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DEATH
MORTALITY and RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

19 NOVEMBER 2003 – 29 FEBRUARY 2004

VicHealth ARTS FOR HEALTH
It seems that rarely in our scientific-rationalist modern world, is the experience of facing and accepting death conceived of as an integral feature of life, but rather as something to be delayed, controlled, defeated, and ultimately segregated from the living. Death: mortality and religious diversity investigates some of the social and spiritual dimensions of mortality. Interviews with culturally and religiously diverse community spokespeople have provided information that reveals fascinating and at times surprising insights, promoting a deeper understanding of the diversity of spiritual rituals and cultural approaches to dying, death, grief and remembering.

Recent data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on the multicultural make up of Victoria, reveals a wide range of religious backgrounds, from the largest (Catholics, at 28.9% of respondents) to the smallest group (Hindus, at 0.4%). A large number of Victorians also belong to the 'no religion' or 'not stated' categories. Using this methodology, the eight largest census categories have been selected as the basis for this research and resulting exhibition.

For much of western culture, mortality is now entertainment and represented in computer generated games, on film and television. Glennys Howarth (2000) points out that our scientific-rationalist culture casts death as the enemy, and our quest for victory over death, has been fundamental to its separation from life. The modern formalization of this separation includes among other things the legal requirement of death certification, medical practices, public health rules on 'hygienic' treatment of corpses, but most importantly, psychological theories of 'healthy grieving', built on the work of Freud, which suggest the bereaved should psychologically release themselves from their dead. Many groups now leave the preparation of the deceased for burial to the funeral industry. Formerly, Hindu families would have washed, dressed and garlanded the body in preparation for cremation, and indeed built the pyre and ignited the flames. Buddhists...
still prefer to gather around the deceased channing the Buddha’s name, for the first eight hours after death. They don’t believe in touching, moving or cleaning the body because the spirit slowly leaves the body during that time. Muslim and Jewish beliefs require burials to be conducted as soon as possible after death. The body is bathed and shrouded by same sex members of the community. Muslims bury directly into the earth, and Jews ensure contact with the earth is accelerated by drilling holes in the base of the coffin. For both of these groups, the burial is entirely a ‘hands on’ community ritual.

The difficulty with the modern approach to separating the dead from the living, argues Howarth, is that it ignores the fact that the death of a loved one results in a loss of self—a self that is inextricably bound up with the deceased. Her view is that the fundamental crisis of bereavement is a crisis not of loss of the other, but also of loss of self. Howarth suggests that to retain a personal sense of meaningfulness and continuity, the individual must construct a biographical narrative that includes a place for the dead person and the events that led to the present. As Allan Kellehear, (2002), comments, the idea that grief over loss is like ‘the flu, that you will get over’ is nonsense. The grieving are changed. Their future narratives can only reflect and somehow incorporate that experience. ‘Getting on with it’, may mean in many cases denying the significance of that grief, therefore the opportunities for sharing of the story of loss.

The eight selected perspectives describe varying periods of ‘quarantine’, ritualised permission to suspend routines of everyday life, to accept the changed situation and to reflect.
During this period, the formal suspension of ordinary life, for example in the Irish wake and the 'month's mind'; and also in the Jewish seven days of Shiva in which Jews sit at home on low chairs and refrain from the ordinary daily activities, are important processes which can ritually contribute to continuity and new biography. Islam holds a prescribed mourning period of three days, during which the bereft family stays at home and is consoled by visitors. Buddhists pray for the deceased for the seven weeks after the death, and the Hindus have a mourning period of three, five or thirteen days, depending on the community. Greek Orthodox Christians avoid social activity for the first forty days after the death. The 'wake' for many contemporary Christians and secular Australians may be often only a short period of storytelling and 'celebration of the life', stories are shared, photographs are revisited, memoirs are written, memorials are created. Participants remember their connections to the deceased, the place of past (present and future) relationships and indeed our own mortality, in the overall scheme of things. Among observant members of religious groups, and also the non-religious, rituals either formally or spontaneously provide reaffirmation of what has been lost, and understanding of a new identity, while protecting the core sense of self (Hall, 2001).

What has been made clear from the interviews in this exhibition is that despite the decrease in religious belief systems and rituals in what is seen as a predominantly secular society, there is not necessarily an absence of spirituality. Allan Kellehear (2000) notes, that there are three sources of transcendence (building blocks of spiritual meaning):

- **formal Religious needs**;
- **Situational needs** (making sense of the immediacy of the situation, through a sense of purpose, hope and connectedness);
- **Moral and Biographical needs** (which seek reconciliation, closure, forgiveness and moral and social analysis).
Anglican priest, Rev. Elizabeth Dean, with the Anglican paschal candle which is lit to mark the beginning of Easter, used for its Resurrection symbolism at funerals.

A richly lined and polished coffin typical of that in which most Australians are buried or cremated. Muslims and Jews, however, prefer plain coffins which are simply transport for the body to the cemetery.

Research for this project revealed surprisingly consistent beliefs in the purpose of life, continuity of the human spirit, and the need for connectedness through rituals of reconciliation, moral purpose, and recognition of irreversible change. At many funerals, people celebrate the importance of lost lives, by expressing connectedness through the performance of eulogies, anecdotes and music. Participation at the home, graveside or crematorium in the preparation or disposal and memorialisation of the dead allows ritual ‘closure’ and reflection. Many people construct shrines – in photo albums, on mantelpieces, in cemeteries, crematoriums and gardens as well as on roadside sites, even the latter are often renewed on the anniversaries of the birthday or death day for many years.

Dr David Ritchie
Deakin University, 2003
The cover triptych symbolizes the religious diversity of contemporary Australians. The pioneer Church of England monument is flanked by a Muslim grave, which according to Islamic requirements is modest and planted with greenery and flowers; and a Jewish grave, which characteristically bears the stones and pebbles left to mark visitation.


Kellehear, A., 'Spirituality and Palliative Care: A model of needs' Palliative Medicine, 14, 2000, pp.149-155.

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The Death: mortality and religious diversity exhibition is presented as part of the VicHealth Arts for Health Program. Through this partnership healthy environments are created and access to arts activities is facilitated.