

D1-LIVING LIFE BY EMBRACING DEATH," THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, 12/16/01

Living Life By Embracing Death; WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN? Reflections on Death, Rebirth, and Hunger for a Faith; By Studs Terkel ;The New Press: 408 pp., \$25.95 ;TALKING ABOUT DEATH WON'T KILL YOU; By Virginia Morris; Workman Publishing: 320 pp., \$22.95

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As the candle burns brightest in the darkness, so too is life most fully lived with a day-to-day awareness of death. We spend much of our lives seeking happiness, satisfaction and meaning, imagining that they can best be found by ignoring our feelings about our own mortality. But there is a surprising amount of evidence, including new books by Studs Terkel and Virginia Morris, that few experiences can confer a greater sense of the preciousness of life, profound love, compassion and a sense of the spiritual than openly engaging our feelings about the fact that we will one day die. It is not easy to do so. But we may discover our full potential for life only if we are also willing to face our anguish about its ending.

Much progress has been made, of course, on bringing death out of the closet. There is even a "death and dying" movement, inspired by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, devoted to helping people die as painlessly as possible and to counseling their loved ones. But it is still revolutionary to suggest that people in the prime of life might benefit from surfacing and working with long-repressed feelings about their eventual demise. Discussing how death anxiety influences how we live is perhaps the last taboo in a 21st century America that has put virtually every other issue--from AIDS to Viagra--on the table.

We all know intellectually that we will die, of course. But we tend to avoid thinking about it, and to feel our feelings about it even less. As Angelina Rossi, the mother of a Vietnam vet and a Terkel interviewee, puts it: "I find that the majority of people don't want to discuss death. It happens to everyone else, but it's not going to happen to us." This

formulation recalls the classic Indian story, the Mahabharata. Yudhishthira, the hero, is asked by Yama, the god of death, "what is the most wondrous thing you know about human beings?" "That all humans, though seeing death all around them, think they will live forever," he answers.

Ernest Becker's classic, "The Denial of Death," powerfully explained how we repress our feelings about our own mortality. We first learn as youngsters between the ages of 3 and 8 that we will die. But we deny the feelings this knowledge evokes because we do not have the emotional tools to cope with them. We then unconsciously take this mode of death denial into our adult lives, rarely examining whether it is really in our interests to do so.

If a wide variety of existential psychologists and thinkers are right, however, we lead far more deadened lives than we realize when we deny our deepest feelings about death. We devote much psychic energy to death-denial, reducing our aliveness. We cut off feelings for loved ones out of an unconscious fear of losing them. Unconsciously wishing to live on through our children, we often punish them when they do not turn out as we wish. Turning religion or nationalism into projects to achieve immortality often leads to violent consequences, as we have just so tragically witnessed.

Denial of death also robs us of the positive value of engaging our feelings about our mortality. As Terkel notes: "We, as a matter of course, reflect on death, voice hope and fear, only when a dear one is near death, or out of it. Why not speak of it while we're in the flower of good health? How can we envision our life, the one we now experience, unless we recognize that it is finite?"

Of the 61 people Terkel interviewed, Maurine Young's story is perhaps the most striking. Her 19-year-old son Andrew was killed by 18-year-old gang member Mario Ramos. Young describes how she moved from wanting to see her son's killer executed to forgiving him, culminating in an emotional jail cell meeting. "I love you like you're my son, like you're one of mine.... You got into my heart violently, but you're there," she told him.

She explained that facing death led to deep love: "It really took the murder of my son and the forgiving of his killer to teach me how to forgive everybody around me. By forgiving them, like I did Mario, it freed me to really love."

Others were similarly transformed by facing death. Dr. John Barrett's daily exposure to death made him worry less about the trivial things in life like his car breaking down. Filmmaker Haskell Wexler spoke of how being in his late 70s has led him to value personal relations more than his work. Comedian Mick Betancourt said that becoming aware of life's brevity has led him to take greater risks with his career. Most of Terkel's interviewees also report that they do not fear death. Many base this on deep religious or spiritual beliefs that convince them that death is not the end. Even a nonbeliever like Kurt Vonnegut Jr. takes a matter-of-fact attitude: "In 'Slaughterhouse-Five,' every time somebody dies ... I always say: 'So it goes'--that's all. Whenever anybody had died--and this would be my sister, my brother, my father, my mother, and I was nearby for those events--that's how I felt...."

Morris, whose important new book is a wake-up call on the need to approach death consciously, does not understand such views. "I'm always surprised when people tell me they are not afraid of dying. My guess is that most people who say this simply have not given the subject enough thought, for fear of death, as far as I can tell, comes with being human," she writes.

Morris makes the strong case that the end of life can be one of our most beautiful experiences, if we prepare for it. If not, it can be agonizing. "We must not wait because by the time we determine that we are 'there,' at that magical border, we have, quite often, missed our chance," she writes.

Her book is painful to read. At times I felt like throwing it across the room, as it forced me to confront the inevitability of the fates awaiting my loved ones and myself. But in the end I had to admit that I owe it to them and myself to face my death as squarely as I can.

The reader of Terkel's book is left to wonder whether his reports of people who say they do not fear death represent wisdom or denial. He might have probed more deeply, for example, whether they are preparing for the death of their loved ones and themselves, as Morris recommends.

Such questions are important not only for each of us as individuals, but for society as a whole. Seventy-seven-million baby boomers will die in the coming decades. This generation exhibited an unusual capacity for self-reflection in its youth, producing the sexual, women's, gay and environmental revolutions. If it turns its attention to consciously living out its last years with an enhanced awareness of its mortality and the legacy it is leaving, the world and future generations could be far better off.

Doing so will require a major shift from present boomer consciousness, however. In one of Terkel's more insightful interviews, advertising guru Bruce Bendinger says, "I was born during World War II, a baby boomer. We've had our foot on the gas for fifty years. And now, as we hit the twenty-first century, we have really accelerated past what is good for people. You're not really thinking. So how can we think about such a thing as death?"

Indeed. Whether baby boomers are able to slow down and savor what is genuinely important in life may determine not only their own happiness in their remaining years, but the quality of society and the legacy they will leave.

People who feel their deepest emotions about their own mortality often report an enhanced appreciation of life, including more compassion for those different from themselves, a greater concern for nature and the environment, less concern for material possessions, more spiritual openings and greater generosity.

Future generations' lives will depend upon our mercy. Whether they will remember us well may depend upon our heeding Terkel's call. Only in facing our deaths can we fully experience the preciousness of our lives.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: Studs Terkel at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art earlier this year.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LAWRENCE K. HO / Los Angeles Times

Credit: Fred Branfman directs the Tides Center's Gifts of Death Awareness project at www.ForGenerationsToCome.com and is a writer and consultant with psychologist Robert Firestone in Santa Barbara.