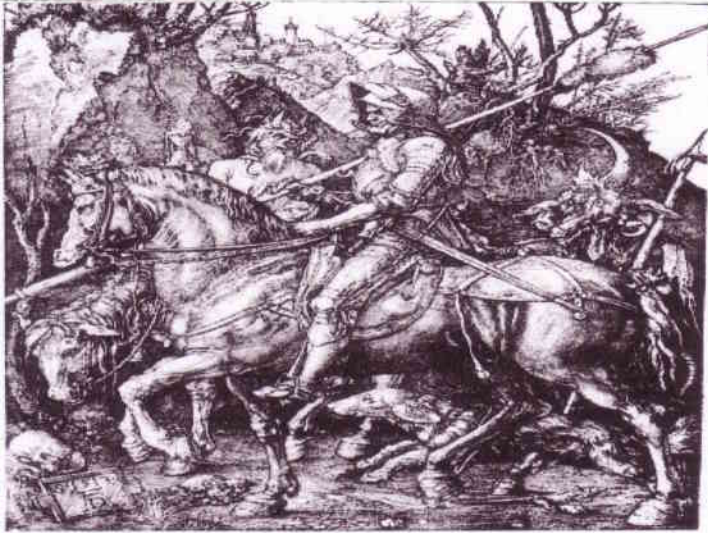


A vintage, sepia-toned photograph of a funeral home. In the foreground, a white casket is open, revealing a young child lying inside, surrounded by flowers. The child is wearing a dark dress. The casket is on a metal stand. In the background, a large crowd of people, including men, women, and children, are gathered. Some are looking towards the camera, while others are looking towards the casket. A woman in the center background is holding a large, ornate floral arrangement. The overall atmosphere is somber and formal.

Death

Death



“On a large enough time line, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero.” – Chuck Palahniuk.

Death. It is the one thing that every person on the earth has in common with everybody else. No matter you're race, gender, religion, or monetary standing, you're going to die. It's as simple as that. Death is definitely the great equalizer, so it should come as no surprise that it fascinates us so much. Death is found all throughout our culture – in our movies and music, our books and poems, our sciences, and even our history. Yet most of us probably don't realize how often we deal with this unsettling topic. In this final chapter of *Disciplinary Action*, we'll look at the ways in which the various disciplines tackle themes of death, decay, and finality.

In Literature, there is perhaps no more common a theme than that of death. The literary giants William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and Ernest Hemingway utilized this theme extensively throughout their works. For example, Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear* all deal with death in some way or another. The great poet Emily Dickinson seems to have been

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fascinated by death and dying, which is best exemplified by her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." Of course, great literature doesn't begin with Shakespeare and end with Hemingway. When discussing literature, we must also take into consideration the writings of the ancients. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient Mesopotamian poem, is one of the earliest known works of fiction. It chronicles the adventures of the hero-king Gilgamesh and his quest for immortality. And for the ancient Greeks and Romans, death was a key component in their mythology. The Greeks explained away the changing of the seasons by the story of Persephone and Hades. Persephone, a goddess of nature, was forced to spend a few months out of every year in the underworld as a consort to Hades, thus leaving the earth barren in winter. This parable for the changing of seasons manages to tie the death of plants and foliage to that of the human underworld. And let's not forget that the number one selling book in the world, the Bible, deals with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For most people, death could not be more poignant and powerful than in the passion of Christ. Finally, modern day authors such as Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Ann Rice sell millions of books that center almost exclusively on death.

The argument could be made that science and medicine would not exist if it were not for man's inherent fear of dying. For what is medicine but the attempt of man to extend his own life? Of course, the abating of suffering is an incentive for medicinal practice as well, but the overall concern of any man of medicine -whether he is a witchdoctor, a homeopathic practitioner, or a modern day surgeon - is to delay death. As intelligent creatures with a conscience mind, we understand that our time here is limited. So, it stands to reason that as those intelligent, conscience creatures we try to find ways around these natural inconveniences. As of this time in history, we humans know that death is imminent

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and unavoidable, yet there are still plenty of thoughtful men and women searching for ways to make this uncomfortable reality a thing of the past. Perhaps, through science, we will one day find a cure for the ultimate disease – death.

History itself is inherently morbid. For when we study history, more often than not, we are reading and writing about people who have long since passed away. Aside from the simple fact that history is the study of the past, thus generally pertaining to death in some form, there are many historical topics that are steeped in morbidity. The violent, bloody, and ultimately deadly topic of war is a main field of research for historians. But war isn't the only gruesome thing of historical importance. Pandemics, natural disasters, murder and assassinations are all areas of historical research in and of themselves. Why? Because we learn a lot about ourselves and our society by studying the effects of traumatic events in the past. For example, many historians believe that the black plague is largely to blame for western civilization's obsession with death. The ideas of *memento mori* and *danse macabre* are seen as relics of the devastation of the plague. Our common practice of remembrance for the dead is derived from the concept of *memento mori*, while *danse macabre* (literally dance of death) is the notion that everyone is dancing with death at all times. These two concepts on death have had a profound impact on our culture to this very day.

The fields of psychology and sociology also deal with death. For the psychologist, the areas of interest tend to be with the living, however, and how humans deal with grief and loss. The human brain is an interesting thing indeed, and psychologists want nothing more than to learn how to understand and even manipulate this complex organ. In terms of sociology, the effects of death on society as a whole must be considered. The topics of

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sociological interest that pertain to death are broad; everything from abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and murder. Let us not forget that psychologists and sociologists alike have something to say on how violence and death in media (e.g. movies, music, video games, etc) affects our children and teenagers. Of course, psychologists and sociologists study things other than death, but the topic does play a significant role in both disciplines.

In the visual arts and media, death is extremely prevalent. Artists have long since been drawing, painting, and sculpting depictions of violence, war, and death. All one has to do is make a trip to their local museum to see this in action. In modern times though, we tend to shy away from the drawings and paintings that one would find in a museum. However, death is still a significant part of our artistic expressions and entertainment. Movies such as *300* and *Gladiator* glorify death as honorable, whereas films like *Rambo* and *True Lies* imply that killing those who get in your way is just a necessary part of survival. The incidence of death in television shows is just as high as for films. How many soap opera characters have been killed off to provide the viewer with that irresistible twist? The medical dramas such as *E.R.* and *House* present us with death almost every episode. And even the comedy *Scrubs* has rolled a large number of guest stars off to the morgue. As far as music goes, you might think that themes of death are only prevalent among death metal bands – hence the name. But there are plenty of songs in all genres of music that deal with death. Blue Oyster Cult's *Don't Fear the Reaper*, Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven*, Blink 182's *Adam's Song*, and Eminem's *Stan*, are just a few examples of the various generations and genres of music that make use of this theme.

So there you have it. Death truly is all around us all the time. It pervades every aspect of our lives, from our entertainment to our education. We read death, we see death, we play death, we even study death. Though we definitely fear it, we just might love it. For why else would we let something we feared consume so much of our time if it were not for the fact that we admire and respect it also? In any case, the fact remains the same. We are surrounded by and incapable of escaping from death. For this reason alone, there is perhaps no more pertinent a chapter to *Disciplinary Action* than this final chapter. Read it if you dare.

When TWA flight 800 blew apart over the Atlantic Ocean in the summer of 1996, there were no survivors left to tell the tale of what happened. Since the plane exploded over water, the black box that was installed to record exactly what happened could not be found. So, as is usually the case with situations like this one, it was up to the scientists to determine, based on the physical evidence, what exactly happened to TWA flight 800.

Beyond the Black Box is a chapter out of Mary Roach's book *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. In the chapter, Roach interviews one of the men responsible for solving the riddle of flight 800, Dennis Shannahan. The selection was chosen because it exemplifies how death and tragedy can be studied in order to help prevent further tragic events.

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BEYOND THE BLACK BOX

*When the bodies of the passengers
must tell the story of a crash*

Dennis Shanahan works in a roomy suite on the second floor of the house he shares with his wife, Maureen, in a subdivision ten minutes east of downtown Carlsbad, California. The office is quiet and sunny and offers no hint of the grisly nature of the work done within. Shanahan is an injury analyst. Much of the time, he analyzes the wounds and breakages of the living. He consults for car companies being sued by people making dubious claims ("the seat belt broke," "I wasn't driving," and so on) that are easily debunked by looking at their injuries. Every now and then the bodies he studies are dead ones. Such was the case with TWA Flight 800.

Bound for Paris from JFK International Airport on July 17, 1996, Flight 800 blew apart in the air over the Atlantic off East Moriches, New York. Witness reports were contradictory. Some claimed to have seen a missile strike the aircraft. Traces of explosives had turned up in the recovered wreckage, but no trace of bomb hardware had been found. (Later it would come out that the explosive materials had been planted in the plane long before the crash, as part of a sniffer-dog training exercise.) Conspiracy theories sprouted and spread. The investigation dragged on without a definitive answer to the question on everyone's