

A Happy Ending

Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer

For years, society has taught us about life, how we can live it well, and what we can do with our time here on earth. Rarely, however, do we discuss the end of life. Phillipe Ariès, a French historian, wrote a landmark book that placed death at the centre of discussion. Entitled, *Western attitudes toward death*, the book describes how dying and death was perceived from the middle ages on, and how, for example, the site of death has changed overtime from the living room, surrounded by loved ones, to the hospital bed, for some, surrounded by solitude. In modern times, people often die in hospitals amid an aura of failure and discomfort, because “the doctor did not succeed in healing” and “it has become inconvenient to die at home” (Aries, 1979, p.88). This way, societies’ sentiments have shifted from living with the death, and regarding death as a natural phenomenon, to death as a concept that interferes with the prospect of a happy life, because it confronts us with the impermanency of life and “frustrates the investments we have made in our lives: our hopes and ambitions, our plans and projects, our loving relationships with others” (cf. Dworkin 1993: 87, as suggested in Scarre, 1997, p. 269) ”

As a result of this conception, many Western societies have almost completely suppressed anything that could remind us of death. In Chinese culture, a similar sentiment is notable, where death avoidance is mainly brought about through religious tradition in which discussing dying and death should be avoided, as it may elicit bad luck (Hsu, O’Connor, & Lee, 2009). All in all, death has become something we wilfully ignore.

One could argue, however, that a shift in our attitude of death is happening again, and instead of a lonely death that is muffled away from the public, a happy, social death is one we more and more and strive towards, and even want to talk about. Besides International initiatives to start conversations about dying and death (for example, *Dying Matters* in the UK will hold their “Big Conversation” campaign on May 9th – May 15th, and the Conversation Project that seeks to encourage people to host a “Death over Dinner” party in the US), individuals more often express their desire for a good and happy death. The following story is a great illustration of this shift.

“I’m 90-years-old, I’m hitting the road.”

Meet Norma. Her personal interests are described as “Norma loves rock hounding, basket making, knitting, reading, jigsaw puzzles, Sudoku, tea, beer, sweet wine, and traveling! She has always wanted to ride in a hot air balloon and would love to go to the moon!” on her Facebook page. Although Norma looks vibrant and youthful, she has been diagnosed with cancer. Norma could have chosen to spend the time that she has left in a hospital, while receiving chemotherapy or radiation, but instead she opted out, saying to one specialist: ‘I’m 90-years-old, I’m hitting the road.’ Norma is currently on an epic journey, together with her son, daughter-in-law, a poodle,

and a motor-home. Her story has been covered on news sites all across the world, and her adventures can be followed directly through her Facebook page.



Norma enjoying different types of cake,
February 22, 2016



Norma at an Aquarium, April 2, 2016

(Images from Norma's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/DrivingMissNorma>)

While the pictures and updates show a happy Norma having her wishes being fulfilled--going on a hot air balloon ride and experiencing the luxury of being able to decide which type of cake to eat, her daughter-in-law also states the importance of Norma's story: "Everyone has different ideas about how they want the end of their life to work. . . As a planet, we need to have this conversation."⁶

So yes, the uncertainty but inevitability of death is scary, and separating from loved ones is a sad and difficult ordeal. But by refusing to regard death as a normal part of life, we decrease our chances of living happily until we die, since individual wishes and desires can't be shared. Perhaps there are things that are still to be learned from the middle-age practices described by Phillipe Ariès over thirty-five years ago, regarding death as a natural part of life that should neither be scary nor demoralizing. Stories like Norma's may help to normalize the process of bringing death back into life, and show us that this stage of life doesn't have to be the end-of-happiness!

Update: On September 30, Miss Norma passed away peacefully. She lived her life till the fullest, and enjoyed her journey until the end. She will remain a source of inspiration to all of us.

⁶ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/90-year-woman-chooses-trip-lifetime-cancer-treatment/story?id=37262967>