death (due in part to our faith), but my mom and I were always comfortable discussing the "just in case" or "when I die" scenarios. This brought me an amazing amount of peace when she passed unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm at the age of 45. I knew what her wishes were, I knew her favorite scriptures, hymns etc. I think this allowed me to prepare a memorial that would honor her to the best of my ability in the way she would have wished to be memorialized. She never wanted a sad service full of mourning, she was very much upbeat through all of life's challenges… As such, we played Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy!" at the end of her memorial. I will never forget the look of confusion on extended family and friends faces, thinking the funeral home may have made a terrible mistake… My brother, who was not as involved in our death discussion during her life, or the memorial planning, leaned over, squeezed my shoulder, and said "thank you." I think **there is a profound peace offered in honoring your loved one's personality and wishes regardless of what the societal norm of the time is**. As such, I have never shied away from discussing death as what it is, or my faith and beliefs with my little one. He is only five, but he has already attended several funerals of family members, as well as sitting beside his great grandmother in her last hours here on Earth (though we were not present when she passed). I have always been open and honest with what happens to their bodies, our emotions/grief process as survivors, and our faith in an afterlife as best as possible in age-appropriate explanation. He has always been a very curious child, and has asked me many times about my mom, what happened to her etc. (She passed three years before he was born, so he never got to meet her.) All in all, I believe if we have honest and respectful discussions with our loved ones, and especially our children, **we can help change the stigma around death fears**, and actually spread death positivity. I am forever grateful that my mom was so open and honest with me growing up and allowed me to feel comfortable in expressing my thoughts, beliefs, and emotions surrounding death. I also believe you can have a sense of humor in regard to death. I would never make light of someone's passing, or of a loved one's grief, but I do think **humor helps** us deal with things that are most difficult in life. For example, when my mom was still feeling the pressures of being embalmed (before she ultimately opted for cremation), she used to tell me to be sure she had her red lipstick on, and if she didn't, she would come back to haunt the embalmer/mortician who prepared her body. She also informed me that she did not want a sad, sullen funeral, and that her service music better have enough bass to bounce her casket from one side of the podium to the other!

3.2 Q: Some tribes practice mortuary cannibalism. Should this be universally forbidden?

A1: Being vegetarian I feel like a yes, but who am I to judge? As they have specific rituals around it. Would I be comfortable if it was a worldwide tradition... I'm not sure. It's not an easy topic to make your mind around or make up your mind at all. I just can think only of the mad cow disease and how it affects animals and humans, and how this practice could affect them.

A2: Disgusting? Yes. Forbidden? No.

A3: I think most of the Western world would find this to be grotesque but again I think each to their own and why should anyone outlaw practices of other cultures?

A4: It is against moral law. It should be universally forbidden so as to discourage people from doing it outside of rituals. I know if I tasted someone and they were delicious, I might want more, i.e.: Jeffrey Dahmer.

A5: No, because that obviously isn't against their moral laws, so who are we (or any outsiders to the tribe/familial group in question) to challenge them on their views and/or trying to impose our views on them? No, it shouldn't be forbidden. Just because I don't share their same beliefs (and have no intention of ever eating parts of people) doesn't mean it should be forbidden. It doesn't affect me (unless it's me they are wanting to eat parts of ?) and often times, as soon as something is "forbidden" there's typically an increase in people wanting to know more about it or actually participating in said action.

A6: Yes. Death carries immense spiritual power; unless you understand it, don't mess with it.

A7: Who am I to judge what another culture does with their dead? They may see putting a loved one in a box to stare at as odd. Does that mean we can universally ban wakes?

A8: While my religion forbids cannibalism and it's frowned upon in my culture, if their society doesn't have a problem with it, then allow it.

A9: No. It sounds more like against other cultural laws and that's a whole different conversation. Would I personally take part in that ritual… No.

A10: No. I feel the family should be able to do as they wish with the deceased. Only the family will truly know the deceased's wishes. I believe my wishes are illegal in many places, so we can't do them.

3.3. Q: In some cultures (e.g.: La Paz, Bolivia), people keep the skulls of their loved ones, decorate them, and place them in their homes as intermediaries between man and divinity. Do you believe this should be universally forbidden?

A1: I am divided on this. Does the person rest in peace because part of the body is missing? But I also like to have a part of them with me when they're gone.

A2: I have a skull of my first cat, so for me it is perfectly fine.

A3: If it is safe to do so then I do not see a problem with any religious ritual.

A4: Who are we to dictate what one culture does? They've been practicing these traditions long before there was a government to have an opinion about it.

A5: Whilst I think it's a bit creepy, if it's what they've done for centuries, why change it?

A6: People should be allowed to do whatever makes them feel most content and happy as long as it is safe.

A7: No, **everyone find acceptance in death differently**. I just believe they should have special place at home, not necessary spread all around the house. My mum has photos of my dad everywhere around the house since he passed, and she hasn't accepted his death after three years. She makes sure nothing changes much and has visual photos everywhere she sits. It probably gives her some comfort. From the outside, she's in denial, not coping and refusing any help moving forward. That's only the reason why I believe that, in your question, it should be a special place at home and not all around the house.

A8: No, if it is part of their culture then they should be allowed to continue, it may be strange to others, but it is their way of doing things.

A9: No, beliefs and religion are subjective. I don't believe it's right to judge or try to control someone else's beliefs or religious practices as long as no one is being harmed in the process.

A10: No, I think it's beautiful. Not everyone can take a photo.

4. 55-65 years old

4.1. Q: After this survey, do you have any thoughts on death phobia and how we can accept our mortality?

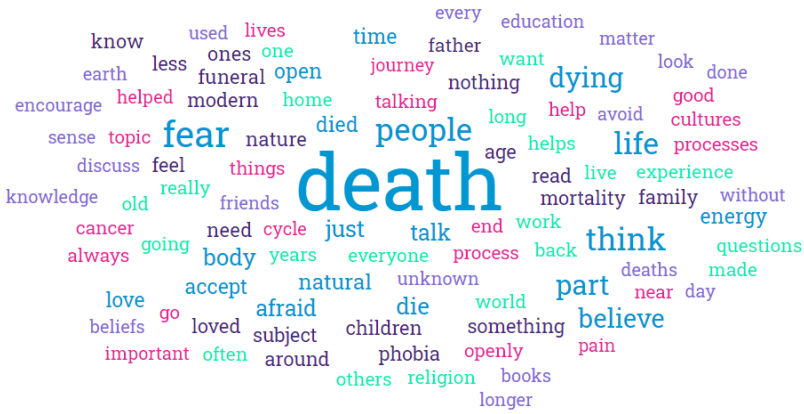

Fig. 27. Word cloud of all the answers for question 4.1. in the age group "55-65"

A1: Avoiding the subject, especially with kids, makes death more frightening. Kids don't need to see a relative die, but they should be **allowed to be curious** about it and to be spoken to with honesty. I'm a priestess of Hecate, so I've been dealing with this subject since my late 20s. I'm 62 now and sometimes feel melancholy that overwhelms me. But talking with others, reading, watching Caitlin helps to deal with it. Good survey. Best of luck to you!

A2: Be open to thinking about death. Discussing with friends and family. Offer to listen to the terminally ill without judgment. When I hear of **terminally ill** acquaintances, I often email them with the offer to listen or do errands or tasks they don't want to ask of family or friends. I stress that I am quite serious but will do or discuss humorous things as well.

A3: Both my grandparents and my mother **donated their bodies to science** when they died, and I plan on doing the same. I believe more people should do this because it helps in so many ways whether being used as donated tissue or organs or in gaining further knowledge in universities.

A4: Connecting people back to nature and cycles of death and dying in nature and animal world and that as human beings we are part of nature, not separate to it, no matter where we live on the planet. Knowing at a cellular level that **our soul lives beyond our body** dying supports surrendering to death.

A5: I am becoming less fearful of death due to caring for my mother-in-law and caring for her when she died due to cancer. My husband of 32 years died three months later from a heart attack, and I was there for that. His dad died three months later, I was not there for that. This was all last year. While I am **still grieving**, I have come to terms with their deaths. Also, we four had all lived together for 32 years.

A6: I am not as afraid of dying as I used to be as both my Mother and Father passed away in 2020, and I hope they would be waiting for me when it's my time to go. I **still struggle** with their deaths daily and miss them tremendously and also struggle with my beliefs as well regarding the hereafter.

A7: I believe that our soul lives on after our body dies and we have completed our purpose on earth. We then go back "home" (heaven) to reunite with family, friends and animals who have passed before us. Some of these loved ones are there when we take our last breath on this Earthly plain to join us on our journey back home. Many NDE experiencers describe lifting out of their body and looking down at themselves with no feelings of attachment to the body. They still feel like themselves but are free of the restrictive body. We don't die, just our vessel does. They also describe the weightlessness, pain-free, overwhelming sense of bliss and unconditional love they feel when they leave their body and visit the other side. Often describing beauty and colors unimaginable to our Earthly senses. Having read many books and done so much research on death and the afterlife, this is why I don't fear death. Although I was raised Catholic, I no longer identify with any organized religion. I am spiritual. I believe we are never alone and that we are always surrounded by guardians and angels. Life is not easy; we are all here to learn. **There is no judgement when we cross over**. I think this might be where fear of death stems from. Many religions are fear-based, manufactured constructs used to control and manipulate. This is why I'm not a fan of organized religion. No matter what our religious beliefs are, we will still be greeted with love when it's our time to cross over. We are all one.

A8: I believe that, since colonization and moving farther from nature and our connection to earth, we have also lost our sense of self and why we were put on earth to begin with. We can find death and rebirth in the natural world every day but very rarely in our modern world unless through disaster. We no longer kill our own food, grow our own vegetables, and preserve them, forage from nature's bounty and timeline or pay much attention to the cycles that should be a part of our everyday lives and the living beings that we witness. Incorporating and **celebrating** these yearly cycles would show us, I believe, the parallels between life/death, light/dark, feast/famine etc. on a more personal level and allow internalization.

A9: I have so many thoughts on this, being a breast cancer survivor (I was diagnosed in 2000 at age 35 when my first daughter was one) and losing my father from pancreatic cancer when I was 23 and he was 58, and losing many family members and friends to cancer. I have done a lot of thinking and spiritual work on death and dying so that I can honestly say I'm not afraid of it for myself, though I would be very sad to lose my teenage daughters! I have made several films, both fiction and nonfiction, that deal with this topic: most recently my film *Dandy Uncle Peter and Me*. Thank you so much for this very important work you're doing! **Death is a bogeyman** in this country. My father was born and raised in a small town in Italy and my husband was born and raised on a farm in Ireland; in both countries death is just part of the natural cycle of things and

is much more integrated into people's daily lives, and for this reason they are much less afraid of it.

A10: I was a paramedic for 15 years and witnessed many deaths or death pronouncements. My dying father was my patient. I was with my mother when she died, holding her hand and I closed her eyes. I feel that young children should not witness a loved one's death, but I think it helps an older child to process death… as long as it is a non-traumatic death. I do believe in OBE [out-of-body experience] and was included in a critically injured patient's OBE… she described seeing a blonde angel in blue surrounded by light… but repeated what I had said enroute to the hospital.

Q: Some tribes practice mortuary cannibalism. Should this be universally forbidden?

A1: As gross as it sounds, it is not our place to deny them their death rituals especially if they live in a far-flung part of the world that we don't have jurisdiction over.

A2: Let the tribe do what it does but it isn't for me. I would much rather eat chocolate.

A3: Don't feel it's my place to comment on other cultures traditions around death.

A4: I don't have a problem with it philosophically, but it concerns me that prion disease apparently can be spread by cannibalism of infected bodies.

A5: I don't know about moral law, but this concept grosses me out.

A6: I don't think it's something I could do. But I'm not sure it should be forbidden universally. I guess it's in what context?

A7: If this practice is part of the tribe's ritual and is it confined within the tribe only, I think there is nothing wrong with it.

A8: Interesting, but none of my business.

A9: Not a safe practice and should be forbidden.

A10: Well, it's against my morals but if it's their tradition, who am I to judge? I don't think there is any point in forbidding it. They would probably just do it anyway.

3.3 Q: In some cultures (e.g.: La Paz, Bolivia), people keep the skulls of their loved ones, decorate them, and place them in their homes as intermediaries between man and divinity. Do you believe this should be universally forbidden?

A1: Absolutely not! I find for instance the way death is dealt with in Mexico to be spiritual and healing and **inclusive**.

A2: I personally would not do that but if that is how you are raised (Amazon tribes, other Indigenous people) then who am I to push my beliefs or fears on anyone else?

A3: I think that keeping a skull is disgusting. Should be an urn, cremation.

A4: If that is historically part of their death rituals, it should not be denied to them by anyone.

A5: It's up to them how they treat their loved ones.

A6: No, of course not. Who is one culture to judge another?

A7: Who am I to interfere with tradition? To them it's showing respect.

A8: I don't care what weird things they do down there.

A9: I think it's an individual choice.

A10: It doesn't matter if it is forbidden or not. People are going to do whatever their beliefs are.

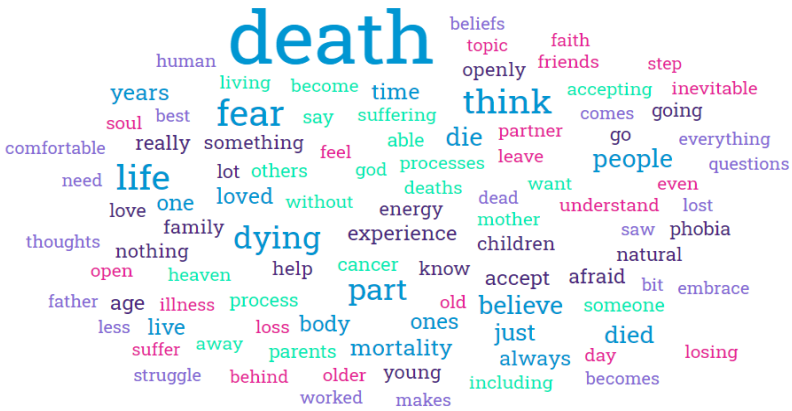

Fig. 28. Word cloud of all the answers for question 5.1. in the age group "over 65"

5. Over 65 years old

5.1 Q: After this survey, do you have any thoughts on death phobia and how we can accept our mortality?

A1: Although I don't want loved ones and friends dying, I do believe their soul was ready to leave this earth and that soul will reincarnate. The one question is (in the case of young people dying… WHY did they have to leave so young?) I guess it may be that we who are left here on earth also have karmic experiences to live out and losing a young person may be part of that experience. I lost a 24-year-old Grandson with muscular dystrophy through a septic episode and four months later a 26-year-old Granddaughter who was shot to death while someone was robbing her. Why did these two young souls have to leave so young?

A2: Having watched a man die slowly with COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease], I would not wish it on anyone; there needs to be more support for carers, and free counselling. Being face to face with death every day gives you a painful and traumatic knowledge of dying and mortality. We need more support to this **exposure**.

A3: I am a 65-year-old single woman and I have experienced a lot of **personal bereavement**: (not including the death of three of my grandparents) my sister-in-law died of a brain tumor in 1996 at 21, my mother died of lung cancer in 1999 at 62, my partner of 13 years died of bladder cancer in 2004 at 59, my partner of two years died of liver failure in 2009 at 61, my partner of four years died of prostate cancer in 2016, my brother died of a drug overdose in 2017 at 51, my mother-in-law died from a stroke in 2017 at 97 and my son died of peritoneal cancer in 2019 at 40. What perplexes me is how and why some people like me experience multiple painful losses while others seem to sail through life only losing grandparents and parents at the appropriate times. Jacky Kennedy comes to mind as a famous example of this kind of bad luck, Joe Biden also has had more than his fair share of tragedy. Would love to hear your thoughts on this.

A4: I don't believe in God, in the afterlife, or in salvation of any kind. I believe in the carbon cycle. When you are dead, you just cease to exist anywhere but in people's memories. But **your roses would benefit from your decomposing body**. There should not be a fear of the unknown as we just stop being. **The more superstitious you are, the more you believe in God, angels, fairies, or any other beings who are not real, the more you are going to worry about your death.**

A5: I have been diagnosed with heart issues, cancer, and life-threatening infections at various times. I have looked down the barrel of Death on several occasions. While I am not necessarily looking forward to it, I do not waste time dreading it. **I am secure in my Christian faith** and believe I will be redeemed in Heaven after death!

A6: I think as you age, you **naturally begin to accept death** with less fear. You've been through parents dying, maybe siblings, friends etc. It increasingly becomes a more common part of day-to-day life. As a younger person, we experience few deaths of others unless it's unfortunate accidents or a rare/random illness. With each decade,

people you know start to pass from a few a year, to a few a month. You watch your parents age and die. Also, for some, as age takes its toll physically and maybe mentally, death becomes more welcomed. Inevitability sets in gradually. When my boyfriend's grandma, who lives independently still and is reasonably well in mind and body (makes her own bed, does her own cooking etc.), turned 100 last month, I asked her "What now?". And her reply? "I wait." Not fatalistic, but **realistic**. That about says it all at some point, I think.

A7: Perhaps by talking more openly with someone like me who is facing it fairly soon because of age and poor health. Also talking to someone like me who has been widowed for three years and who's attitude is that they are done with being alone and feeling they have been left behind. **I am someone who is ready to pass on.**

A8: I belong to a Threshold choir (for the last 10 years) where we sing in a group of two or three at the bedside of dying or very ill people. I've also been present at both my parents' deaths (in their own home) with family and attended the death of my best friend. These experiences are filled with such **compassion and love**. I also highly recommend the Japanese film *Departures* for a very beautiful, funny, and intimate look at funeral and death culture. Many documentaries have helped too. I talk with my grown daughters and partner about death; it's sometimes harder for them but they are getting used to it. I don't fear death for myself except for any suffering it will cause my loved ones. And I suffer unnecessarily (suffer thinking about suffering!) when, in spite of myself, I contemplate the death of my children or grandchildren before me. It's about the **missing them**.

A9: I think you have to have a sense of "self"; if you are living your life with a sense of consciousness, I believe that you have a better sense of your place in the Universe. My only fear of dying relates to how much pain and suffering has to go on before I'm finally "gone"… I've watched my Dad, Mom, Aunt, Uncle and Cousin "fade" away and sometimes in great pain before their physical body actually was allowed to die. That's not right. The loss of meaningful, MEANINGFUL, ceremony has created more **confusion** and **fear**, in my view. We have continued to extend physical life without acknowledging the quality of that life extension.

A10: Demystify the death process and what happens in a mortuary.

5.2 Q: Some tribes practice mortuary cannibalism. Should this be universally forbidden?

A1: While I'm uncomfortable with the idea, I don't see this practice as being against moral law. Beliefs and practices are cultural and important to those practicing the rites.

A2: They should be allowed to do what they choose.

A3: Yes. Immoral and prion disease.

A4: No… it's their culture! Not for me to intervene.

A5: It's against OUR moral law, we have no right to tell them what to do if it's their culture.

A6: If it's their culture and it's not harming anyone it's up to them, but it would be repellent to me.

A7: I don't feel people outside the tribe have the right to judge.

A8: I guess to them it's an act of love. No, it shouldn't be forbidden.

A9: Forbid this!

A10: No. I believe in freedom and respect.

5.3 Q: In some cultures (e.g.: La Paz, Bolivia), people keep the skulls of their loved ones, decorate them, and place them in their homes as intermediaries between man and divinity. Do you believe this should be universally forbidden?

A1: Follow your own traditions.

A2: I cannot see why it should be forbidden. Once we died, we aren't there physically any longer.

A3: I think they should be allowed to keep their tradition.

A4: People can do what they want.

A5: Should not be forbidden. Each culture should have the right of their beliefs.

A6: We should not try to change other cultures beliefs if is not harmful to anyone.

A7: No comment.

A8: No, it's their culture. Just because we are uncomfortable with it doesn't make it wrong. They would see our fear and lack of rituals as appalling.

A9: To each their own.

A10: No, it is cultural in nature.

Survey interpretation and findings

This comprehensive global survey (2021, $N = 4{,}622$) explores contemporary attitudes toward death, mortality, and cultural rituals across regions, age groups, and education levels. Below is a structured analysis of key findings, supported by quantitative data and qualitative responses.

1. Demographic Overview

- **Regions**: 62.7% of respondents were from Northern America, followed by Eastern Europe (11.2%) and Western Europe (8.5%). Smaller regions (e.g., Southern Africa, Central Asia) had representation below 1%.
- **Age Groups**: Even distribution across 15–24 (23.8% religious), 25–34 (68.3% non-religious), 35–54, 55–65, and 65+ (46% religious).
- **Education**: Most respondents had higher education (e.g., bachelor's or postgraduate degrees), suggesting informed perspectives.

2. Key Quantitative Findings

A. Yes/No/IDK Questions

- **Religiosity**: Non-religious responses peaked in the 25–34 group (68.3%). Older adults (65+) were more religious (46%).
- **Afterlife Belief**: 75.5% of 55–65-year-olds believed in an afterlife, the highest among age groups.
- **Death Humor**: Over 90% across ages found humor about death *not* disrespectful (e.g., 95.9% of 35–54-year-olds).
- **Children Witnessing Death**: Support increased with age (61.6% of 65+ agreed).
- **Modern Fear of Death**: 70% of 55–65-year-olds believed modern humans fear death more than ancestors.

B. 1–5 Scale Questions

- **Fear of Death**: Highest in younger groups (avg. 2.89 for 25–34) and lowest in 65+ (avg. 2.16).
- **Fear of Loved Ones' Death**: Consistently higher than fear of one's own death (avg. 4.35 for 15–24).

- **Funeral Preparedness**: Willingness to handle a loved one's body increased with age (avg. 3.85 for 55–65).
- **Green Burials/Exposing Children to Funerals**: Strong support across ages (avg. 4.35 and 4.07, respectively).

3. Qualitative Themes

A. Coping with Mortality

- **Younger Groups (15–34)**: Used humor, curiosity, and media desensitization ("*laughing helped us grieve*"; "*death isn't taboo anymore*").
- **Middle-Aged (35–54)**: Emphasized exposure and open dialogue ("*children need to discuss death early*").
- **Older Adults (55+)**: Focused on spirituality, acceptance, and legacy ("*soul lives beyond the body*"; "*I wait*").

B. Cultural Rituals

- **Mortuary Cannibalism**: Mixed views. Younger respondents leaned toward cultural relativism ("*their traditions, their choice*"), while older adults cited health risks ("*prion diseases*").
- **Skull Preservation (e.g., Bolivia)**: Most supported cultural autonomy ("*who are we to judge?*"), though some found it unsettling.

C. Generational Shifts

- **Youth**: More likely to engage with death via books/media (88.1% of 25–34 would read realistic depictions).
- **Elders**: More comfortable with physical proximity to death (e.g., preparing bodies).

4. Conclusions

1. **Death Positivity Movement**: The survey reflects growing acceptance of death discussions, driven by generational differences in coping mechanisms (humor vs. spirituality).
2. **Cultural Tolerance**: Most respondents rejected universal bans on rituals, advocating respect for diversity.
3. **Fear Disparities**: Fear of loved ones' death outweighed fear of personal mortality, suggesting emotional bonds amplify dread.
4. **Practical Recommendations**:
    - Normalize death education for children.

- Foster intergenerational dialogue to bridge gaps in attitudes.
- Support culturally sensitive end-of-life practices.

Final Note: The study highlights a global shift toward death acceptance, though age and culture shape perspectives profoundly. Open conversations and exposure to death rituals may further reduce stigma.

Data Limitations: Overrepresentation of Northern American/Western European respondents; qualitative themes are illustrative but not exhaustive.

Conclusions

Over the past few years, there has been a noticeable shift in society towards accepting and embracing death positivity. Regardless of age or educational background, people seem to be making a conscious effort to confront and understand death, rather than shying away from it due to fear or discomfort. Interestingly, people tend to be more apprehensive about the death of their loved ones than their own mortality.

This trend is particularly evident in how different generations deal with death and dying. The younger generation, for instance, seems to use humor as a coping mechanism when discussing death, whereas the older generation is more accepting of being in close proximity to a dead body or even handling it. This suggests that there is a generational difference in how people approach death and dying, which is worth exploring further.

It is heartening to note, however, that people are generally non-judgmental towards the death rituals of others. They recognize that cultural and religious differences play a crucial role in how people approach death and mourning, and they are respectful of these differences. This shows that people are becoming more accepting of diverse cultural practices, which is a positive step forward for society.

Moreover, the suggestions that respondents made for dealing with death phobia were insightful and thought-provoking. They emphasized the importance of having open and honest conversations about death and mortality, and the need for a support system in place. They also recommended seeking out professional help if one is struggling to come to terms with death. These recommendations are essential, as they can help people overcome their fear and discomfort around death.

Overall, this study serves as a testament to the fact that the death positivity movement is gaining momentum and eroding the taboo associated with discussing death and mortality. People are becoming more open to talking about death, and they are recognizing the importance of confronting their mortality. This shift in mindset is paving

the way for more open and honest conversations, which is a positive step forward for society as a whole.

Final conclusion

Creative nonfiction works that focus on death acceptance play a crucial role in helping individuals understand and embrace their mortality. These thought-provoking narratives and introspective accounts challenge societal taboos and encourage conversations about death that lead to personal growth and a greater appreciation for the value of life. By embracing the inevitability of death, individuals can find solace, make meaningful connections, and experience a profound shift in perspective. Death-acceptance creative nonfiction empowers individuals to confront their fears, surpass cultural barriers, and engage in a more compassionate and fulfilling existence. Through a continued exploration of the various facets of death acceptance through this genre, individuals have the potential to transform their relationship with mortality, enrich their lives, and inspire others to embark on their own journey towards death acceptance.

It serves as a powerful tool for individuals who are afraid of death, offering them an avenue to explore and navigate their fears in a meaningful way. It makes us less lonely in our quest for answers and, more than that, it creates a type of intimacy between us and a writer who acts as a friend and who promises us that everything written down is true. In today's world, we lack emotional connection with people around us, and perhaps this is the conclusion that we were meant to reach all along: creative nonfiction is the answer to modern man's loneliness. Of course, loneliness is not the only factor contributing to our increasing death phobia, but it is definitely one of the most prevalent, especially (and paradoxically) in young people. By connecting with the others, by sharing our fears and anxieties, we see that we are not alone in our pain and we might find some meaning in our lives, and thus, in our deaths.

Through the lens of personal stories and real-life experiences, creative nonfiction allows readers to connect with the raw and authentic emotions associated with mortality. By presenting true narratives, this genre offers a sense of relatability, helping individuals realize that their fears and anxieties surrounding death are shared by others. Furthermore, creative nonfiction encourages introspection and self-reflection, giving readers the opportunity to confront their fears and thoughts about mortality. By immersing themselves in these narratives, individuals can gain new perspectives, find solace, and gradually develop a sense of acceptance and understanding towards the inevitable. Creative nonfiction empowers individuals to confront their fears of death, fostering a more open and honest dialogue about mortality and ultimately contributing to personal growth and well-being.

The fear of death is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that modern society experiences, stemming from cultural and societal influences, personal experiences, and existential fears. This fear has resulted in a range of responses and behaviors, from avoidance and denial to obsession and anxiety. While it is natural for individuals to harbor a certain level of trepidation towards death, it is essential to recognize the adverse effects of excessive death phobia on our quality of life, mental well-being, and capacity to embrace life's uncertainties. By cultivating a healthier relationship with death and engaging in open and honest discussions, modern society can begin to navigate the existential dilemma of mortality with greater acceptance, wisdom, and resilience.

Modern man's fear of death has become increasingly prevalent in the twenty-first century, with many individuals struggling to come to terms with their own mortality. In a society that values materialism and individualism, the idea of death is often seen as an inconvenient interruption to the constant pursuit of personal success and happiness. This, coupled with the decline of traditional religious beliefs and community structures, has led to a sense of isolation and separateness that exacerbates fear of death. Furthermore, advances in medicine and technology have given people the illusion of control over their own mortality, leading to a denial of death and an avoidance of the difficult emotions that come with it. As a result, modern man's fear of death has become a pervasive and deeply ingrained phobia that affects individuals on a personal and societal level.

There are several causes behind modern man's fear of death. At its core lies a fundamental human desire for self-preservation and a fear of the unknown. In addition to this, cultural influences and societal pressures play a significant role. The emphasis on youth, beauty, and productivity perpetuated by media and advertising creates unrealistic and unattainable standards that fuel fear of ageing and the decline of the body. Similarly, the glorification of violence and war in popular culture reinforces a sense of doom and mortality. The lack of open and honest communication around death and dying also contributes to fear. The medicalization of death, where individuals often die in hospitals rather than at home surrounded by loved ones, further adds to a sense of alienation from death. Combined, these factors create a climate in which modern man's death phobia is able to thrive.

Death-acceptance literature has emerged as an important and thought-provoking genre in contemporary Western literature. In a society that often avoids discussing death, these literary works provide a platform for exploring and coming to terms with the inevitability of mortality. By examining death from various perspectives, authors encourage readers to confront their fears, reflect on the meaning of life, and appreciate the fleeting nature of our existence. This literature serves as a reminder that death is an integral part of the human experience and invites readers to embrace a more accepting

and holistic worldview. Through its exploration of the themes of loss, grief, and the afterlife, death-acceptance literature offers a valuable opportunity for personal growth and introspection. It allows individuals to confront their mortality and to contemplate their own legacies, ultimately fostering a greater understanding and acceptance of the fragility and preciousness of life.

Caitlin Doughty's pursuit of death positivity is a remarkably compelling and necessary approach that challenges society's often fear-driven and death-denying attitudes. As a mortician, author, and public speaker, Doughty urges individuals to embrace death as an intrinsic part of life and to engage with it in a more open and meaningful way. Her advocacy for alternative funeral practices, such as natural burials and home funerals, not only emphasizes the importance of environmental sustainability but also allows individuals and their loved ones to actively participate in the process of honoring and saying goodbye to the deceased. By questioning the norms and creating spaces for open conversations about death, Doughty empowers individuals to confront their mortality, fostering richer and more compassionate connections with one another.

Moreover, Doughty's unflinching discussions about death and dying provide a counterbalance to the often sanitized and commercialized portrayal of death in mainstream culture. By challenging the prevailing notions of beauty and perfection, she encourages individuals to embrace the reality of their mortality and appreciate the unique stories that each life holds. Through her work, Doughty dismantles the stigma surrounding death and presents an alternative narrative that celebrates life's finitude.

Ultimately, Caitlin Doughty's death positivity movement compels individuals to reevaluate their relationship with death, encouraging them to approach it with curiosity, acceptance, and even celebration. By embracing death as an intrinsic and meaningful part of life's journey, individuals can foster a society that is more compassionate, connected, and appreciative of the preciousness of every moment they have. This shared human experience can be navigated with greater acceptance and wisdom, leading to personal growth and a more fulfilling existence.

Caitlin Doughty has been a prominent figure in the death-positivity movement, inspiring individuals to confront and change their relationship with death. Her impact on the movement has been sweeping and multifaceted, spanning various forms of media and outreach. As a funeral director, author, and television host, Doughty has helped to demystify death, debunking myths and taboos surrounding it. Her work encourages individuals to accept death as a natural and normal part of life, freeing them from fear and anxiety. By promoting open and honest conversations about death, Doughty's message has resonated with a diverse group of people, inspiring individuals to connect with their own mortality and take control of their dying and grieving processes.

Doughty's impact on the death-positivity movement can be attributed to her unique and radical approach to death. She founded "The Order of the Good Death," a collective of professionals working to change the culture of death, where they discuss and explore alternative funerary practices and rituals. She has written several books, including *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory*, and *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, which have reached a broad audience. Moreover, in 2011, she launched the wildly popular YouTube series "Ask a Mortician", which provides accessible and informative answers to questions about death and dying. Doughty has also helped establish death literacy (the knowledge and skills needed to navigate death) that when put into practice can assist individuals experiencing grief and death anxiety.

Finally, Doughty's impact on the death-positivity movement can be summed up by her advocacy and contribution to changing the narrative of death. Doughty uses her platform to challenge the status quo, speaking out against the profit-driven funeral industry and advocating for alternative, eco-friendly funerary practices. Her message empowers individuals to take ownership of their own deaths, encouraging them to view death as a liberating inevitable process rather than something to be feared and avoided. Doughty's work continues to inspire a new generation, giving voice to a growing movement of people demanding change and showing the way for a more positive relationship with death.

H umor is a defining characteristic of Caitlin Doughty's writing style in her books. Although the subject matter of death and dying can be perceived as morbid or depressing, Doughty uses her comedic voice to break down barriers and normalize these taboo topics. Her use of humor can help to make her writing more accessible and inviting to audiences that may feel uncomfortable discussing death. Doughty often uses sarcasm and wit to address serious issues, making her work both entertaining and informative. By incorporating humor into her writing, Doughty shows that death can be approached in a way that is both respectful yet playful, ultimately contributing to the death-positivity movement and helping individuals come to a more accepting relationship with death and dying.

Caitlin Doughty's work is characterized by cultural sensitivity, particularly in her books and videos that address funerary practices from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As a proponent of death-positivity and a critic of the Western funeral industry, Doughty emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness and respect in approaching death and dying. Her work individuals to view death from a diverse range of perspectives while emphasizing that there is no one right way to grieve or honor one's loved ones. Throughout her videos and books, Doughty takes great care to investigate, understand and present different cultural approaches to death sensitively, without appropriation or insensitivity. Overall, Doughty's thoughtful and culturally sensitive

approach has helped to create a welcoming space where individuals of different backgrounds can explore and learn about death and dying without fear of being disregarded or misunderstood.

In the coming years, there is the potential for a significant shift in death phobia. Society's perspective on death and dying has been evolving, and the death-positivity movement is gaining traction. As more individuals engage in open conversations about mortality, challenging the taboo surrounding death, the fear and phobia associated with it may decrease. With increased education and exposure to diverse cultural approaches to death, people may develop a healthier and more accepting attitude towards the end of life. Additionally, advancements in technology and medical practices may continue to impact the way we experience death and the dying process, potentially alleviating some fears. Although it is impossible to predict the future with certainty, the ongoing efforts to promote death-positivity and foster a more open dialogue around death offer hope for a reduction in death phobia in the years to come.

In conclusion, the importance of this paper on Caitlin Doughty's death-acceptance literature lies in its ability to highlight the significance of initiating discussions about death and dying. Through her work, Doughty has emphasized that the societal taboo surrounding death must be challenged, and we must examine our feelings and perspectives on death to create a more positive and informed approach towards death. By depicting the subject matter as accessible and approachable, Doughty's unique writing style has enabled her to engage with an array of audiences, including those who may be uncomfortable discussing death. This paper has affirmed that Doughty's death-acceptance literature is a valuable contribution towards raising death awareness and encouraging readers to embrace an alternative perspective and attitude towards death.

Moreover, by shining a light on the cultural sensitivity and pragmatic approach that characterizes Doughty's work, this paper emphasizes the need for more research and dialogue towards various cultural beliefs and practices related to death. As cultural backgrounds and beliefs differ vastly across the world, an exploration of the funerary practices of different cultures can be crucial. Therefore, this paper may serve as a starting point for further research on the topic and provide insight into how literature can serve as a medium for advancing death awareness and can serve as an impetus for future works to deepen our understanding of death and dying.

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