



## Interviews with those who live the thanatologist's life

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BOOK REVIEW Edited by David E. Balk

## Interviews with those who live the thanatologist's life

**A review of *Living, Dying, Death, and Bereavement: Conversations with Thanatologists* (two volumes),** by David E. Balk. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2020. 1148 pp. ISBN 978-1-5275-5958-5 and 978-1-5275-5959-2. \$199.90 set (hardcover). Reviewed by William G. Hoy.

David E. Balk is Professor Emeritus at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York where he directed graduate studies in thanatology and served as chair of the Department of Health and Nutrition Sciences. Among his publications are *Helping the Bereaved College Student* (Balk, 2011) and *Coping with Dying, Death, and Grief during Adolescence* (Balk, 2014). With colleagues, he edited the first two editions of *Handbook of Thanatology: The Essential Body of Knowledge for the Study of Death, Dying, and Bereavement* (Balk et al., 2007; Meagher & Balk, 2013).

William G. Hoy is Clinical Professor of Medical Humanities at Baylor University, where he teaches undergraduate pre-medical students. Dr. Hoy's research examines the role of poverty in end of life and funeral decision-making, especially among African American patients and families. Prior to his academic appointment at Baylor, he directed counseling services for Pathways Volunteer Hospice. He is the author of *Bereavement Groups and the Role of Social Support: Integrating Theory, Research, and Practice* (Hoy, 2016) and *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* (Meagher & Balk, 2013) in addition to more than 100 book chapters, journal articles, and educational pieces.

*Tome*. Merriam-Webster (2021) defines it simply: "a large or scholarly book." Personally, I am partial to the "kid's definition" the online dictionary also provides: "a big thick book" (n.p.). Yes, it is. When David Balk's fine collection of interviews arrived, I was astounded that this volume (actually bound as two separate volumes because of its size) spanned 1,148 pages. My professional library includes way more than 1,000 volumes and I am fairly sure this is now the longest. When invited to write this review for *Death Studies*, I failed to ask one important question: how long is it?

That being said, however, the book is well worth the substantial forest felled to produce it. While not a book to be read in a single sitting, it contains 37 interview transcripts of people the editor deems important enough figures in the often-unknown field to merit the recording of their insights. David Balk is eminently qualified to make that selection. Balk is professor emeritus at Brooklyn College, part of the sprawling City University of New York system, where for more than 15 years he

taught and directed graduate studies in thanatology, eventually serving as chair of the Department of Health and Nutrition Sciences. Active for many years in the leadership of the Association for Death Education & Counseling, Balk has also served as the book review editor for *Death Studies* since 1993.

In 2016, the interviewer/editor made contact with more than 50 professionals in the field of dying, death, and bereavement to set up telephone or in-person interviews to ask a wide-ranging set of questions about their work, their own evaluation of the field, the influences on their lives and careers, and their thoughts about future directions and debates in the field of thanatology. Not all of the potential interviewees were available at a mutually-convenient time, at least one died before the interview could be scheduled, and a few determined that that stories the interviews evoked were just too painful to share publicly. Because I was one of those who Balk contacted in the process but could not coordinate an interview, I can review this work with an eye to both the background of the project and the objective voice of one not interviewed.

In the editor's words, each interview was produced verbatim with only extraneous words such as verbal pauses removed. Because each interviewee was allowed to review and approve the manuscript before publication, one has to assume what is published is a somewhat redacted version of the conversations. However, the interviews appear to be honest and forthright; many of the respondents seem to hesitate little in taking on "sacred canons" of the field. One example is Tom Attig's unabashed criticism of the attempt to make everything in thanatology a "science-based" approach, resulting in a philosophy held by some that if it cannot be tested and proved empirically, it must not be valid (pp. 487–489).

The work reads like a veritable "who's who" of thanatology from the present and over the last 40 years or so. The selection of interview subjects is a convenience sample of interviewees, and Balk makes no pretense that these (even including the voices not heard in the book) are by any means the only or even leading voices. He explains, "Several persons who have made significant contributions to thanatology are not part of my book" (p. 9) and in concluding his interview with Mary Alice Varga notes how the book evolved from just a compendium of names "everybody would recognize" (p. 991). In

the Foreword, Paul Rosenblatt notes that David Balk's own voice is one of those not heard in the book though his work and influence would most certainly make anyone's "short list" of canonical characters.

Balk begins by explaining the factors that incited his interest in the project and then proceeds to summarize the procedures he followed. Included in this introductory chapter is the table of "structured questions" he provided to most of the interviewees in advance (at least one, Bob Neimeyer, elected, instead, to be "surprised" in the interview).

Readers might appreciate—or not—the rather "folksy" ways that Balk banter with his guests, even about matters not especially germane to the topic. One example is the ten lines of text between Balk and Dale Larson in which they discuss whether or not the recording technology is working (p. 364). In the COVID lockdown era of "Zoom fatigue" and reminders that "You are muted...", readers will certainly identify with some of this banter more today than when the interviews were conducted. Often, Balk and his interviewee "catch up" on the health news of mutual friends (Balk and Bill Worden discussing Phyllis Silverman on pages 127–128) or the "inside stories" between interviewees as Balk carries tales from one interview to another.

What shines through is the conversational way that Balk conducted these interviews, and much like a skilled therapist, talked about non-threatening issues before diving into matters of potentially greater consequence and controversy. Of particular interest to me was the question asked of virtually every interviewee, "Are there any ideas that have influenced (or are influencing) thanatology that you consider untenable?" Of course these responses varied widely but their diversity indicates the multitudes of opinions that are part of our field.

The element that both surprised and gratified me in this work was the apparent transparency with which interviewees spoke. Bob Neimeyer talked openly about how his father's suicide impacted the trajectory of his pre-adolescent life and continues to reverberate. Darcy Harris discussed the struggles with non-death losses being excluded from many professionals' understanding of the field. Heather Servaty-Seib talked of the marginalization experienced by many of our colleagues, like her, working in such a "touchy" field at a major engineering, science, and research powerhouse as Purdue. Discerning readers will realize quickly that even for those whose life revolves around study, teaching, and support related to death, loss is an ever-present reality, often having been a seminal influence in the trajectory of life and career.

This book is a compendium of raw data, the verbatim transcripts of many hours of interviews. Though he includes about 11 pages of synthesis in his introductory chapter and notes that deep analysis was not his goal, I found myself wishing many times that Balk would have explored some of the common themes that unite this diverse group of professionals; less than 1% of the total pages for the synthesis seems underdone, at best. One of

the ideas I had as I read was encouraging one of my own pre-medical students to perform a content analysis to determine what common individuals and classic works in the field were often cited as influential in these professionals' careers. I suspect that such a study would yield a rich history of our field.

Another criticism is that Balk's work, by his own admission, is overwhelmingly White and European in its orientation. There are many valuable contributors to our field from Asia, the Middle East, and South America who have made important strides and whose stories would be fascinating on their own merits as well as in comparison to the overwhelming White North American majority of the interviewees. Balk noted he was limited to English in conducting interviews but this certainly does predict a significant shortfall in what has truly become a global field of inquiry and practice. If the several thousand attendees at professional workshops on grief counseling where I speak every year are any indication, our field is overwhelmingly White, but it is still important that we take pains to hear other voices. I know nearly all of these people and as best I could determine, Tashel Bordere was the only person of color interviewed in the entire book.

I regret that one of the leading academic publishers did not choose to publish this work since the efficiencies and marketing heft of leading thanatology-related publishers like a Routledge or Springer would have undoubtedly reduced the price of this work; I expect its US \$200 price tag is well outside the budgets of many in our field. In my opinion, if the book had been produced in paperback or in an electronic version, these invaluable stories would be available to a much wider audience.

In spite of these shortcomings, however, I am very glad I made my way through this work. Though I know the vast majority of these people and have counted some of them as colleagues and friends for more than 35 years, I learned things about nearly all of them from the book. As I read, I was reminded that all of us are drawn to the work we do and continue to find fulfillment in that work because of many different influences, many different "callings." As I read through what may very well be David Balk's *magnum opus*, I am grateful that he took the time to enrich the lives of all of us with the stories of these people, pioneers and newcomers to the field, alike. In reading their stories, I am reminded of the rich tapestry that is woven together in this amazing professional community called thanatology.

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