

SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH AND DYING: AN INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFERENCE

Submitted by Shannon Lythgoe

When asked how the theme of the upcoming **Spiritual Perspectives on Death and Dying** conference came about, Inter-Religious Studies Program Director Laura Duhan Kaplan says, “current events.” Recent legislation regarding medical assistance in dying has sparked broad conversation on societal values around death. These conversations, Laura says, have led to a shift in values. In the past, many people avoided thinking or speaking about death. Today, these same people realize that, in certain circumstances, death can be welcomed and embraced.

As a pastoral caregiver, Laura has accompanied many adults through illness and death. Almost everyone, she says, who experiences a terminal illness comes to accept the inevitability of dying. They begin to prepare for it in a way they might not have, had they been healthy. Often, they draw only on their own inner resources. No one taught them the rich cultural knowledge about death and dying, available from a variety of traditions. This conference takes a small step towards sharing that knowledge.

Laura’s personal connection with the issue is profound. When Laura was an infant, her four-year-old brother passed away. Her parents—products of the times and their cultural influences—chose not to tell her and her younger brother about their sibling. So, they grew up in a family torn apart by a secret, unacknowledged grief. The children adapted to being the comforters of their grieving parents. But Laura wishes they had known their parents were sad and angry about Freddy’s death, so they could have had greater compassion and understanding towards them. Eventually, Laura and her brother pieced the facts together and approached their parents, and they grieved as a family. On reflection, Laura understands that her parents didn’t have the cultural toolkit or pastoral support to help them process their own experience and support their other children.

North Americans, says Laura, have both gained and lost from the medicalization of death. We have gained facilities where people can receive expert care during their final months. Often, this care is better than home care. But we have lost the opportunity to support our relatives and friends as they die. Because we rarely see or participate in the dying process, we’ve lost the role models we can learn from. Fortunately, we are starting to remember why it’s healthy for people to help care for their dying loved ones.

Why organize an inter-religious conference to discuss spiritual implications of the dying process? Laura says that



From left to right: panelists Laura Duhan Kaplan, Philip Murray, Adam Rubin, Arun Chatterjee, Sally Thorne, and Ashley Moysé

different religious cultures have emphasized different aspects of care in the dying process. We can all learn from the resources developed by these traditions. For example, **Hindu** and **Buddhist** traditions excel in teaching non-attachment and equanimity in the process of dying. **Christianity** instills hope in eternity and an afterlife. **Jewish** traditions provide outstanding support for grieving family and friends. Helpful intersections can occur when people from different traditions get together to talk and learn from one another.

The keynote speaker for the conference is **Dr. David Kuhl**. David, a physician working in palliative care, was trained to maintain a clinical distance from his patients. Over time, he realized that holding himself separate from his dying patients was artificial. As a human being, he had so much in common with them.



Keynote speaker, Dr. David Kuhl

He began to listen and engage with his patients at a more profound level. He shared some of his learnings in his well-known book *What Dying People Want: Practical Wisdom for the End of Life*. David has since branched out professionally in several directions. His current work supports families of people who are dying. When someone is part of a family system, their dying process includes the whole unit—adults, teens, and children. David’s presentation,

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We Die Alone, and Yet We Don't, will be an interactive conversation with Laura and the audience. David's keynote presentation is the one conference event that is free and open to the public. (All other events are open only to those who registered for the entire conference.)

The conference begins with a panel discussion of spiritual perspectives on medical assistance in dying. Panelists include **Philip Murray**, a Christian VST graduate who works in spiritual care; **Arun Chatterjee**, a Hindu VST graduate who works in spiritual care; **Dr. Sally Thorne**, a Jewish Professor of Nursing at UBC; **Dr. Ashley Moyses**, a VST Research Associate and Christian medical ethicist; and **Rabbi Adam Rubin**, a pastoral care giver and scholar of Jewish law. Panelists will offer medical, theological, and patient-centred perspectives.

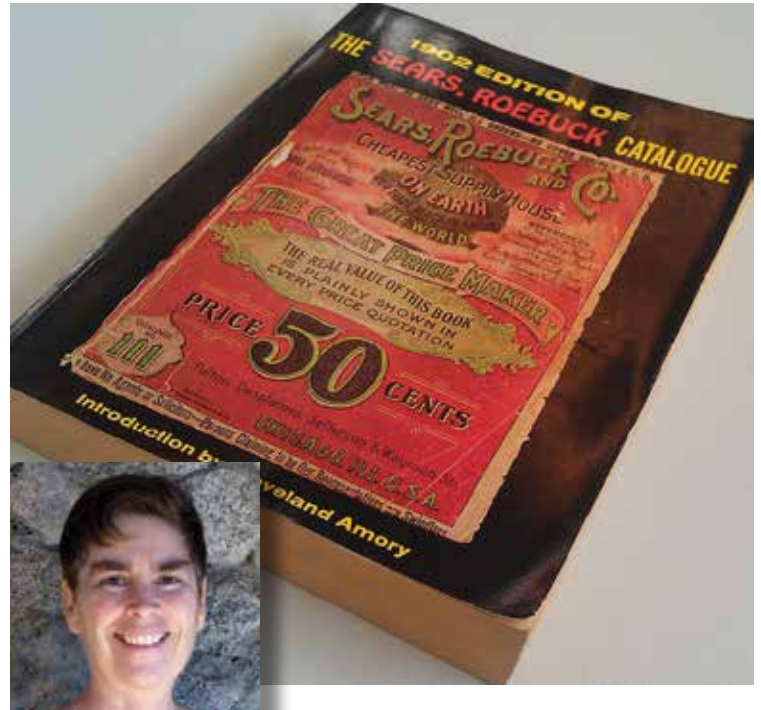
Shorter presentations by scholars from the extended VST community are also on the program. VST faculty, research associates, alumni, graduate students and community colleagues will speak. These scholars represent Christian, Indigenous, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions. Their talks examine many aspects of dying, including spiritual preparation, grieving, and to social representations of death. A session exploring music for passing and grieving is also planned.

The conference closes with a workshop on *Departure Directions*. **Michelle Pante** and **Rena Lazar**, founders of **Willow: Inspired End of Life Planning**, will help participants examine how they wish to prepare for their own deaths and funerals.

Registered conference participants will have an opportunity to share communal lunches and connect with each other. Some might consider registering with a close friend, to share and process this profound conversation together. Please note that the conference facilities—both the VST building and Epiphany Chapel—are fully accessible.

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A Moment's Respite...



Submitted by Kathleen Cabral, 2018 VST graduate

I work at the **BC Women's & Children's Hospital** as a Spiritual Health Practitioner. One day I visited a young boy who was very ill. I asked his mother what might help her son's stay in the hospital. Mom mentioned that her son loves the **Sears** catalogue and has a collection at home. I thought that if the boy had something that reminded him of home, he might be temporarily distracted from pain, boredom, discomfort, homesickness and so on. And this, of course, eases Mom's suffering. I then wondered where in heck I might find a catalogue since I knew the Sears stores had just closed. I remembered that my parents used to have Sears catalogues around the house. So, I called my parents in Calgary and asked my Dad if they still had catalogues. Dad wasn't sure but mom looked around and found the only one they had left. My dad couriered it to Vancouver and I received it within a few days.

My dad, always a big softie for kids (Mom too), also enclosed three catalogues from **Hammacher Schlemmer**. This company is 166 years old and offers novelty products like underwater sports cars that sell for, say, a mere two million dollars. The child lives in a remote community so you can just imagine his delight when he saw such marvellous things. As a side note, the catalogues also provided some stress relief for other members of the healthcare team on a busy day. The really astonishing part of this story is that the boy was missing one catalogue for his home collection: a 2013 edition. Guess which one my parents sent? Yes, that very one.

Update: Kathleen Cabral informs us that the young boy in question recovered fully, and has gone home to resume a healthy life!