

**James W. Green, *Beyond a Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 272 pp.**

After years of studying about death and dying as a thanatologist and working as an ACPE supervisor for more than 20 years in trauma, intensive care, bio-ethics, and palliative care, I found it delightful to read and review a book about death that includes a plethora of well-documented historical data with narratives that add exponentially to the understanding of how a good death has changed over time. Green weaves together aspects of history, philosophy, theology, and bio-ethics. He has a unique gift that drew me into his narratives and had me wanting to read his endnotes—that was a rare pleasure. He manages to give an historical trajectory to innumerable understandings that range from why some bodies were buried, why some were boiled, and why some were burned. This is presented with historical fact, mythic narrative, and some tongue in cheek humor as well. The chapter titles are each examples of his pithy creative etymology, for example, “Getting Dead,” “Exit Strategies,” “The Body as Relic,” “Soulsapes,” “Passing It On,” “In Our Hearts Forever,” and “The Future of Death.” I probably learned the most from “The Body as Relic” and have gained an appreciation for ritual that makes use of bones for a number of years<sup>0.319</sup>...in perpetual. This would be an ideal book to read while studying family systems and/or the origins of rituals both cultural and religious.

James Green did a superb job of introducing the reader to death practices (relationships) that exist among the survivors, the corpse, and the postmortem experience. He refers to the Hertz Model, which one might explore in more detail. The model forms a triangle with each of the italics above represented by a point of the triangle. However, it is the relationship(s) that exist from point to point that provided for me a new way of reflecting on the ways families grieve prior to a death, how the body is handled at the time of death until burial or cremation, and how a person is memorialized after their death.

There are many ways the author compares and contrasts the mega narratives as texts/narratives that are reworked in the midst of or after historical change. This occurs in all traditions/faith experiences. Nevertheless, the author’s premise (task) was to give a historical trajectory that included the impact of time, culture, the advancement of medical science, and the decrease of the attention now given in North America to “getting dead” despite the end-of-life, palliative care, and hospice movements. Any person who has been drawn toward the mystery of meaning making, or the lack thereof, could find this book invaluable. It acknowledges a myriad of ways that history and narrative assist in assessing how, what, and when (if at all) individuals, families, faith-based or cultural, and/or religious communities need care.

This book has provided me a more comprehensive framework for assessment of pastoral, religious, and spiritual care. I have been prompted to

delve into the pioneer or frontier influences on a good death. How has a focus on the rugged individual as unique and fringe contributed to being spiritual and not religious? Do communities “celebrate life” because they no longer have religious rituals that reflect with integrity what it is that they (we) believe about death and that which follows? Perhaps in many parts of North America, being at home with nature has superseded being with family or a faith community. Green suggests that there are now rituals and families that grieve common losses with on-line internet families and in spontaneous shrines on street corners.

I am imagining peers and colleagues may gravitate toward a more individualistic, private spirituality and away from the powerful rituals that mythical creation narratives in all traditions set as standards that bound the community together as a grieving community that would dismember and re-member the body as beloved for many years to come...the anniversaries of heartfelt death. There is much to be remember and reflected upon after reading and attempting to integrating *Beyond a Good Death* by James W. Green.

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