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Editor’s Note

The History of Death

It is a pleasure to announce the release of the second issue of the Journal of Humanistic Psychiatry. Fortunately for our journal, there are several new members who have decided to join our editorial office and board. While our last issue was centered in the history of psychiatric treatment, this issue will explore the history of death and dying among human existence. Death anxiety and human mourning have always been parallel to human existence. Collective denial is a defense to the existential anxiety provoked by the knowledge of an irreversible death. This denial is challenged every time someone that is close to us dies. The loss of loved ones can cause profound sadness. Arguably, the origins of human mourning took place 300,000 years ago by Homo Heidelbergensis in Atapuerca, Spain (Figure).

In this issue, our frontpage depicts a 14th century miniature of Death visiting a moribund. The image is discussed in our icons of psychiatry section. In the same section, the history of the mausoleum at Halicarnassus is analyzed. This funerary monument was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In our section for commentaries, we included an essay about Frida Khalo’s painting “Broken Column.” In our articles section, “Death as an Art of Creation” discusses the concept of death and spiritual beliefs of ancient Egyptians. “The Triumph of Death” analyzes the depiction of death in Italy during the Middle Ages. “Between Life and Death” describes the phenomenology of near death experiences and their correlation with recent neuroscientific knowledge on neuronal death. Finally, in our cinema and psychiatry section, death, dying and fear are explored through the films of Woody Allen, Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Simon Pegg and Michael Haneke.

Figure: Sima de los Huesos, Arguably the first human burial, Homo Heidelbergensis, Atapuerca, Spain

Fernando Espi Forcen, M.D.
It was generally believed in the Late Middle Ages that Death visited people when they died. The visit of Death didn’t imply that the deceased would either go to heaven or hell. Death visited equally everyone with no consideration for age, sex, condition, power or social rank. In every historical period, there seems to have been a way to represent Death. Egyptians chose a beast of different animal forms, as we will see in the first article of the present number. In Greco-Roman culture, Death was depicted as a winged genius with a funerary urn in one hand and a burning torch in the other. An iconography that was sometimes maintained during the Middle Ages, especially in Italy where the influence of classical tradition was more prominent than anywhere else. Nonetheless, in the Late Middle Ages Death assumed several forms until its representation was generally defined with the figure of a skeleton. As we will further analyze on the article “The Triumph of Death in Late Medieval Italian Painting,” Death had sometimes the form of a skeleton, but it could also be a bat-winged ghostly female figure or an old woman. The image on the cover of this number presents Death with two of her most popular attributes, a scythe and a coffin, visiting a moribund in his very last moment. Death is a putrid and half decomposed figure; she is dressed like a monk and can’t help to crack a macabre smile that will later characterize her in the 15th century iconographic cycles of the Dance of Death.

References:
Mausolus and the First Mausoleum at Halicarnassus

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Many of the significant monuments of the ancient world are classified as funerary art. Perhaps no other tomb has been more universal than the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

King Mausolus ruled the region of Caria under the Persian dominion from 377 to 353 B.C.E. Despite being Persian, he spoke Greek and was fascinated by Greek art and culture. Mausolus moved the capital from Mylasa, a hilltown to Halicarnassus on the Aegean Sea Coast. He improved the harbor, built a fortified castle and surrounded the town with walls and watchtowers. According to some historians he also controlled the region of Lycia, Knosos in Crete and the Aegean Islands of Rhodes, Chios and Cos. (1)(2)(3) He conceived the idea of building a tomb for himself and his wife Queen Artemisia-who was also his sister-but he died shortly after the project was started. Artemisia continued to see the project through and hired two of the most important architects of ancient Greece for the design of her deceased husband. These architects were Satyrus and Pythius of Priene. For the sculptural reliefs she hired Leochares, Bryaxis, Scopas of Paros and Timotheus. The tomb was finished sitting atop a hill overseeing the city. (1)(2)

The mausoleum consisted of three sections: The bottom was rectangular and measure approximately 120x100 feet and stood 60 feet high. Each step of this level was covered by statues depicting historical events and Greek mythological scenes. The second section had 36 columns with statues filling the spaces. The columns of this level were 38 feet tall. Inside the colonnade was the burial chamber protected by stone lions. The colonnade supported a 22 feet pyramid. On the top of the pyramid there was a chariot with King Mausolus and Queen Artemisia pulled by four horses. The total height of the monument was 140 feet. (1)(3)(4)(5)

After Alexander the Great conquered Halicarnassus in 334 BC, the city gradually declined in importance. However the mausoleum was identified by Antipater of Sidon as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Today, the word mausoleum is used generically for any above ground tomb. (1)(2)

The structure was demolished by an earthquake in the 13th century AD. In early 15th century the Christian knights of Saint John arrived in the area and found it in ruins. They used the remnants to build the medieval castle of Bodrum and later a British expedition in 19th century excavated the site. (1)(2) Today, the massive statues of King Mausolus and Queen Artemisia have been restored and can be seen at the British Museum in London.

References
1. Chadie Kruger, Fit for king, Calliope, 10507086, Sep 2006, Vol 17, Issue 1
3. English School In: Look and Learn; The Mausoleum at Halicarnasus, Private Collection; 20th Century.
When I became acquainted with Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and her art, I was about 19 years old. For me, it was love at first sight. Her face, her personality, her art, the story of her life, all those things captivated me. Ms. Kahlo wanted to be a physician, when she was young, but she suffered a horrible traffic accident, at age 18. She survived, miraculously, though not without a broken back, multiple fractures, and a penetrating wound to her abdomen. In bed for a long time, and out of boredom, she started to paint. And she became the wonderful artist we know now.

Many of her paintings have medical themes. As a medical student, I found them also interesting and courageous, since they were about her own medical problems, and in a time when this was likely to cause scandal. But no painting of hers struck me like “The Broken Column” did. Before I started training in Psychiatry, I loved that painting. But then I got my training and ended up specializing in Consultation-Liaison Psychiatry. When I see that painting now, I continue to love it. But the difference is that now so many things catch my interest as a C/L Psychiatrist: the expressionless face, albeit with tears (I learned, in my fellowship, that people with chronic pain often times seem as if they are not in pain). I love how she conveys that her pain is all over her body, represented by nails precisely distributed, some bigger than others... invading even the sheets. What is that about? Dysesthesias, that produce pain in your body when the sheets touch it? A symbol to convey the pervasive power of pain to invade your life, even your most intimate spaces? Both of these? And more?

Then we have the arid landscape in the back. Void...dry...broken. Is this Pain Country? Endless, limitless...for ever? Is this the hopelessness of chronic pain that makes pain patients, sometimes, consider suicide? (I remember how the very few patients that requested physician-assisted suicide, during my fellowship, had also severe pain and how, after a pain consultation and intervention those suicidal ideas quickly disappeared).

Then the column. Broken in many places, grossly put together but still holding her, her head neatly resting on top of it, maybe intimately connected to the idea of pain all over. And why a classic column, precisely in a woman that would not hesitate to paint body organs...Why a classic column? The fact that in Spanish the word used for spine is more commonly “column” (columna) is NOT, I think, the main reason for her choice. Is this a small homage to Art itself, as the one thing that keeps her going, that supports her? Her new spine?

And finally her face. Looking straight at you, with her dignity intact, supported precisely by that broken column, as if telling you “yes, this is who I am now”. Her hair flowing freely (in normal life she frequently wore it beautifully arranged, in the way humble Mexican women, indian specially, used to wear it).

Something about the whole painting conveys the idea of acceptance. Acceptance, which is, so often, the main psychological challenge for patients in the C/L setting. A serene acceptance. No denial here, as her tears (and the broken column) remind you, Just acceptance.

I can’t help it but to think, after looking at this painting again, how a wonderful physician she might have become, if fate had not gotten in the way. And, why not, maybe even a wonderful Psychiatrist?
Death as an Act of Creation: Funerary Beliefs in Ancient Egypt

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Ancient Egyptian civilization was characterized by a highly ritualized and sacramental society. The Greek historian Herodotus mentioned in the 5th century B.C. that there were no other people in the world as religious as the Egyptians. The Hebrew Talmud also recognizes the special religiousness of the Egyptians by stating that nine of the ten parts of human magic belong to the Egyptians. The vast quantity of Egyptian objects left behind proves that death and the afterlife were highly revered by Ancient Egyptians. With the exception of the Greco-Roman mysteries, no religion predating Christianity had regarded death as a means of hope. Egyptians believed that after death the deceased went on a journey full of obstacles until he or she finally reached a god-like status, thus turning into an Osiris, the Egyptian god for the dead. Whereas Greeks and Babylonians assumed that after death the soul would wander eternally in an inferior world, Egyptians believed in the ideas of regeneration of the individual and eternal life. These concepts are fundamentally expressed through analogies. One of them has to do with the cycle of the Sun which dies and is reborn daily; this is related to the god Re. The other analogy has to do with the natural cycle of harvest, which likewise dies and reappears. This is related to the god Osiris. Existence is thereby not permanent, but a process of continuous renovation. Funerary literature combines these two myths in an attempt to explain death as a path to a higher existence.

Death was viewed in Ancient Egypt from two different perspectives. The so-called monistic view regards death as a primary condition that guarantees the eternal life. Death belongs to creation and is a necessary step to reach the eternal life. On the other hand the dualistic view sees death as a feared enemy, which is a conception shared by most cultures in the history of humankind. An inscription that could be read by random travelers on a Middle Kingdom tomb reflects this mentality: “You who love life and hate death.” Egyptians appreciated earthly life and wanted to die as late as possible. Middle Kingdom literature indicates that the ideal age to die was one hundred and ten years. At the time this was almost impossible, but it denotes that by no means Egyptians desired physical death. To avoid the fatalistic idea of an eternal death, they paradoxically interpreted death as a preliminary step to a new and eternal life. Death was considered a violent event, as it is shown in the hieroglyphic that illustrates the concept of death with the figure of a kneeling man that covers a bleeding wound on his head with the hand, an idea taken from dead enemies in battles. In the words of Zivie-Coche, “the bleeding man expresses the concept that even in its most peaceful forming, death is always an act of violence, that it is an enemy, an inexorably menacing evil.” Funerary literature presents a more optimistic picture of death. The books of afterlife are a compilation of spells that instructed Egyptians how to overcome the obstacles – usually demons protecting gates- they may encounter in their way to the next world. The most popular was the “Book of Coming Forth by Day,” a funerary canon of the New Kingdom that includes the celebrated psychostasia or weighing of souls, a scene that depicts the deceased being judged by Osiris and his forty-two judges. Mummification was an important step in order to be judged by Osiris. The heart of the deceased was thought to contain his conscience and intelligence; hence, it was weighed by using the feather Maat, a symbol of cosmic truth and justice. In the case that the deceased was not positively judged, a monster would devour him, his soul would be destroyed and he would be

1 Hdt. Hist. II, 37; Talmud, b. Qid. 49b.

Figure: British Museum 10018.2, papyrus of Hemuttawy, “Lady of the Two Lands”, XXI dynasty.


denied an afterlife. If the judgment ought to be favorable, the deceased would enter the next world and enjoy an eternal life.

In regards to the dualistic perspective of death, it is curious to note the lack of specific images for death. Given the rich religious iconography that characterizes Egyptian civilization this is a surprising fact. This could be explained by the uneasiness the subject of death provoked in Ancient Egyptians. There is basically one representation of Death as a god in Ancient Egypt, it has been illustrated on a papyrus and we know it is Death due to the text that accompanies the image: “Death, the great god who makes gods and men” (fig. 1). Death has been depicted on a starry background as a fantastic animal, a winged serpent with two heads— one of a man and one of a jackal on the other end of the body— walking with two pairs of legs. Between the wings there is a big sun with the beetle inside that alludes to the god Khepri. This god represents the forces that move the sun through the sky after the nightly reign of Osiris. Even if this image could be considered a creative license of the artist, the idea that death is regenerated by life has been clearly expressed.

In conclusion, while in Ancient Egypt death was feared as an enemy that puts an end to earthly life, death was also considered an inescapable step to a new and eternal life.

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4 Zandee, op. cit.; Dunand/Zivie-Coche, op. cit., p. 156.
The Triumph of Death in Late Medieval Italian Painting

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"Io non attendo che a spegner vita"
(I don't do other than to take life)

These are the words uttered by Death depicted on a fresco painted by Buonamico Buffalmacco, which will be studied in this article. During the Late Middle Ages in Europe there was a cultural obsession with the macabre and death. Everywhere we find skeletons, cadavers, and different kinds of memento mori (reminders of death). Wars, plagues, and lack of salubrity and medical knowledge surely made people aware of how easy it was to die. Death was especially ubiquitous with the arrival of the bubonic plague, or Black Death, that caused the mortality of one half of the European population between 1348 and 1350. The transi-tombs and the dances of death are macabre examples of visual culture produced after the Black Death. Nonetheless, the popularity of iconography of death was well established before the bubonic plague. The purpose of this article is to study the iconography of death in Italy before 1348 and its continuity in time by discussing one 13th century pictorial example.

An early literary example of memento mori in the Late Middle Ages is the poem Les Vers de la Mort written by the monk Hélinant of Froidmont between 1193 and 1198. In the poem Death visits different individuals to warn them that they are going to die: a pope, an emperor, a cardinal, a king, a woman, go for a walk accompanied by their dogs and hawks, back to late 12th century: three living beings encounter a putrid and fetid corpse and realize that one day they will decompose in a similar way. This motif was popular all over Europe in the 14th century. In its most popular version three kings or noble men are hunting in the forest when they suddenly encounter three dead corpses that admonish the living against the life of pleasure and excess that they enjoy. The three dead assert that they were once the way the three living are now, and that the living will certainly turn into what they have become. For that reason the living should be careful and follow a righteous and Christian life to be prepared for death.

One of the earliest pictorial examples to have survived of the legend of the three living and the three dead is an Italian fresco that covers the walls of the cathedral of Atri (Abruzzo), dated back to the 1260's. Three men are hunting and get off their horses when they happen to see three dead corpses. Besides the frescoes of Atri, there are four more 13th century examples in Italy of the meeting between the three living and three dead. This proves that the legend was more popular in Italy than in any other European country. Sometimes it reached remote Italian places such as the frescoes elaborated in 1340 for the church of Nostra Signora di Sos Regnos Altos in Sardinia. There are even paintings on wood of this legend, like the one by Bernardo Daddi painted around 1340, and preserved in the Galleria della Academia of Florence.

Figure 1. Encounter of the Three Living and the Three Dead. Atri (Abruzzo), 1260's.

A huge fresco painted between 1336 and 1341 by Buonamico Buffalmacco depicts the subject of Il trionfo della morte (the triumph of death). This fresco is on the walls of the Campo Santo, a gothic cemetery in Pisa. The fresco was seriously damaged during the Second World War, but we can have a good idea of its integrity in pictures taken before the war. The left part of Buffalmacco's fresco shows an elaborated version of the encounter between the three living and the three dead. Several aristocrats on horse, including women, go for a walk accompanied by their dogs and hawks,


2 For this early frescoes see Marco Piccati, "Mixed Encounters: the Three Living and Three Dead in Italian Art", en Mixed Metaphors, pp. 160-164.

3 For the attribution and dates see Luciano Bellosi, Buffalmacco e il Trionfo della morte, Turin: G. Eunaidi, 1974, pp. 3, 19, 24.
a reference to the fact that they are hunting, when they encounter three cadavers in three different states of decomposition: a fresh corpse, a putrid man and a skeleton. They clearly react with disgust by covering their face, a motif to indicate that the corpses stink. A monk bears a phylactery on which it is written that the living will turn into what the three corpses are now when reached by death. On the center of the fresco Death is represented as a ghostly female figure with bat wings and a huge scythe to take souls of the heap of dead men with the help of a legion of demons. Today the image is badly preserved, but we know how it was thanks to the photos before the war (fig. 2). Among the dead there is a pope, an emperor, a king, and a beggar. It aims to proclaim that death equals every social status, in fact a text on the fresco clearly states: “Schermo di saver e di richezza, di nobiltade ancora e di prodezza, vale neente ai colpi di costei” (Neither wisdom or wealth, nor nobility and prudence, means nothing to the strokes of Death). Close to them, there is a group of beggars and cripples that ask death directly to release them from their suffering. As it is written on the fresco, they utter the following words: “Dacche prosperitade ci ha lasciat / O morte, medicina di ogni pena / Deh, vieni a darne ormai l’ultima cena” (Since prosperity has abandoned us/ Oh death, medicine of all suffering/ Come and give us now the last supper). This is a very pessimistic view of the status of beggars in late medieval Tuscany: death is preferred to the harshness of life.

There was another fresco in Tuscany dedicated to the triumph of death, which was painted by Andrea Orcagna for the Santa Croce church in Florence. Only some fragments have been preserved, but we can have an idea of how it was originally due to similarities with Buffamallico’s fresco. Orcagna’s painting included a Last Judgment scene, an appropriate subject in the context of death, since it reminded the viewer that his or her actions in life would be judged at the moment of death to either go to heaven or burn eternally in hell. Some preserved portions of the fresco show damned men and women being tortured by demons. Another fragment contains the victims of death: among them there is a nun and a cardinal, which gives the idea that death spares none. Similarly to the fresco in Campo Santo, Orcagna’s work contains a group of beggars asking death to “give them their last supper” with the same words of Buffamallico’s fresco (fig. 3).”

Previous scholars studied macabre iconography as a result of the devastation of the Black Death in Tuscany. Nonetheless, the Black Death was by no means a Tuscan catastrophe; it affected likewise most of the European cities. Moreover, the frescoes of the triumph of death were made immediately before the arrival of the Black Death in 1348. This proves that the subject of death was already popular in the Late Middle Ages. It has been argued that the reason for the production of early frescoes of the Triumph of Death is related to the scatological debate in 14th century Tuscan cities, and to the effects of the bull emitted by Pope Benedict XII in 1336. This bull confirmed the doctrine that there is a judgment of the soul right after death, rather than at the end of all times.

The triumph of Death also decorated the walls of churches outside Tuscany. In the chapel of St. John, inside the Dominican church of Bozen, there is a fresco of the triumph of death executed between 1339 and 1345. Death is represented by a winged gruesome skeletal figure riding a horse and chasing a group of knights that rush for shelter in a castle. As in the previously mentioned works, there is a group of

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Figure 2. The Triumph of Death, Camposanto, Pisa. Buonamico Buffamallico. 14th century. Picture taken before it was damaged in the Second World War. Detail: Death with bat-wings and scythe taking lives.

Figure 3. The Triumph of Death, Santa Croce, Florence. Andrea Orcagna. 14th century. Detail: Beggars asks Death to come and take their lives.
of cadavers of different social ranks directly beneath the horse of death and two beggars claiming the release of their miserable condition.  

A century after the works that we have analyzed, another huge fresco depicting the Triumph of Death was committed for the courtyard of the palace Sclafani in Palermo (today preserved in the National Gallery of palace A batellis) (fig. 4). The owners of the palazzo moved to Aragon in 1415 and sold the palace to the city of Palermo in 1440, which thereafter was converted into a hospital. There is no documented evidence about the patron and artist responsible for the work, but a study of the garments on this painting reveals a popular fashion between 1438 and 1445. The triumph of Death was an ideal subject for a hospital, as it must be noted that the primary function of a hospital was to save the soul of the sick, for most of the patients went to hospitals not to be cured but to die. The fresco was probably commissioned between the inauguration of the hospital in 1440 and 1445. Death as a skeleton is riding a ghostly horse over a group of dead people from different social positions, next to them a gathering of beggars ask them to take them with her. In contrast with the menacing attitude of Death, men and women enjoy the pleasures of life around her: they are listening to music offered by a lute and a harp player around a fountain, while another man is going hunting with two dogs on a leash. This warned spectators about the dangers of a pleasurable life that would guarantee a place in hell when they received the visit of Death.

12 Völser, op. cit., pp. 75, 78, 84.
14 A usual subject for medieval hospitals was therefore the Last Judgement. One of the most popular works in the context of a hospital was the Last Judgement altarpiece commissioned by Chancellor Rolin to Roger van der Weyden for the Hôtel Dieu of Beaune, see Paul Binski, op. cit., pp. 42-43. For this idea in relation to the Isenheim altarpiece in the context of a hospital see Andrée Hayum, The Isenheim altarpiece: God’s Medicine and the Painter’s Vision, Princeton University Press, 1993.
15 In the context of the Danse macabre there is another 15th Century Triumph of Death in Clusone (Bergamo). Since its iconography is very different to the cycles that we have studied and it forms part of a cycle dedicated to the dance of death, I have chosen not to include it in this article.

Figure 4. The Triumph of Death. Galleria Nazionale di Palermo. 15th century. Today the fresco has lost part of its pigment for its bad preservation.
Among all mammals, humans are likely the first to fully understand the irreversibility of death. What has become known as ‘death anxiety’ is found to be a constant issue across all civilizations and perhaps has played a major role in the origins of spirituality. (1) No one will know certainly what becomes of our consciousness after we die. Throughout history, most religions provide behavioral advice that will help one attain a pleasurable experience in the afterlife. On the other hand, philosophers have generally emphasized the importance of enjoying the present.

Elisabeth Kübler Ross was one of the first physicians to describe the stages of death and dying. In 1969, while she was an instructor at the University of Chicago she published the book ‘On Death and Dying’. (2) Later, she began to gather information from patients that had met criteria for being clinically dead. The experiences that these patients report, also called “near death experiences” received the attention of the general public in 1975, when psychiatrist Robert Moody wrote ‘Life After Life’. In his book, he narrated the experiences of 150 patients that had gone through near death experiences. (3)

With the recent improvement of cardiac resuscitation techniques, the total number of patients that report near death phenomena has increased dramatically. (4) However, only about 10 percent of these patients will claim to recall a near death experience of their own. Some research has shown that near death experiences are universal independent of age, gender, ethnicity and nationality. In general there is a lack of awareness of near death experiences and patients usually feel reluctant to talk openly about it. In 1987, The Journal of Near Death Studies was founded by Kenneth Ring. (5) The film “The Flatliners” was released in 1990 and tells the story of five medical students that use their scientific knowledge to have near death experiences of their own and explore what lies beyond death.

Phenomenology of near death experiences

Some common classical elements of near death experiences are:

- **A sense of awareness that one is dying**: Patients are usually conscious and fully aware that they are dying. (3)(6)

- **Feelings of well-being and peace**: These are usually described as “overwhelming”. (3) On a personal note, in my first year of residency I saw a patient that had a near death experience after a terrible car accident. He reported that as opposed to life on earth, “there,” there were no worries. Subsequently, he lost his fear of dying.

- **Out of body experiences**: Characteristically, people feel that they have been taken out of their own bodies while retaining full perception and consciousness. Kübler Ross reported a blind patient that was able to describe the rescue team in detail. (3)(6)(7)

- **Seeing a light or a tunnel**: Subjects can feel that they can ‘go to the light’ or walk through ‘the tunnel’. The same patient that I saw during my first year of residency told me that he could see a tunnel made of perfect concrete. (3)(6)(7) Similarly, Hyeronimus Bosch’s painting “The Ascent of the Blessed” depicts
Patients can usually survey their whole life at a glance, as it “flashes before their eyes”. Not only the experiences are present, but also present are all of the thoughts that they had in their entire life. Everything seems to be connected and stored. (3)(6)(7)

- Seeing deceased relatives: According to Kübler Ross, her patients would see only relatives that were already dead. Two of her patients told family members at the moment of death that they were reunited with other family members that had died the same day. Neither the patient nor the family members knew that they had died. (6) Van Lommel tells the story of a patient that saw a man whom he could not recognize. Years later, the mother on her deathbed told him that he was born out of an extramarital relationship with a Jewish man who died in World War II. She showed him his picture and he recognized him as the man he had seen 10 years earlier during his near death experience. (7) According to Kübler Ross, children who have not lost anybody may see Jesus or other spiritual leaders. (6)

- Conscious return of the self into the body: At times, patients are conflicted with passing into death or remaining in the present and claim to have made the decision of returning to their bodies. (6)

Theories that may explain near death experiences

Near death experiences have challenged the bidimensional model of “being alive” versus “being dead”. It is possible that the classical “point of no return” theory may become obsolete with the current and future advances in resuscitation techniques. It may be interpreted that extending the moment of death with hypothermia (8) could skew the data obtained from individuals undergoing near death experiences. Today, “to die” is explained in a more dynamic monodimensional model as a “massive stroke of the brain.” (9)

Scholars have developed several theories that may explain near death experience:

- Glutamatergic theory: Glutamate and other excitatory aminoacids are released with neuronal death. Glutamate is thought to play a significant role in the pathogenesis of schizophrenia. AMPA and NMDA are the receptors of glutamate. There are some case reports of patients with anti NMDA immune globulins presenting with psychotic symptoms. A massive release of glutamate in the brain could explain the “hallucinatory-like” phenomena of near death experiences. (10)(11)(12)

- Opioid theory: Endogenous endorphins have been probed and modulate neuronal survival. A sudden flooding release of endorphins could explain the overwhelmingly pleasant feelings experienced by individuals going through near death experiences. Our brain secretes endogenous opioids when we have pleasant experiences, such as passing medical board exams, or having a child. (12)(13)

- Hypoxic brain theory: People undergoing acute transient hypoxia of the brain can report seeing a light or a tunnel and a life review. Hypoxia has been known to cause pleasant experiences, and hypoxiaphia is a sexual disorder in which an individual experience pleasant feelings and sexual arousal with self-induced hypoxia. (7)

- Epileptic theory: Patients undergoing temporal lobe seizures report out of body experiences where they can see themselves from the outside. In some people who had suffered from cardiac arrest, electrical activity can still be recorded in the electroencephalograms. (14)(15)

- Non-local consciousness theory: In some realms of psychiatry, it is consensually accepted that the brain is the substrate of the mind. However, none of the above theories can fully explain the complex phenomenology of near death experiences. Today, some scholars are more inclined to accept the possibility that consciousness is independent of the brain. (7)

Still some of the near death experiences of patients cannot be explained scientifically, especially the scene descriptions of individuals going through out body experiences. Many of these patients lose their fear of dying and feel that there is a life after death. (16)

There are more questions than answers in the phenomenology of near death experiences and research in this matter usually leads to political, social and spiritual debates. There is also a significant lack of consensus on the meaning of near death experiences in the scientific community. With some exceptions, near death experiences are generally perceived as positive and pleasant by patients and reduce the probability of developing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorders in cardiac arrest patients. (17)(2) In some settings, near death experiences may alleviate the pain related to death and the anxiety in patients with terminal illnesses and the people who have lost loved ones. The clinician should identify these patients and educate them on the phenomenology of near death experiences. Echoing the eternal question of human existence, “is there a life after death”? It seems that we will all have to wait and see at the moment of our own death. Either way, near death studies have shown that “to die” can be a very pleasant experience.

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Why Death is not a Stranger in Woody Allen’s Movies: A Case Series Study

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Woody Allen (1935, Brooklyn) is a writer, director, screenwriter, actor, comedian and musician whose films focus on human beings coping with conflicts in life. He has written many screenplays with lots of references to death, one of the major worries of mankind. Mr. Allen’s relationship with death is well known: he is strongly against it (1).

Characters coping with death appear frequently in Woody Allen’s films. Some have even cast Death itself as one of the characters (2,3). Alongside this fascination with death, Mr. Allen has also shown great interest in Psychiatry, the medical specialty that deals with the disorders of mind and coping with life in general.

In this article, four case reports extracted from his films are exposed in order to show the different ways Allen’s fictitious characters cope with the problem of death, the psychiatric symptoms they develop, and the philosophical questions related.

Case 1) A 10-year-old child presents to the clinic with complaints of depressed mood because “the Universe is
expanding, and one day will break up apart”. Fortunately, not all the theories of Physics agree with this (4), but the child, with a mild adjustment disorder, has acquired conscience of the mortality of the world (and his own mortality too). The realization of an end to his entire world has made him believe that homework is not the best use of his time. The doctor exposes the following “It won’t be expanding for billions of years, and we’ve got to enjoy ourselves while we’re here, eh?” By reminding us that we all will die, Mr. Allen brings up the key question of what to do with our life.

Case 2) A 30 year old male is going to be executed at 6am next morning. In this scene from Love and Death, the character copes with his imminent death through generalization of his personal problem that is literally true. “To be executed for a crime I never committed. Of course, isn’t all mankind in the same ship?” He uses denial, holding onto the thought he is not really going to be put to death, but unfortunately he does die. Once dead, he says goodbye to his true love, and dances with Death through the path to the land of the Dead. This case example beautifully shows the full mourning process.

Case 3) A 40 year old hypochondriac male visits the clinic complaining of deafness and is scheduled for more tests as some results are not clear. Frightened by possibly being near death, he starts to worry about the meaning of life and if there is an afterlife. He embarks on a quest seeking answers from several religions. This male, with an imaginary cerebral tum or, develops a major depressive episode complete with suicidal thoughts, until the good news of not having a tumor hastens his recovery. In this case, there is a process of learning promoted by the fear of dying. The character copes with his fears and finally changes his previous fear towards life.

Case 4) A 50 year-old male with a family history of cardiac arrest goes for a check-up complaining of atypical left arm pain. The physical exam and all tests are normal. He is diagnosed with anxiety. A few hours later, he suddenly dies. His spirit returns to earth and visits his depressed friend. He describes the afterlife as “not as funny as life.” Two conclusions can be extracted from this scene. First, the moment of death is unpredictable. Second, being alive is sometimes depressing; to be dead is even worse.

No cause-effect conclusions can be made of this case report series study. However, these four cases show the interesting clinical, philosophical and existentialist intertwining of Woody Allen’s screenplays. This retrospective study allows us to formulate the hypothesis that death is used in Woody Allen’s films as an instrument to help people think about how to cope with problems and enjoy life.

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Cinema and Psychiatry

Ikiru (To Live) by Akira Kurosawa (1952)

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Kurosawa’s masterpiece is a film about personal transformation when one encounters death. Ikiru relates the story of Watanabe, a man whose monotonous life consists basically of going to work and go home. He works as chief of the public bureaucratic sector and though he is always at work, he doesn’t do much. He is a living example of the passive aggressive nature of some sectors of bureaucracy. As narrated in the film, Watanabe has been “dead” for almost thirty years. He is a widow and does not have a close relationship with his only son. After he finds out that he has only a few more months to live due to stomach cancer, Watanabe experiences profound existential anxiety. He realizes his life has been meaningless. He is a “living mummy.”

Watanabe’s first reaction is depression and he begins to drink to forget his terrible fate. Soon, he starts acting out by exploring Tokyo’s nightlife with an eccentric novelist he meets in a bar. Neither of these experiences relieve Watanabe’s existential pain.

Later, Watanabe encounters Toyo, a young female who used to work with him. Watanabe starts going out with her, fascinated by her enthusiasm and joy of life. Toyo reveals to Watanabe that her main motivation is her new job. She works in a factory where she makes toys. This job makes her feel like she can relate to and play with almost every kid in Japan. Inspired by her, Watanabe decides that he can still do something meaningful before he dies. He will dedicate all his remaining time and energy to overcoming the tedious bureaucratic barriers with a plan to transform a mosquito-infested cesspool into a children’s playground. All of the sudden, his life has meaning. After finishing his ambitious project, Watanabe dies a happy man. In parallel, we see the snow falling on him while he swings on a swing-set, in the park that he built.

Experts in death and dying often teach that the best is brought out in patients during the end of their lives. As clinicians, they commonly teach us more than we can teach them. Watanabe’s final months are a magnificent example of this same experience.

Figure: Ikiru Film Poster (source: imdb.com)

The Seventh Seal by Ingmar Bergman (1957)

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The Seventh Seal is possibly the most well-known film by one of the greatest directors in the history of cinema: Ingmar Bergman. The film takes place in his native land, Sweden, during the Late Middle Ages. The name alludes to one of the seals opened by the lamb in the Book of Revelation: “When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Revelation 8:1). This quote eludes to the silence of God in reply the fundamental questions of our existence. The Seventh Seal is a tribute to agnosticism, no matter how hard one attempts to know what will happen after death, there is no answer because God keeps silent.

The main character of the film, Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) is a crusader that returns to Sweden after ten years. He dies as soon as he arrives at the beach with his squire. Death comes to take him, but Block challenges Death to a chess game with the expectation of living if he wins.

Figure: Death plays chess with Antonius Block (Source: wikipedia.org)
Death accepts the challenge and they start playing. After every movement Block has some extra time on this world to return to his castle with his squire and wonder about what may happen to him if he loses the game and dies. On their journey, they find Sweden infected by the Black Death, the plague that caused the death of half of the European population. Block’s efforts to find answers about God and the plague are useless. He asks a witch that has been condemned to be burnt for presumably causing the plague by dealing with the devil, but she has no answer. When he sees her dying, he gets really scared because his squire tells him that there is nothing after death for he can perceive this through the eyes of the moribund woman. Block realizes that he has no chance to beat Death and that she will checkmate in her next movement. He then asks Death if she will reveal what will happen after she comes to take him. When Death replies that she has nothing to reveal, Block’s inquiries remain unsatisfied.

In the Late Middle Ages, it was believed that Death visited the moribund men and took them to the otherworld. The film uses some late medieval motifs such as the popular dance macabre. This artistic subject is represented in churches all over Europe. The macabre depicted Death in the form of a skeleton, taking individuals of every age, social and professional status. Other typical late medieval subjects include religious appearances, jugglers and the crusades. The idea of Death playing chess was taken from a late 15th century fresco in Täby Kyrka, a church near Stockholm, which depicts Death playing the game. Nonetheless, the film has no real historical accuracy considering the participation of Sweden in the crusades took place in 1293, the Black Death arrived in Europe in 1348 and the representation of the dance macabre corresponds to a 15th century iconography.

A Fantastic Fear of Everything by Crispian Mills (2012)

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“A Fantastic Fear of Everything” is a comedy released this year starring the always capable Simon Pegg in the role of an author of both crime fiction and children’s novels as he falls into the depths of madness. The film does a superb job of conveying the feelings, imagery and actions in the life of a man battling with psychosis. However, the film falls apart about halfway though and would lead one to believe that all one needs to do to combat the grips of serious mental illness is to face your fears head on and you will become healed. In real life, unfortunately this is rarely if ever the case.

Before tearing apart the film, written and directed by Crispian Mills, we should actually focus on the positives and what one could learn from its viewing. Pegg’s Jack, very quickly finds himself secluded in his apartment trying to find inspiration for his next novel while being bombarded with intrusive thoughts and misperceptions of reality. As stated before the first half of the film is a quite “Fantastic” example of what it might be like to have to deal with a psychotic illness. Many of the scenarios might seem outlandish, but are not entirely uncommon. For example during my career as a psychiatrist, I have met at least 3 people who have ended up burning their clothes in the oven. Jack’s Psychosis more closely would coincide with diagnostic criteria for Schizophrenia as he has running commentary (i.e. The narration of the film is through the mind of Jack narrating exactly what he is doing at any given time; jack is now picking up the phone, etc.), Visual Hallucinations of “shadows” both in the mirror and in his peripheral vision. There is a running theme of alliteration with “Lulu’s Launderette” which magically turns into “Lily’s Laundry”, the “Wyrd Wild Wood”, and even “Harold the Hedgehog”.

How does Jack deal with these misperceptions? Well, he talks to a therapist named Dr. Friedkin (Paul Freeman) who explains that all of his problems can be traced back to traumatic childhood events that revolve around being in a laundromat. Jack thus, just needs to have a successful experience washing his clothes in public and he should be cured. This fairly simple task, which becomes quite complex, complete with a kidnapping plot that really makes no sense whatsoever, apparently has Jack “cured” by the end of the film.

In real life, the process is not quite as easy or straightforward. Truly, the more realistic (and in my opinion more satisfying) ending would have occurred right after Jack is taken into custody by the police. The sad reality is that many people with mental illness run into law enforcement at least once in their life and many end up only being treated once incarcerated.

Despite all its flaws, “A Fantastic Fear of Everything” does a good job using the symptoms known to plague individuals with psychosis to paint a fairly entertaining story.
Amour by Michael Haneke (2012)

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Amour tells us the story of a French couple, Anne and Georges, who are retired music teachers in their eighties. They still have an active social life and seem to love each other.

Early in the film, Georges wakes up in the middle of the night and sees Anne crying for no apparent reason. The following morning he finds out that Anne forgot to fill the saltbox. During breakfast she suddenly becomes mute, stuporous and immobile, as in a catatonic state. The episode lasts for a couple minutes. George convinces her to go see a doctor. Anne had had transient ischemic attacks secondary to carotid artery stenosis. She undergoes surgery but there are complications resulting in a left-sided stroke that paralyzes her right arm and leg. When she comes back from the hospital, she makes George promise that he won’t take her to the hospital ever again. Anne does not cope well with her health condition and constantly goes back and forth between denial and depression. Left-sided strokes are especially associated with depression.

At some point in the film, Anne tells George that she does not want to live like that anymore. Georges worries since he has made a great effort by trying to take care of her the way he thinks he would have liked to be treated if it had happened the other way around.

Later on, Anne has a second stroke and becomes aphasic, demented and bedridden. This renders her totally dependent on others. George and Anne’s daughter, Eva, is a frustrated woman who does not have a close relationship with her parents. After she visits her mother, she tries to convince George to take her to a hospital. George makes up a story to dissuade her. He wants to keep his promise of not taking her back to the hospital. Anne’s cognitive and functional state deteriorates to the extent of not being able to communicate her basic needs. At one moment in the film, Anne becomes very anxious while complaining of pain. George is able to calm her down by telling her a story of his childhood. After that, George realizes that she is not living with dignity and suffocates her with a pillow. He next adorns her bed with cut flowers, dresses her up with a nice dress, and tapes the doors shut. Without Anne, George’s life does not make sense and he starves himself to death. In the final scene, George and Anne leave the house together headed toward the “other world.”

The film is congruent with the, so-called in France, Sartrean existentialistic approach of life. Amour will not only challenge your ideas of marital love and your ethical principles but your sense of meaning and existence as well.

Future Issues

- Summer Issue 2013: The history of sexuality
- Fall Issue 2013: The history of possession and other dissociative disorders

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