

# SOCI 389 <sup>1</sup>

## Course Title: Death and Dying

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**Instructor: Tucker D. Farris, M.A.**

### Course Description:

(From UVIC Catalog): “*Sociological approaches to death and dying, emphasizing cross-cultural differences in the construction of the meaning of death and dying, the rituals accompanying these processes, and their legal, economic and political aspects. The course also focuses on how death is accounted for and processed by state and health agencies.*”

This course will examine the social process(es) of death and dying in contemporary society with specific attention paid to the current social context of the COVID-19 world health crisis. Students will explore the concept of death from a variety of theoretical and philosophical traditions in order to gain a specific understanding of the social weight placed on mortality and, as a result, may hopefully gain valuable insights into life as a social being. We will explore the idea of death with a sociological lens, paying particular attention to concepts such as legacy, the necessity of death, defining death, and the social construction of death in modern society. This will be a class where one may expect to explore the idea of death in a social way and we may together explore the narratives and ideas surrounding the end of life in our cultural contexts as well as in others. We will question the nature of death as a *social* experience, and present an opportunity to reflexively contemplate the nature of our own mortalities.

Ultimately, the end of life is a deeply social component of our existence, where awareness of our own mortality colours our experience of everyday life in ways that are both implicit and explicit. This course will allow students to explore the deeper meanings of death and dying across social contexts and within their own social reality to strive at developing a more complete system of social knowing around death and their own everyday lives.

### Course Objectives:

Students will engage in critical mediations and theoretical applications towards the concept of death and the process of dying. They will grapple with these crucial components of life (and social life) in a socially metacognitive fashion. There are several key objectives students will be expected to accomplish over the course of the term: (1) to gain a broad understanding of key philosophical and theoretical understandings of the social components of death and dying; (2) to contextualize death and dying in the contemporary social world, with a specific focus on the implications and social changes surrounding death and dying as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 world health crisis; (3) to exhibit a degree of metacognitive introspection into their own mortality and the social factors they engage with in their social realities as a result. Finally, it is expected that this course is part informative and part reflective so that students may develop both

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<sup>1</sup> This outline is only intended to give an overall sense of the course. A detailed course outline will be made available before the first day of class. Only that outline is to be considered official.

an understanding of death and dying from an academic perspective, as well as a personal one. Students will engage these social forces in both academic and personal ways through readings and through the semester-long composition of an introspective sociological journal wherein they will reflect on the concepts discussed in class and their current existence in a global pandemic. These journals will be referred to as 'plague diaries' and will be students' primary form of assessment for the course.

### **Course Pre-requisites:**

None, SOCI 281 recommended

### **Topics May Include:**

The metaphysics of death and dying in contemporary society, philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the subject in both historical and contemporary veins, the sociologically interactive components of death and dying, spiritual contributions to the human understanding of mortality, typology of death (I.E. when does a death become 'tragic,' or 'heroic'), institutional realities of death and dying (legal processes of death/interactions with the state regarding death), the neoliberal state and death, social interpretations of death (I.E. socially constructed explanations and rationalizations of death and dying), sociohistorical components of death and dying, the future of death (explorations in our contemporary engagements in death and a sociological look into emergent trends of how death is being considered as we evolve into the 21<sup>st</sup> century), and most critically: death and dying in the age of COVID-19.

### **Required Resources May Include:**

*The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death; Eds. Bradley, Feldman, and Johansson*

Course material will be a sampling of readings from peer-reviewed journals, primary writings from key theorists, and excerpts from Daniel Defoe's *A Diary of the Plague Year*. All readings will be made available via Brightspace or in class.

The course will require access to a computer with internet connection for access to course materials. However, in the interest of equity and sensitivity to accessibility of these materials, they may be provided by the instructor for students that have a need for them.

Additional resources may include documentary films/video clips/podcasts ('oral histories' related to COVID-19 and death within the pandemic)

### **Mode of Delivery:**

The course is scheduled for Tuesdays and Thursdays at 6:00 PM (PST) to 8:20 PM (PST) and will be **In Person at UVIC (CLASSROOM TBA)**. The class will follow every COVID-19 safety recommendation of the university and the BC Ministry of Health. Each week will encompass two distinct 'units' or major topics of inquiry. Students will have between 1 and 3 readings for each unit. Some weeks all readings will be required, other weeks students will have the choice of several with the in person class being a semi-structured seminar where students will engage in cooperative peer-teaching excersizes. Additionally, the course will contain an experiential educational component at least once every other week where students will engage

with the material in transformative and creative ways. These activities represent an experimental aspect of the course and as such will not be the same or concrete as the course develops.

Finally, students will engage in a weekly written assignment (the 'plague diary') which will see them engaging with course material and applying it to the current world health crisis and their own lives. These contributions will be relatively short (300-500 words), but the diary will grow to be a substantial metaphysical/introspective piece on death and dying. Students' final assignment will be to edit their diaries into a complete volume and to write a short (5-7 page) commentary of their work over the term. It is the hope that students will blend creative reflexive sociology and academic rigor to create a product that, by the end of course holds both intellectual and personal merit. This assignment is the primary assessment measure of the course.