

The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.
"Without vision, the people perish."

The Teenage Suicide Holocaust: Is Death Education the Cause?

Over 50,000 American teenagers have committed suicide since the introduction of death education in America's public schools in the early 1970s. According to *Education Week* (10/31/84), there are 18 teenage suicides a day in the United States, or about 6,570 per year.

In 1985, a half million teenagers tried to kill themselves (*Boston Herald*, 3/5/86). There is no reason to believe that this widespread death wish among teenagers has abated.

Teen suicide is now so common, that only the most spectacular tragedies get national attention. One such tragedy occurred last spring in Sheridan, Arkansas, where three high school students committed suicide within 24 hours of each other. The town, with a population of 3,200, is about 40 miles south of Little Rock. According to *Facts on File* (5/18/90):

"The suicides began April 30, when a 17-year-old student, Thomas Smith, walked to the front of his American history class at Sheridan High school, told one of the girls in the class he loved her and then shot himself

in the head with a .22 caliber pistol as his classmates watched.

"Later that evening, a friend of Smith's, Thomas M. Chidester, 19, was found shot to death at his home with a .45 caliber pistol, leaving a note that read, "I can't go on any longer." The next day, another Sheridan High student, Jerry Paul McCool, 17, was found shot to death at his home with a .22 caliber pistol. Police labeled the death a suicide, although McCool's parents insisted it had been an accident. The three deaths occurred in the wake of another suicide in Sheridan, by 17-year-old Raymond Dale Wilkinson, who had shot himself to death on March 28. Police said there appeared to be no link among the killings, other than the friendship between Smith and Chidester, and that none of the youths had been in trouble with the police."

Cluster Suicides

We are now all too familiar with these bizarre cluster suicides that have shocked

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and baffled communities all across America:

Jefferson County, Colorado: At least 14, possibly 17, teenagers committed suicide between January 1985 and April 1986. A study showed that "few of the victims had taken drugs or alcohol before killing themselves. Some had problems at school or with the law, but others were model students who participated in sports and had high grades." (*Rocky Mountain News*, 4/10/86)

Fairfax County, Virginia: Three Annandale High School seniors committed suicide between September 17 and October 26, 1987. According to the *Fairfax Journal* of 10/29/87, Annandale students are a "very ordinary bunch of American kids. . . . Nobody really knows what specific troubles the Annandale youths who killed themselves may have been facing."

Omaha, Nebraska: Three teenagers attending Bryan High School committed suicide and two attempted suicide within a two-week period in February 1986. According to *Education Week* of 2/19/86, the students were "normal kids, not really involved with drugs or anything."

Leominster, Mass.: On March 27, 1986, George Henderson, 14, a Leominster High School honor student, shot himself to death with a 12-gauge shotgun in his bedroom. He was the sixth teen suicide in Leominster in two years, the third in that school year. According to the *Worcester Telegram* of 3/28/86: "Here was a boy not identified as being a child at risk. . . . There was no indication something was wrong . . . he was a good student, an athlete from a relatively normal family."

Bergenfield, New Jersey: In March 1987, four teenagers — two boys and two girls — committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in a car idling in a closed garage. They had made a suicide pact.

Alsip, Illinois: Nancy Grannan, 19, and

Karen Logan, 17, described as best friends and classmates, committed suicide in March 1987 by carbon monoxide poisoning in a closed garage.

School Officials Baffled

School officials and parents express bafflement when trying to figure out why these youngsters are killing themselves. Some psychologists have suggested that it may have something to do with low self-esteem. But many of these suicide victims are good students, good athletes, well-loved by their families. So why are they committing suicide?

Is it possible that death education is the cause?

Most people, including parents, haven't the faintest idea what death education is. A graphic description of death education was given in the *Winslow Sentinel* of 4/9/90. Winslow, a town of about 5,500 inhabitants, is in central Maine where people assume that weird subjects like death and dying are not part of the curriculum. You'll assume differently after reading this:

Death, dying, funerals, wills and organ donations — pretty morbid stuff, but not for a group of Winslow High School seniors.

They wrote their own obituaries and epitaphs, filled out organ-donation cards, visited a funeral home and talked about such issues as mercy killing.

They wrote instructions for their own funerals.

As part of a week-long seminar on death and dying, the 60 seniors learned to feel more comfortable about the issue of death — what to do if someone dies, what to say to family members of a deceased loved-one, how to prepare for the inevitable.

"It's the first time I'd ever been exposed to anything like this. Families don't talk about death," said Jennifer Erickson, who took the seminar as part of her psychology class.

"Because of this course, I'll talk to my own kids about death," she said,

Jeffrey Charland attended the seminar as part of his sociology elective.

"A lot of people don't have experience with going to funerals," he said. "It helped us to feel more comfortable about being around someone who has lost someone."

Guidance Counselor Cathleen Clement taught the seminar. She came up with the idea for the course when she was in graduate school, looking at different areas in which students need exposure. . . .

"I wanted to (conduct the seminar) in a positive, upbeat way, even though the topic is morbid," she said.

Activities for the course included role-playing, in which students pretended someone had died. They went through the motions of dialing 911, making funeral arrangements, and either going through stages of grieving themselves, or helping another person through those stages.

In the process, they learned about the cost of being embalmed and buried in a coffin, as opposed to being cremated, and about the choices they have.

"We got a price list on everything, and it's expensive to die," said Erickson.

Charland said that while taking the course he has made the decision to be cremated when he passes on.

"I want to be cremated because of environmental reasons. It saves land and is a lot cheaper," he said.

The trip to Gallant Funeral Home Inc. in Waterville was neat, according to Charland.

Although the students did not see any bodies there, they did see the equipment and tools used for preparing them for burial. . . . The students saw the make-up, and learned that a hairstylist comes in to fix the corpse's hair. . . .

Clement said the students never stopped asking questions at the funeral home. . . .

Erickson said she wants to teach, probably high school sociology, and Charland wants to work in the field of psychology.

Clement said some students initially felt uncomfortable with the seminar, but eventually became less afraid.

Were Parents Consulted?

There is no indication in the article that parents were consulted about the seminar or were asked for their approval. Also, not all students react to death education as calmly as the two interviewed by the reporter. Some get quite upset. Death educator, Nina Ribak Rosenthal, in an article entitled "Death

Education: Help or Hurt?" (*The Clearing House*, Jan. 1980) wrote:

"Death arouses emotions. Some students may get depressed; others may get angry; many will ask questions or make statements that can cause concern for the instructor. . . . Students may discuss the fact that they are having nightmares or that the course is making them depressed or feeling morbid. . . . Others may have no reactions or feel a great sense of relief that someone finally is talking about the things they often felt they could not say. Others may become frightened. In fact, Bailis and Kennedy report that secondary students increased their fear of death and dying as a result of participating in a death education program."

Depression, fear, anger, nightmares, morbidity. These are the negative emotions and reactions stirred up in students by death education. Is this what parents want their children to experience? Is this what they send their children to school for? However, according to Ms. Rosenthal, simply because death education can cause such emotional turmoil and anxiety is no reason not to teach it. "Since death has been such a taboo topic, open and honest communication is essential. Such communication," she writes, "helps to desensitize students to anxiety-arousing items."

Desensitizing Children

Thus, the purpose of death education is to "desensitize" children to death — to remove or reduce that reasonable, rational, and useful antipathy to death that helps us preserve our lives. It is when children begin to see death as "friendly" and unthreatening that they begin to be drawn into death's orbit and lured to self-destruction. It's a phenomenon that might be called "death seduction," in which an individual is drawn irresistibly into a fascination and then obsession with

death. The individual begins to hate life and love death.

Death Ed in Kindergarten

Death educators are quite aware that they are dealing with a highly charged, taboo subject that many children cannot handle. But that hasn't stopped some teachers from introducing the subject in kindergarten. The January 1989 issue of *Young Children*, published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, carried an article by kindergarten teacher Sue Spayth Riley about her class's trips to a cemetery.

After a discussion about burials and cremation, one little girl says, "If I die I don't know whether I want to be put under the ground or not. I want to think about that some more."

A little boy says, "When I die I'm not going to be buried; I'm going to be flamed."

The cemetery visits deeply impress the children as can be seen by the bizarre games they invent back at school. Ms. Riley writes:

Dramatic play after the trip deepens and extends the experience. On the playground the morning after this year's pilgrimage, I watched as several children in the sandbox improvised three gravestones by propping plastic frying pans vertically in the sand. The children then lay down in front of their headstones. When another child walked by, one of those in the sandbox called out, "Hey, this is a graveyard, you want to be dead?" Another gravestone was erected, and a child began sprinkling sand on the others. There ensued much arranging and rearranging of children and markers.

Another youngster built a large rectangular block building — a child's version of a mausoleum — with enough room for a child, hunched up, to get inside. Ms. Riley writes:

This box-like structure was solid on all sides except the front where a baby blanket, supported by a long block on top, served as a door. When a child huddled inside, the blanket was lowered.

When (the boy) called me to the block room to see his creation, Greg explained, "This is a place for dead people." . . .

Observing from the sidelines I watched the "dead game" progress. One child at a time would be "dead," she or he would enter; Greg would lower the curtain.

Greg then announced they were going to put some dead babies in the box. He placed several dolls in a large wooden crate, then put another small box on top with two more dolls laid side by side. He attempted to put the whole package in the "place for dead people." . . . "Too big, it doesn't fit," he said. He then transferred the dolls into two shallower boxes. . .

Obviously, Ms. Riley and the National Association for the Education of Young Children are convinced that these morbid experiences are of benefit to the children. However, the high incidence of teenage, and now even preteen, suicide seems to indicate otherwise.

The Power of Suggestion

Children are extremely suggestive. Recently, in Canton, Michigan, an 8-year-old boy was shown a suicide film in school, in which a child who is depressed tries to hang himself. Less than 24 hours later, the 8-year-old, mimicking the boy in the movie, hanged himself in his own bedroom. (See *BEL*, April 1990)

This was not the first such suicide. In 1985, a 14-year-old high school freshman, an honor student with great promise as an athlete, hanged himself after watching a television movie about teenage suicide, *Silence of the Heart*. (*NFD Journal*, Feb. 1985)

As a result of these copycat suicides, the press has noticeably reduced its reportage of teen suicide. Nevertheless, the schools are increasing their programs on death and dying, making it virtually impossible for any child to escape the influences and effects of this dangerous, morbid subject. And parents, kept largely in the dark, don't even know what is going on. They send their

children to school smiling and happy only to have them return home depressed and suicidal.

How It All Began

How did death education get into the schools in the first place? The subject began to be taught in the early 1970s after the 1969 publication of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's influential book, *On Death and Dying*, based on her lectures to medical students and personnel. Since then, Dr. Kubler-Ross has lectured widely, spreading her credo that "dying can be one of the most beautiful, incredible experiences of life if it is shared with loved ones." Acceptance of death has become the central theme of her work.

This view is completely contrary to the Biblical view, which sees death as the tragic consequence of man's initial disobedience of God's commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through Adam's sin, mankind became infected with the satanic spirit, against which every human being has had to struggle. According to the New Testament, the coming of Jesus Christ provided man with the possibility of ultimate victory over Satan: forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life after death.

Needless to say, our humanistic educators do not accept that view of death as the consequence of sin. They prefer to see it as a "natural process."

The Making of a Death Cult

In the 1970s Kubler-Ross became involved with a spiritualist cult in Southern California, led by a "spiritual healer" named Jay Barham who believed in "spirit guides" and practiced "out-of-body experiences." With Barham she founded a healing center called Shanti Nilaya, "the final home of peace," which has also become the center of

a religious movement.

Kubler-Ross herself has become the charismatic leader of a New Age death cult. According to *Omega, The Journal of Death and Dying* (Vol. 16, No. 2, 1985-86):

"Kubler-Ross' religion is a new form of an old tradition of religious thought and practice, namely, the tradition of the mystery religions, which thrived in pre-Christian antiquity. The womb and the grave have been equated in mystery religions. . . . This is precisely the significance of Kubler-Ross' choice of death and dying as her primary consideration as a charismatic leader."

Death Educators Organize

In 1973, a group of death educators decided to organize a professional association, one of the purposes of which is to promote death education in American schools. The name of the association was the Forum for Death Education and Counseling. Its purpose was three-fold: facilitate communication and publishing among death educators; organize conferences and encourage networking; and develop programs to train individuals "in the theory, methods, and subject of death education and/or death-related counseling."

The first president of the Forum was Dan Leviton of the University of Maryland (1976-78). He was followed by J. Eugene Knott, University of Rhode Island (1978-80); David L. Frederick, University of South Carolina (1981); Bruce Bowman, Maryland (1981); Joan N. McNeil, Kansas State University (1982-84); and John S. Stephenson, San Diego, California (1985-87).

The Forum's 1985 directory listed 689 members, 494 (72%) females and 195 (28%) males. Members represented 43 states, the District of Columbia, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Australia. In 1987, the Forum changed its name to Association for

Death Education and Counseling (ADEC).

A Growth Industry

In 1986 president John S. Stephenson announced that the Association had now "achieved adolescence and is ready to embark on fresh territory." He said:

"The Association needs to become a household name similar to that enjoyed, for example, by the American Medical Association and the National Education Association. . . .

"Visibility gives an organization the opportunity to make its case. It also brings us face to face with our enemies and that seems to be important in planning strategies. One reason death education apparently has not met with significant resistance may be due to the fact that it is not widely known. We need to change that and provide the public with an appropriate forum."

Public Ignorance

As of 1990, the public seems to be as ignorant of death education as it was in 1985. Meanwhile, the death educators are busily promoting their interests among fellow professionals. In an article entitled "Development Opportunities for Teachers of Death Education" (*The Clearing House*, May 1989), the author, Darrell Crase, an education professor at Memphis State University, writes:

This article reaffirms the need for death education and offers some methods for improving pedagogical skills of teachers.

A task force appointed by the president of the Association for Death Education and Counseling . . . is charged to (1) carry out a study of the current state of death education in U.S. schools, (2) make recommendations for the ideal K-12 curriculum in death education, and (3) make recommendations for minimal knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers should possess before attempting to teach death education to children. . . .

. . . Although we can assume that most pedagogical efforts are sound, recent examples have surfaced, depicting miseducation and ill handling of attempts to address dimensions of dying and death. Consider the following items from the *Dallas Morning Press*:

"Some (have) blamed death education classes for the suicides of two students who attended courses in Illinois and Missouri. Other students have suffered traumatic reactions. Minimally trained or untrained teachers have asked first graders to make model coffins out of shoe boxes; other students have been instructed to sit in coffins, measure themselves for caskets, list 10 ways of dying (including violent death), attend an embalming and touch an undraped corpse (Levin 1988)."

There have been a few other examples of ill-advised instruction such as a quick, three-day, shotgun approach to death education (Mueller 1978) where young students were asked to respond to a host of potentially upsetting death related phenomena. A lawsuit was filed (Freeman 1978) on behalf of students who claimed damage resulting from inappropriate pedagogical techniques. Certainly mistakes do occur in many instructional settings and some minimally trained teachers may, on occasion, handle situations inappropriately. But let us hope that the above examples are rare and that effective death education is the norm in our schools throughout America.

Making Death Ed "Effective"

And so the death educators are more concerned with making death education more effective than investigating the possibility that death education, in and of itself, is a contributing cause of teenage suicide. The statistics alone should elicit some curiosity and interest, if not alarm. In 1960 there were about 1,000 teenage suicides; in 1984 about 5,000 (*Idaho Statesman*, 3/17/87).

What accounts for this steep rise? All sorts of top-of-the-head theories abound, but why hasn't there been some honest, probing research into the problem? Why must everyone involved seem so dumb-founded and helpless? Millions are spent researching insignificant phenomena, but not a cent has been spent on this life-and-death problem.

Is The Debate Over?

Meanwhile, the death educators have been forging ahead as if the debate over the wisdom of delving into this taboo subject is all over. In an article in the *NEA Journal* of March 1973, one death educator wrote:

"Death by its very nature involves science and medicine, social studies and sociology, psychology, history, art, literature, music, insurance, and law." Thus, death education can easily be integrated into any subject and permits classroom discussion concerning "the moral and ethical issues of abortion and euthanasia, and the spiritual and religious aspects of death and afterlife." The article ends with this justification for teaching about death: "Subject matter for today's education must have universality, must be intrinsically interesting, must be intellectually challenging, must have both personal and social relevance, and must prepare students for life. We believe that teaching about death meets these criteria."

Parents Are Irrelevant

And so the decision to introduce death education into the public school curriculum was made without consultation with parents who have become quite irrelevant in these matters.

In another article in the *NEA Journal* of Sept. 1976, the author, an English teacher at a Wyoming high school, wrote: "The highlight of the course was our visit to a mortuary and cemetery.... Afterwards... a boy stated, 'The visit to the graveyard and funeral home really blew my head, and I had to talk and think about death.'" And another student commented: "After discussing it with others, death didn't seem like such a terrible happening."

The NEA's Active Role

Not unexpectedly, the National Education Association has played an active role in promoting death education. It pioneered in the development of sensitivity training and values clarification by sponsoring the National Training Laboratory, founded in 1948 at Bethel, Maine. It has promoted death education by sponsoring the writing and publication of *Death and Dying Education* by Prof. Richard O. Ulin of the University of Massachusetts. The book includes an 18-week syllabus for the death educator. An article in the *Boston Herald American* of July 23, 1978 states: "At the time [Prof. Ulin] began doing reading and research, the National Education Association, the publisher of the book, was looking for someone to write about death education. A friend who heard about the NEA's quest matched the author with the publisher."

In addition, death education is promoted in a book on Health Education published by the NEA as part of a Series of books entitled *Education in the 80's*. There is a chapter in that volume entitled "Death Education Comes of Age" by Kathleen Hoyt Middleton. Ms. Middleton writes:

"In the 1980's the subject of death and dying will become an accepted and essential aspect of the health education curriculum. . . Journals such as *Death Education* and *Omega* can be helpful in keeping up-to-date on the issues. . . Funeral directors in many communities are also becoming more concerned with their role as educator." Ms. Middleton is the author of *A Conceptual Approach to Death and Dying Education*, a complete curriculum for junior high. She is also Director of Curriculum, School Health Education Project, part of the National Center for Health Education.

Uneasy Teachers

Death educators, of course, are aware that fear of the subject among teachers must be overcome. An article in *Phi Delta Kappan* of March 1974 states:

"It is considerably easier to know something about sex education as an adult than it is to have experience with one's own death. But at least we do possess value-clarification precedents in approaching the subject of death. We have the rich experience now of sensitizing adults to racial and economic discrimination, sex stereotyping, and other human relations problems. It should be possible to apply some of the strategies used in those earlier inservice efforts to the topic of death and dying. No administrator should be surprised to find that his staff is afraid of handling this topic, when he considers that research studies reveal similar fears among medical practitioners and even prospective funeral directors. . . . Surely the topic is too important to be kept in the morgue any longer."

And so, out of the morgue and into the classroom!

We have now had about 20 years of death education, and in that time well over 50,000 teenagers have killed themselves. In a year from now, another 5,000 will have committed suicide. Is it too much to ask of our "educators" that they investigate the problem?

Junior High Freshman Kills Self

The death of Jodi Ann Grist, 14, of Boise, Idaho, on March 8, was judged to be a suicide by Ada County Coroner Irwin Sonnenberg. He said that Grist hanged herself and died in her home of asphyxiation. An obituary in the *Idaho Statesman* of 3/10/90 stated: "Jodi, a freshman at South Junior

High School, was loved and cherished by all who knew her. She brought so much warmth, joy and love to her family and friends. She had so many special interests, including a love for horses, music and reading. Jodi will be missed by all who knew and loved her—she was such a special, precious little girl. We love you, Jodi!"

After Jodi's funeral on 3/12/90, Ada County Sheriff's deputies searched two carloads of young mourners coming from the funeral and found a gun. But a passenger in the car with the gun said no one intended any shooting and said the gun had been unloaded and taken away from a suicidal teenager for her safety. The unloaded .22 caliber handgun was found under the front passenger's seat and ammunition in the possession of one of the youngsters. No arrests were made. Ron Arnold, South Junior High principal, said the school has been offering counseling for students disturbed by the deaths. "It's kind of a cloud that goes over the entire school," he said.

Boy, 11, Hangs Self

The death of an 11-year-old boy in Boise, Idaho, who was found hanging from a swingset in the yard of his home on April 15, has been ruled a suicide by Ada County Coroner Erwin Sonnenberg.

Timothy Merritt was found about 1:15 p.m. with a rope around his neck, suspended from the crossbar of a swingset. Merritt's mother and a neighbor attempted to resuscitate the youth while emergency medical help was on the way. (*Idaho Statesman*, 5/9/90)

Vital Quotes:

"Humanistic education is the institutionalized love of death."

— Dr. R. J. Rushdoony