

Barrett, D.P. (1990). Death anxiety and mid-life. *Coalition News- Monthly Newsletter of the MN Coalition for Death Education and Support, Inc.* 13 (12), p.1

It seems to be true that we often study/or get into areas which touch us personally – areas in which we are in need of understanding and growth. I know that has been true for me in terms of my recent area of interest within the death and dying field – not only did my death anxiety increase as I was writing a doctoral dissertation on yes, death anxiety, but I emerged from this ten year process only to discover that I am now a middle-aged person!.....'So, I have found myself pondering the question of whether there is a difference in how individuals relate to death in mid-life than in young adulthood or in the advanced years.

What I have discovered in some of the reading I have done and from personal experience is that in young adulthood it appears the perception of death as being remote is prevalent and that underlying a typical avoidance of thoughts of death, fear of death is probably relatively high. Death anxiety seems to heighten in mid-life as a major change in one's perspective of time takes place, where one now perceives time as "time-left-to-live rather than time-since birth" (Gesser, Wong, and Reker, 1987-88). A trend has been identified in some studies which suggests that death anxiety trends to decline in the later years as older individuals reconcile themselves to the implications of the passage of time and to the reality of death (Lonetto & Templer, 1986).

Now, what I am thinking about with regard to my own situation as a middle-aged person and also as a death educator and counselor, are ways to facilitate the facing and integration of the reality of death at a time when death anxiety may be heightened. Jungian and transpersonal psychologies have been helpful to me in this respect. In Jungian psychology, mid-life, unlike the outward journey of life, which occurs during the beginning stages of human development and involves the formation and development of ego, seems to be about a kind of ego death and the identification with a larger Self and a deepening connection with the spiritual core of life. Mid-life is a time when we are invited by a natural process to pay closer attention to the unconscious and the inner life.

Where death anxiety fits in is that not only does time perspective change in mid-life, heightening anxiety, but often an individual experiences what is sometimes referred to as a "dark night of the soul." This can be a period when the tenuousness of life is keenly felt and when painful feelings of aloneness are experienced, as an individual struggles with a pervasive sense of separateness and fear of death that exclusive identification with the ego fosters.

In Jungian and transpersonal psychologies, the way through these uncertain waters is by a greater knowledge of and contact with an intuitive way of knowing, which can lead to an expansion of consciousness, revealing a basic oneness and a sense of connection with a larger whole.

The implications for death education and counseling from this perspective would seem to be the inclusion of intuitive techniques such as guided visualization and meditation in death education programs and in counseling situations, to help individuals experience their own inner wisdom and the spiritual core of life, leading to an increase in the sense of connection and very possibly to a decrease in death anxiety.

Gesser, G., Wong, P., and Reker, G. (1987-88) Death attitudes across the life-span: The development and validation of the death attitude profile (DAP). Omega. 18, 113-128.

Lonetto, R., and Templer, D. (1986). Death Anxiety. New York: Harper and Row.