

What is Life? What is Death?

by Brent Jang

Dying patients need to know that they are not being abandoned, says a renowned Los Angeles psychologist.

Dr. Herman Feifel told a capacity crowd in the Law Centre that dying patients do not expect miracles but they do want the feeling of being cared for. He said death seldom occurs in the home like in the 1800's. Rather, death today "resides in an antiseptic, impersonal type of setting."

"It's important that we die the death of a human being. It's time death education took its proper role in our lives," said Feifel at last week's *Canada, the World and the Future Conference*.

Feifel, who works at the VA Outpatient Clinic in Los Angeles, says when someone dies, there are both tremendous feelings of anger and of relief. On one hand, the "survivors are left high and dry," and on the other, there's the feeling that the survivors no longer have to go through with stressful hospital visits.

"Death is what it means to be human," he said.

A second speaker, Dr. Paul Rosenblatt, agreed with Feifel in determining the line between the questions "What is life? What is Death?"

"You can't address one without addressing the other. We're coloured by this

vulnerability to death. People are important to us and are part of what gives life meaning," said Rosenblatt, a professor of family social science from the University of Minnesota.

Rosenblatt said grief never really ends: "We really don't write-off the people we've been attached to."

Feifel said grief represents a deep psychological need. "Family



Dr. Herman Feifel.

members are considered part of the treatment team. The first year (after a death) is a crucial year."

The Los Angeles psychologist said many medical students enter the profession to get a hold on death. However, there are limits to "how omniscient a doctor is at this stage of the (medical) game." He said modern medicine places emphasis on finding cures, but is neglecting the civil liberties involved when a person is dying or is old.

"We don't even trust them (the elderly) with a dollar to buy a quart of milk at the corner store," said Feifel.

"A death reminds us of our own personal mortality. When one's mother and father dies, the bell tolls for thee."

Rosenblatt said there is an oscillating quality in the fear of death. If one has a lot of things planned, then they say, 'please, don't let me die now.' But if things are going so smoothly, there's less of a fear. Rosenblatt was worried about the arms race, saying "it's only been in my lifetime that we can eliminate all life."

Feifel said the "way to fend off (global) death, is not to take those steps in the first place."

"We live in a culture that is very youth conscious. Death is an abomination. It is the antithesis of what we uphold. The older the person is and the more religious

the person is, the more benign that death seems."

"The modern professional's role of omniscience is being removed," he said.



Dance performance in Life and Death issues portion of a week-long *Canada, the World, and the Future* conference.

Why do children have to die?

by Cheryl Parsons

The subject of a child's death, the third in a series of death-related discussions, was held in the Law Centre on Friday.

Conducted by three panelists, the topic "Why do Children have to Die" was dealt with from different viewpoints.

University of Minnesota Professor of Death Education and Research Robert Fulton looked at dying from a general position.

He asked the question "Why do people have to die?"

Said Fulton, "Huge amounts of time and money are expended keeping the young alive while the old are encouraged to die."

He felt society was obsessed by youth and viewed it as a declining resource.

"For the first time the elderly have a monopoly on death," commented Fulton, referring to the phenomenon of increased life expectancy.

Fulton also noted the change in attitude towards death. "This is the first death-insulated generation in the world," he said. "Most people can reach their twenties undisturbed by death."

We see death as coming from either our own hand or the hand of another.

Many of our attitudes on dying, says Fulton, have been socialized by the media.

For the average person, death takes three forms. First, it is reversible; this is depicted by cartoon characters on television. Secondly, all death is fantasy; the actual body is rarely seen. Finally; death is seen at a distance.

Said Fulton, "these attitudes lead us to view death as something extraneous to life rather than a cycle of it."

Director of the Centre for Bioethics in Montreal, David Roy, addressed the main question more directly.

"The question should be," he said, "When should children be allowed to die?"

Roy suggested that ethics be

left out of the clinic when not backed up by sound clinical experience.

"I've been accused of having ethics but not principles," he wryly said. "However, I feel that one must match the case to the principle."

"I like to put each case on a curve of moral tolerance," said Roy. "For example, an abortion for a raper 12-year old will fall higher up on the curve than for a couple who don't want to postpone their trip to France for a month."

Dr. Roy described several cases of children born with severe mental and physical handicaps. He was concerned with the lack of information parents received and the limited role they played in deciding their children's future.

As criterion for aggressive treatment, Roy drew the line when it only prolonged life or left a very limited level of development.

"If the child can make good progress mentally and physically, then aggressive treatment should be administered," he said.

Dr. Judy McTavish of the Department of Pediatrics at the Cross Cancer Institute spoke on the program for terminally ill children.

With the aid of a slide-show, she stressed the importance of education for all members of the sick child's family.

"It's very important to communicate with the dying child," she said. Questions such as "How will I find the sandbox in heaven" need to be handled with tact and honesty."

McTavish says allowing the child to die at home is becoming the norm. Despite obstacles to this alternative, it allows for an easier death for the child, and less bewilderment for the family.

McTavish encouraged letting life continue as normally as possible and making the most of remissions.

Death: A celebration

by Bonnie Zimmerman

"Death: A Celebration" wasn't a party where everyone dies.

It was a special performance of music, dance, and poetry readings held last week as part of the Life and Death Issues portion of the week long *Canada, the World and the Future Conference*.

The night began with men in

tuxedos performing German songs about death. Harold Wiens has a very powerful voice.

The poetry reading by William Meilen was passionate. He chose his readings to go with his Anglo-Welsh heritage - mostly

Dylan Thomas. His accent and presentation made the poetry very interesting to listen to. His conclusion "and death shall have no dominion" seemed to express the

overall view that he took of death.

The dance portion was rather disappointing. The music didn't really correspond to the dances and the shuffling and banging of their feet on the floor was almost as loud as the music.

The dancers did look as though they were capable of better with more preparation.

It was all very cultured though, as would befit a celebration of death.



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