

Review of *Death: The Beginning of a Relationship*, by Christine S. Davis

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Abstract:

A review of the book “*Death: The Beginning of a Relationship*” by Christine S. Davis.

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Article:

I'll admit it: I am a sucker for a good story. I have a thing for really good writing. I'll also admit that, when I picked up this book and read the title, I was struck by a truth I had never considered. I've just never thought of having a “relationship” that starts in, or is grounded in, or is somehow *with* death. Just not on my radar, frankly. I don't like to think about it.

It turns out, however, that lately I've had to come to terms with this notion, this “relationship.” One friend recently died of cancer; another was just diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer. In some ways, these events made this book difficult to read. But once I started, I was hooked. The intriguing thing is that this book is not really about death. It is about life—or, to be more precise, about how we go on living in the face of death. Death strikes us all, to be sure. Friends, family members, lovers, pets—they all die. And one day, each one of us will have to face our own death. And, somehow, muddle through the process of leaving this world, with or without help. Most of us avoid thinking about this until it hits close to home.

But what is really striking about *this* story is that the people in it really *do* have a relationship with death—an everyday, almost ordinary relationship. But they also seem to have a deeply spiritual relationship with death. And that itself is quite remarkable, especially given how generally uneasy we, in our culture, seem to be with the idea or the encounter—much less the (messy) process of death. They are hospice workers, and they face it every day, in every imaginable scenario, or at least every scenario in which death is not a sudden visitor who arrives before the help can settle in. These people do the heavy lifting of emotional labor (Tracy, 2000), assisting families with letting go of loved ones, opening doorways to new understandings of the potentials and the pitfalls and the meanings of our struggles with death.

The author “shadows” a front-line hospice team as they make their home visits, engage in team meetings back at the office, and do the hard work of “liminal servants” (McLaren, 1988) who usher people across the threshold from this world to the next while comforting and assisting those who must remain behind. These people are real *teachers*—educators in the arts of living and dying gracefully. The fact that they can do this work at all is remarkable; that they do what they do, day after day, and maintain good humor, compassion, and honesty is nothing short of amazing.

This is very good ethnography. Davis captures—through evocatively rendered scenes, dialogue, character development, and action—the mood, the tone, the emotional landscape, the multiple meanings, the sense-making, and the power and difficulty of the communicative work these health care professionals must engage in to help patients and their families muddle their way through the tragic, painful, and occasionally uplifting experience of terminal illness. Their life-world is a death-world, and they know all too well how painful this world is for those who encounter it, and yet they retain their composure, their commitment, and even a bit of joy in this difficult work.

Meanwhile, Davis is no stranger to personal loss. She artfully weaves into this narrative of hospice work the parallel narrative of her own first encounter with death: the death of her father when she was a young woman. Davis's struggle to build an understanding of death—her dance with death, so to speak—is writ large in the text. At first her unfolding relationship with her father, her father's death, and her father's legacy in her life seems difficult to render; it begins as a tentative, somewhat haltingly written story. But as the parallel stories unfold, Davis the author gains strength and, in the end, develops an affirmative and compelling relationship with her father, with her loss, and with loss in general. The evocative chapter titles tell the story of her progression through the process of coming to terms with death: Inauguration, Education, Escalation, Edification, Association, Assimilation, Disorientation, Termination, Limitation, Separation, Adoration. I can only urge you strongly to read these chapters. Once you start, beware: You will not put it down.

This book is a fine read for anyone intrigued by the grace and power of good writing; it is a beautiful, poetic, and emotionally charged text. It is also a must read for anyone concerned with end of life issues, hospice work, loss, trauma, and, more generally, health communication and crisis. It would serve well as a text for courses in health communication, trauma and loss, grief and communication, ethnography and autoethnography, and relational communication. In fact, my students in my graduate ethnography seminar will be reading it come spring semester.

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