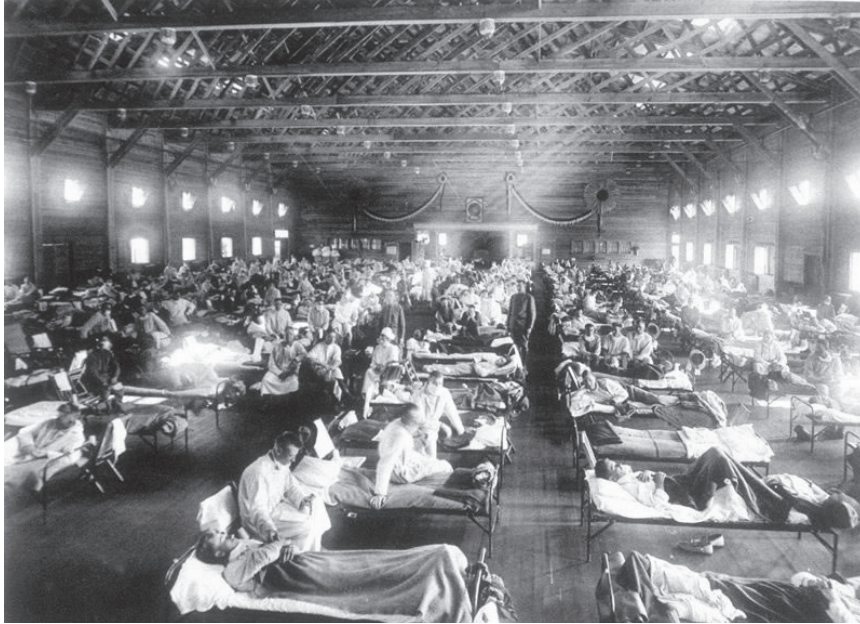


# Learning to Live with Death



Soldiers ill with Spanish influenza at Camp Funston in Kansas, 1918.

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Someone once said to me, “What is the spirit of this place and how can we get it across to our visitors?” Every time I start a new interpretation project, I ask myself this question. It’s kind of my mantra now. It keeps me focused on telling an accurate, unbiased story and encourages me to look at the esoteric side of the subject at hand, not just what’s immediately obvious. As interpreters we do our best to create impartial stories, often walking a delicate path between the needs of the client, stakeholders, and the audience. But what about ourselves? Do our personal partialities affect the manner in which we present a subject or the stories we choose to tell? Are we even aware of their presence in our decision making?

I ask this question because interpreting natural disasters brings these issues into stark view. Turning our communities upside down, natural disasters can be

devastating, leaving people to rebuild over many years and mourn the death of loved ones. They force us to take notice. They force us to look at death: catastrophic death, tragic death, death without bodies to bury. But are we really comfortable with contemplating mortality and exploring issues around death? How do we interpret a subject that in so many parts of the world remains the last taboo?

When interpreting a natural disaster, the obvious perspective is to focus on the natural processes and examine why it happened. We like to make sense of things. Sometimes it’s the only way to cope with the scale of the death toll. We might mention how many people died and give an example of a personal tale to add a human side to the story. This would be

good interpretation. However, I would like to question whether compelling human stories are sometimes missed because of the interpreter’s own feelings towards death.

Steve Taylor, senior lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University, writes in *Psychology Today*, “We live in a culture that denies death,” and as a result, “a large part of human behavior is generated by unconscious fear of death.” Death remains a difficult subject for many, even though it’s 100 percent dead certain that we’re all heading for the same final event. We might touch on it briefly during a religious service, a funeral, or perhaps when a character dies on TV, but we are not taught to talk about death openly. It’s become unpredictable, unknown to everyday life.

In recent decades, death care has been removed from families and put into the hands of medical professionals. Subsequently, “death is on the outside of life,” according to Caleb Wilde in *Confessions of a Funeral Director*. It is dealt with by hospitals, medical trusts, and death care organizations. Now out of our hands, we find it awkward to talk about. So when we’re called to interpret natural disasters, is it any wonder that we may choose to focus on the natural processes? Perhaps we look at mass death instead, which often remains nameless? We might refer to the large numbers of people killed as a way of showing how catastrophic the natural disaster was. But we are interpreters. We know that telling a more personal story or likening the subject to people’s lives (ours included) is actually more meaningful. Hence, I would suggest that good interpretation portrays the enormity of the death toll more effectively through personal tales.

However, at this point, we have a problem. Personalized death is raw. It's an emotionally confronting subject. It makes us think about our own lives, our families, and fears in ways that we might not want to tackle. Despite our best efforts to remain impartial, how often do we fall on the side of telling an environmentally themed story instead? Interpreters need to be careful not to attribute their own meanings or fears to the narratives of natural disaster interpretation. As with all subjects, we ought to seek to tackle difficult issues openly, sincerely, and truthfully. It is vital that we approach these subjects in a manner that encourages people to make their own meaning. Talking about meaningful subjects like death sincerely and truthfully changes lives. It gives victims a voice.

I hear some of you saying, that's fine for adults, but what about children? In the United Kingdom, Dying Matters Awareness Week occurs every May. It is a week of community events, held to raise awareness and encourage discussions about death, dying, and mortality. This year, we attended the event "A Dead Good Day Out" with Ichabod, our interactive death dummy. We developed him to train people to care for some of the common complexities of death and dying care. A South Korean film crew also attended and expressed their shock that not only was there was no age limit to the event, but that there were activities for children. Some of the most powerful interactions that Ichabod had were with children. They especially engaged with the interactivity of his bodily functions and wanted to touch his hand.

One woman who worked in child bereavement inquired about Ichabod teaching children about what a dead body looks like. She said that her classroom activity of children lying down with their arms crossed wasn't working too well. It wasn't real enough. Her willingness to talk about death with the children was refreshing.

By contrast, I spoke to a film



Interactive death dummy Ichabod Smith sits, ready for work.

maker last year who was asked to film a training session for teachers. The teachers were told that the session was to teach them about ways to talk to their classes about death, especially when a child's pet or grandparent dies. Only afterwards did they learn that the entire session had in fact been aimed at helping the teachers deal with their own feelings towards death. There was real desire to ensure that teachers did not impose their own unease with death onto the children, who in most cases, were quite black and white about the subject. I wonder

whether the organizers would have received so many attendees if they'd been more direct initially, about the real aim of the session?

In exploring the interpretation of natural disasters, it seems pertinent to ask, what actually is a natural disaster? According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, a natural disaster is "a natural event such as a flood, earthquake, or hurricane that causes great damage or loss of life." The severity of the disaster is measured through the economic loss, a community's ability to rebuild, and the human lives lost. It seems to be a greatly human-centric event. A heavy storm that floods a termite mound is undoubtedly a natural disaster for those termites, when as humans, all we are left with is a few puddles.



However, in measuring human lives lost in the context of natural events, it seems acceptable to suggest that certain diseases be considered as natural disasters. Consider widespread infectious diseases like AIDS/HIV, Spanish influenza, and the plague.

When a person dies of disease, their death is determined as death by natural causes. Now, if those deaths occur on a massive scale, do they not become natural disasters too? Over 230,000 people died in the 2004 South Asian Tsunami, yet these deaths remain greatly disproportionate to HIV/AIDS deaths. Since the first reported case of HIV in the Congo in 1959, 25 million people have died from AIDS, according to *AIDS Orphan*. Moreover, *National Geographic* identifies that the 1918 outbreak of Spanish Influenza killed 50 million people worldwide. In the 14th century, the plague claimed an estimated 75 million people, according to History.com. Nevertheless, worldwide natural disasters are still commonly referred

Ichabod with his coffin at "A Dead Good Day Out" in Southampton, United Kingdom, during a 2014 Dying Matters Awareness Week event.



to as environmental events, such as floods, earthquakes, forest fires, drought, volcanoes, hurricanes, and landslides.

The interpretation of natural disasters offers us a platform to examine a range of issues outside of the expected environmental stories. As interpreters, we hold a critically important tool within us. Our ability to create experiences that challenge social norms and accepted wisdom is a true gift. However, it also forces us to reflect upon our own lives. Regardless of our fears, death is ever present. It will come to us all. "Its transformative power is always accessible to us," Taylor writes, and "becoming aware of our own mortality can be a liberating and awakening experience." Accordingly, interpretation that approaches human mortality with an open heart can be revolutionary. It has the potential to create remarkable unforgettable experiences...but only if we learn to live with death ourselves.

### For More Information

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