

## Living Well, Dying Well:

Engaging Students in Mindful Inquiry through *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

Anyone can be a Death Warrior, not just someone who is terminally ill. We are all terminally ill. A Death Warrior accepts death and makes a commitment to live a certain way, whether it be for one year or thirty years.

—*The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

I've been thinking about the collection of human truths that our society most strongly resists acknowledging—things like disability, disease, aging, death. What does it say about who we are and what we are afraid of? What does it say about what unexplored opportunities there might be for truth-telling and liberating wisdom?

—*Courtney Martin, "The Courage to Acknowledge Our Frailty"*

**T**eachers are asked to do impossible things on a daily basis: to create meaningful and rewarding learning experiences for all students; to prepare students for work and college; to be compassionate and understanding; to be of upstanding moral character; to prepare students for standardized tests; to develop themselves professionally; to teach and have important conversations about the enduring themes of human life. And that's a partial list. Given increasing professional obligations, both procedural and ethical, a curious absence in curricula and classrooms is explicit conversation and focused teaching around death and dying. Imaginative literature—both canonical and young adult—is replete with death. And so are our lives. As a topic of inquiry, it remains largely missing in our classrooms, or perhaps worse, avoided completely as a topic too difficult and controversial to address.

A central and often broadcast promise of humanistic inquiry is to deliberate with others what it means to live well. *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*, by Francisco X. Stork (2010), provocatively shifts the frame and asks, "What does it mean to die

well?" Stork's novel draws our attention to the process of dying, rather than death per se. What does dying well do for the dying and the living? How are those who live impacted by and connected to dying and the dead? Using *Death Warriors* as the fulcrum text, this article outlines an instructional unit for ninth graders that focuses on the ways that *dying*—the process of dying—is full of potential in the way it invites us to live intentionally, to reflect, to reconcile, to care and be cared for. We selected ninth grade because we imagine such a unit having an important influence on students during the whole of their secondary school experience. We believe our emphases on processes related to literacy and life can influence students' academic and out-of-school lives. In short, we imagine this unit affecting the intensity and intentionality with which students read, write, and live.

Based on our own secondary teaching experiences, ninth grade is an opportune and sensible time to begin this foundational work. We highlight how learning to die well can, paradoxically, teach us how to live well. To parallel our conviction that this process is full of learning potential, we imagine our unit helping

students, through direct engagement and reflection, experience the benefit of authentic inquiry and taking processes seriously as students and human beings. We offer readers a theoretically grounded and descriptive teaching unit outline with resources and approaches

for teaching *Death Warriors* and, more generally, about death, dying, and mindful living. We describe how one such *Death Warriors* unit might begin, generate momentum, and conclude. Readers will learn about texts and resources in ways they can adapt to fit the needs of their teaching contexts.

We approach our unit from a comparative perspective—one of mindfulness and contemplation influenced by Eastern philosophical traditions. Incorporating meditation and reflective writing, our approach provides a platform for having meaningful conversations about dying well—and what the processes of dying (and

living with those who are dying) make possible and visible in our lives. Stork's novel introduces readers to the complexities of life, death, and dying through two characters, Pancho and DQ. Death has taken Pancho's entire family—his mother, father, and murdered sister. The novel begins with and is propelled by Pancho's vow to find and kill his sister's murderer. DQ, meanwhile, is slowly dying of cancer but wants to live on his terms, not those set by doctors or his mother. The young men connect at St. Anthony's home, where Pancho is charged with caring for DQ, a role he begrudgingly accepts. While living his final days, DQ begins to write the *Death Warrior Manifesto*, a guidebook to mindful living. Because of DQ's friendship, including the numerous conversations he has with DQ about living intentionally and compassionately, Pancho chooses to honor his sister's death by living his life and not pursuing revenge. DQ honors himself

by living his final days in peace at St. Anthony's home instead of pursuing further cancer treatment.

Our work suggests approaches for establishing a contemplative, Eastern-influenced perspective on death and dying by incorporating meditation and contemplative writing practice. We also offer examples of supplementary texts to include alongside *Death Warriors*, providing detail about when and how they might be used in an instructional sequence. Finally, we offer examples of projects where students can apply their knowledge, skills, and understandings in authentic ways. Taking a lesson from DQ's orientation to death and dying, we intend our focus to provoke conversations with students about how we might live more intentionally with ourselves, with those we care about, and with those who care for us. Prior to a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of our unit, we feel it is important to provide a rationale for our choice to position death as a classroom-worthy, indeed vital, topic of inquiry.

## Why Death?

While death and dying are universal experiences, *how* we experience death and dying is culturally specific. Notions of appropriate grief and mourning rituals, questions of what happens after death, and the meaning of life itself vary greatly. Cacciatore (2009), for example, argued that while the experience of death is common to all cultures, there is little research on the effects of culture on how individuals and families understand, confront, and reflect on death. The rituals surrounding death and the ways grief is expressed can be quite different. Because our values and beliefs about death are part of our cultural identity, we should work to understand death as part of cultural competence (Galambos, 2003) and to provide support and opportunities to learn and question those cultural beliefs associated with death. Thus, it is important for humans (i.e., students) to develop the components of cultural competence related to dying and death (e.g., grief, mourning, ceremonies, and celebrations).

Regardless of who we are, death is an ongoing part of our lives. Because young adults can struggle developmentally to grasp the value of their lives and their cultural relationship(s) to life and death, they need opportunities to consider how conceptions of death influence how they live, the ways they mourn,

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and the rituals in which they engage to cope (Gire, 2014). Research has shown that children, even those too young to verbally articulate it, are aware of and concerned about death, making it all the more important to provide students with the requisite skills and lenses—for thinking about and responding to those concerns, for interrogating cultural representations of death (e.g., in literature), and for understanding the factors that contribute to their own perceptions of death. To support this work, teachers need to provide students with opportunities to:

- question the social “norms” of death and dying;
- conduct cross-cultural analyses of the values and practices related to death;
- understand and respect cultural differences (and similarities) with regard to death; and
- rethink their own beliefs about death and life.

Young adult literature (YAL) provides students fertile ground on which to wrestle with and make sense of the world around them. Teaching YAL allows students to examine how other adolescents manage and resolve issues associated with fear, sadness, and death (Tu, 1999). Thus, YAL provides students a safe space to consider complex and troubling topics through a fictional lens, an often necessary precursor for meaningful self-reflection and critique of contemporary life. Reading YAL in classrooms can support students as they develop language for reflecting on death and the skills necessary for discussing death as a part of their lives.

We find Stork’s novel a fitting conduit to explore these issues with students. One of the ways adolescents come to understand complicated topics and concepts, death included, is through literature. It is not news that literature—including literature for children and adolescents—can influence how we think and live. What adolescents read about death in literature could very well be the only guided opportunities they receive to consider death, their relationship to death, and their own beliefs and feelings about death. This becomes even more important when we consider the range of ways people and cultures view, react to, and position death. Engaging with and reflecting on death vicariously through literature is not simply a means for students to better understand their own beliefs about and responses to death, it also creates scaffolded opportunities to learn about life. While reading

YAL featuring death and dying, teachers can design instruction to support students as they ask important questions about death and culture:

- What cultural values related to death are expressed in this book?
- How do the positioning and valuing of death in this book align with and depart from my own beliefs and understandings?
- What cultural lens on death is provided throughout this text?

Below, we offer a discussion of the comparative views of death and dying included in the unit. These serve as our theoretical anchors and critical lenses through which students consider—through the readings and in their own lives—Western and Eastern views of death and dying and, by extension, of living.

## Comparative Views of Death and Dying

To help students critically consider death through literature, we borrow from McGoldrick, Almedia, and Hines (1991), who, writing about social work professionals, suggested five questions to ask when working with families who have experienced death. For our purposes, those families become the characters in our readings. We have adjusted McGoldrick et al.’s questions to guide students as they engage with the unit texts and to serve as analytic lenses for reading and for their lives moving forward:

- What rituals related to dying and death are culturally prescribed?
- What are the culture’s beliefs regarding what happens after death?
- What emotional expressions are considered culturally appropriate?
- What are the culture’s gender expectations when dealing with death?
- What are the culture’s social class expectations when dealing with death?
- Within the culture, are stigmas attached to specific types of death and/or are specific types of death regarded as especially traumatic?

To assist students as they consider how death is variously conceptualized across cultures, teachers can include curricula on comparative views of death and dying. While our unit does not include readings that

specifically address Western and Eastern views of death and dying, we do provide a brief overview here, as these lenses connect strongly to and illuminate our featured text.

### Western Views

How do Americans understand death and dying? It is important to read around this question to get a better understanding of how students think (or don't think) about death and dying in their everyday lives. According to contemporary anthropological accounts of death in American life, "modern Americans die *hard*," Lee

(2009) writes. "We live longer thanks to new advances in modern medicine, but we die with less equanimity than our grandparents did" (p. 55). Death is increasingly characterized by sanitation, isolation, and avoidance. As a society, we are more concerned with curing than with caring (Verghese, 1994).

Western societies, generally, keep death "invisible"—at once taboo, unnamable, but seemingly conquerable through technological invention (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984). In their reading of *Death Warriors*, students might apply this Western lens to DQ and the push he

receives from his mother to try new treatments and approaches, which ultimately places more focus on the avoidance of death than on intentional choices of how to live life.

### Eastern Views

In Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, followers are encouraged to face the reality of death, to make death an ordinary part of life, and thus live with more intensity and awareness (Hanh, 2002). In Tibetan Buddhism, the nine-round or nine-point meditation centers on becoming mindful of and aware of death. The meditation is organized around three "roots" and three "convictions" (Macdonald, 1984). The three roots are worded in the form of simple state-

ments: death is certain; the time of death is uncertain/unknown; mental/spiritual development is the only helper at the time of death. Three "convictions" necessarily follow. Following the certainty of death, one "ripens [the] inner potential by cultivating positive mental qualities and abandoning disturbing mental qualities" (p. 69). Following the uncertainty of the time of death, one "ripens inner potential, without delay" (p. 71). Following the fact that nothing—relationships or possessions—can intervene in or stop the inevitability of death, one ripens "inner potential purely" without "attachment to worldly concerns" (p. 74). In general, the nine-point meditation encourages one to be mindful of death and to live with purpose; thus, an Eastern orientation nudges toward a more intentional life. While Western perspectives suggest that one must be self-aware in order to be aware of death (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984), Eastern perspectives on death and dying reverse the order: one needs to become aware of death for any chance at self-awareness and development.

Eastern philosophies and approaches to death, dying, and living ultimately guide this unit and, through the unit readings, provide students a necessary lens for reflecting on and analyzing their perceptions of death. One way we advocate scaffolding this transition into new ways of thinking and living is through the implementation of contemplative practices in the classroom. Contemplative (and mindful) practices have received increased attention in US K–12 schools, as we see entire curricula devoted to secular and social approaches to living well. This new ideology or paradigm in education parallels the larger shift to promote healthy lifestyles through contemplative techniques (e.g., yoga and meditation). We, for example, provide our students ongoing opportunities to engage in meditation and contemplative ways of thinking as we also instruct them how to use mindful reading and writing practices in their coursework and in their lives. What follows is an overview of these contemplative practices and how we introduce and sustain them in the classroom. We want to note that we use contemplative practices, including meditation, in all of our courses and units of study, as well as in our personal lives. We do not recommend that teachers only include them sporadically, as this leads to a kind of cultural tourism that borders on theft. Instead, we recommend that teachers incorporate these practices

into their daily lives, courses, and units of study as a consistent routine.

### MEDITATION

A powerful practice for the ELA classroom, meditation plays an important role in any approach to mindfulness and contemplation and, for our purposes, to the study of death and dying. Because meditation is grounded in Eastern philosophies, practicing meditation can help students make connections between Eastern and Western ways of thinking and living. Similarly, meditation can become a new lens for students' examinations of self and heighten their inner awareness of life systems (e.g., breathing). These benefits can impact motivation, engagement, and cognitive and emotional presence.

To introduce students to meditation, especially in a room full of peers, we begin by guiding the process. We read scripts focusing on breathing (a vital component of meditation), and as students begin to feel more comfortable sitting in silence and focusing on their breathing, we introduce themed scripts that align with specific texts or conversations. An excerpt from one such script reads:

Focus on your breathing and notice how the air flows in and out. Visualize your breath gently flowing in and out of your body. [Pause]. Observe how your breath continues to flow. Deeply. Calmly. [Pause]. Notice each stage of a breath. Notice the in breath, and the pause that follows. Notice the exhale, and the pause before inhaling another breath. [Pause]. Feel your chest and your abdomen rise and fall gently with each breath. As you inhale, focus. Exhale, and focus. Inhale. Exhale.

With time, we extend the script pauses, helping students build meditative endurance and focus. Eventually, we remove scripts entirely, allowing students to become their own meditation guides. While we would encourage teachers to select and write scripts they feel work best in their classrooms and with their students, we also note the benefit of resources. Two such resources include meditation scripts and information from Edutopia (<https://goo.gl/BWtbRe>) and Mind Space ([meditationinschools.org](http://meditationinschools.org)), a research-based resource housed at Cambridge University. To help students reflect on their meditative experiences, we make writing a daily component of our contemplative practice. A meditation journal serves as a space for students to consider their new experiences, to imple-

ment writing as a part of their lives, and to reflect on their own connections to our readings.

### MINDFUL READING AND WRITING PRACTICE

Scholars across disciplines position mindfulness as an approach to disciplinary inquiry that emphasizes thoughtfulness, time, nonviolence, integrity, and reflection. Mindful inquiry, we believe, helps students engage more thoughtfully with unit texts, with the topic of death, and with their experience of living inside and outside the classroom. Part of a mindful inquiry approach is engaging with texts and our own thoughts at a measured pace (Tremmel, 2017). We recommend incorporating frequent journal writing to accompany the daily meditation for our unit. The prompts, largely open-ended in nature, ask students to consider what they are thinking and feeling post-meditation, how this stance relates to or conflicts with *Death Warriors*, and how their engagement with silence and slow thinking parallel DQ's journey to be(come) a Death Warrior. The content of specific writing prompts, of course, is at the teacher's discretion, but our general recommendation is to provide students space and time to process what they are learning about dying and, thus, living a meaningful life.

### Analyzing Death through *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*

Stork's (2010) novel serves as a unique site for examining death through multiple lenses and philosophies. The author does a masterful job of weaving together the lives of two characters who approach death differently—Pancho seeks revenge for a murdered family member, while DQ faces death by desiring a fulfilling life. With time, the divergent plots reconcile because of Pancho's friendship with DQ and transformed perspective. Because the characters approach

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death and dying in different ways—approaches that parallel Western and Eastern philosophies—*Death Warriors* fosters potentially fruitful discussions about the meaning of life, the destruction of anger, and the gift of friendship. Throughout much of the novel, for example, DQ lives his life in a way that closely aligns with Eastern beliefs. He composes his understanding of the relationship between life and death and his

philosophy of living within his opus, the *Death Warrior Manifesto*, a text that serves as a powerful prompt for reflection: “Anyone can be a Death Warrior, not just someone who is terminally ill. We are all terminally ill. A Death Warrior accepts death and makes a commitment to live a certain way, whether it be for one year or thirty years” (p. 195). DQ’s manifesto, readers are led to believe, is left unfinished—which offers teachers and students unique writing and assessment opportunities, which we later explore.

In contrast to DQ, Pancho spends much of his time angry and uses the clear dividing line he sees between life and death as

a catalyst for his actions. It is not until he has spent significant time with DQ that he begins to think differently about the quality of his daily life, including its emotional tenor. He eventually gives up on his agenda of seeking revenge for his sister’s death, due, in part, to DQ’s modeling a different way to live. Pancho’s character, particularly the gradual healing he experiences, offers students opportunities to reflect on how anger can protect but also empty the soul. Early in the novel, Pancho lives to be angry. By the end, we see his transformation into a sensitive, love-seeking, and giving person. Pancho, in a sense, “completes” DQ’s manifesto by living his life and choosing to love, reminding readers that a life philosophy is only on paper, but a life well-lived must be in the flesh.

Also in contrast to DQ’s approach to death, his mother Helen can be read as representing Western ideals, especially given her wealth and attempts to throw money at “a problem” (in this case, DQ’s cancer). Instead of listening to her son and honoring his needs and wants, Helen obsesses over finding a cure. She is not entirely unsympathetic—who wouldn’t want to try every available means of restoration?—but her efforts to cure affect the quality of DQ’s final days. As students closely read this novel, McGoldrick’s framework provides thoughtful reflection opportunities. For instance, posing the question, “What rituals related to dying and death are culturally prescribed?” points to the cultural conflict between DQ and his mother. He has gradually accepted that he will die and wants to spend his final days living with awareness and love. He is violating American cultural prescriptions about conquering death through cure—more medicine, more hospitals, more technology. The conflict between DQ and Helen gives students opportunities to question the death and dying rituals that compose American life.

## Supplementary Texts

In order to scaffold students’ understanding of cross-cultural views of death, our unit features YAL, children’s literature, and a variety of supplementary texts to assist students as they develop and reflect on their personal views regarding death and their emerging philosophies of life. Below, we provide a list of multiple texts and text types that teachers can use to create a comprehensive unit plan. While providing a detailed step-by-step discussion of how to weave each text into an instructional unit is outside the scope of this article, we do offer brief examples of how specific texts potentially fit within a unit and connect with the anchor text.

Rather than reading *Death Warriors* (or any novel) in isolation, we argue for pairing it with excerpts from a range of supplementary texts. These other texts could possibly include additional YA novels, such as Matt de la Peña’s *We Were Here* (2009) and *I Will Save You* (2010); traditional canonical texts, such as Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Agee’s *A Death in the Family* (1957); short stories, comics, and graphic novels, including Moon and Ba’s *Daytripper* (2011) and the webcomic *MaryDeath* (Tarpley, 2018).

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We also recommend incorporating informational or nonfiction texts (e.g., excerpts from Rhodes & Yedder’s *Introduction to Thanatology: Death and Dying in American Society* [1983]; Peter Saul’s TED Talk, “Let’s Talk about Dying” [2011]; Roland Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* [2010]), poetry (e.g., Neruda’s “Nothing but Death” [1993]; Brontë’s “On the Death of Anne Brontë” [1849]; and Howe’s “What the Living Do” [1997]), music (e.g., Bob Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” [1973]; Queen’s “The Show Must Go On” [1990, track 12]; and Tupac Shakur’s “Life Goes On” [1996, track 9]), and film (e.g., documentaries, such as Steve James’s *Life Itself* [2015]). Using a wide variety of texts can remind students that the topic of death is approached by artists, intellectuals, humorists, and journalists—and that they are not alone in reflecting on the end of life and, more immediately, the purpose of living.

Below, we provide more detail about four supplementary texts and how they can be incorporated into an instructional unit on *Death Warriors*. Reading a webcomic such as *MaryDeath*, a story about an inquisitive girl (Mary) and her best friend (Death) who is only visible to her, takes some of the power away from death and helps students rethink the negative connotations associated with death using some of the tenets of Eastern approaches discussed earlier. One comic in particular nudges viewers to be more aware of the ever-presence of death where we might not see it. The comic, dated 11.23.17, shows Death dressed in a dark cape with scythe in hand, standing in a field of turkeys, all alive. The caption above the single panel reads “Happy Thanksgiving” in quotation marks. The dry, ironic humor points to the hypocrisy of the holiday, given the death and destruction that surround it (animals, factory farming, and settler colonialism). A second example critiques habits of mindlessness, connecting usefully to a discussion of *Death Warriors*. In a 2x2 paneled comic from 11.15.17, Death enters a teen’s room, saying, “[I]t’s time,” matter-of-factly. The teen, in the middle of playing a computer game, responds with worry about whether his game character will die, too. Death, noticeably puzzled, responds that he does not think so. The teen, relieved, leaves the room with Death, noting that, “[H]e won’t be totally gone . . . just afk [away from keyboard].”

Through this comic series, Tarpley personifies Death and positions the character as contributing to

Mary’s identity development, highlighted by other briefly appearing characters and their seeming ignorance of death. What makes this narrative so interesting and aligns it clearly with our use of *Death Warriors* is how aware Mary appears to be that her death is inevitable, which leads her to question the purpose of life (a mindful approach to living and dying). Like DQ, Mary draws upon her knowledge and relationship to Death to navigate life in intentional ways.

*MaryDeath* might be read on a daily basis during the *Death Warriors* unit, particularly at the beginning or end of class; or, if a teacher chooses, students could read the comic independently and brainstorm similarities and differences between *MaryDeath* and *Death Warriors*, including how *MaryDeath* offers a critique of our contemporary attitudes on death and dying.

To ease students into the topic of death, the unit can begin with a class discussion of *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952), a text with which many students will be familiar. *Charlotte’s Web* raises questions about death obliquely, through the lives of animals, and gives students opportunities to consider death, suffering, and ethics. The opening scene in which the farmer is preparing to kill a piglet establishes death as a pending presence, making Wilbur’s possible slaughter the central conflict. Thanks to Charlotte’s writing of his attributes in her web, Wilbur becomes a prized (and spared) pig. As the novel continues, Wilbur watches his friend Charlotte throughout the process of her dying, and he uses that experience to grow, to strengthen, and to carry out her last wish. Using this novel as an introductory text can establish an important conversation around death and its role in Wilbur and Charlotte’s friendship. Similarly, in *Death Warriors*, Pancho lives a parallel experience with DQ by ultimately recognizing the impact that DQ’s living has on him and using that to reframe his entire being (i.e., to live as a Death Warrior).

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We also encourage teachers to include multiple poems throughout this unit to provide students yet another way to consider death and to make connections to the anchor text and unit theme. Marie Howe’s poem, “What the Living Do” (1997), for example, illustrates the difficult process of living with tragedy. Howe wrote her poem in memory of her brother and, through the poem, comes to understand that “moving on” might mean not an easy or all-at-once forgetting,

but rather remembering the living in everyday moments.

Howe’s poem connects to Pancho’s strong emotions after the death of his sister and the spiritual journey he takes toward mindfulness. His ordinary work at the orphanage and hospital, including entertaining young children, becomes part of the daily life of re-centering himself in relationships, in the ordinary work of living. In the end, Pancho comes to realize that he is alive and that to continue living, he must move on. Howe’s

poem might be read near the beginning of the novel as a point of comparison to Pancho’s or DQ’s inner experience. An open invitation to respond to the poem in writing could feature in the students’ journals after the daily meditation exercise. There are, of course, many possibilities for including Howe’s poem and others like it. We think short, emotionally evocative poems would pair well with *Death Warriors* at numerous points in the storyline and could inspire deeply reflective writing by students on death and dying.

To help students engage in multimodal analyses of the meanings and representations of death, we bring in texts like Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon’s graphic novel *Daytripper*. The main character, Bras de Olivias Dominguez, works for a newspaper where he composes obituaries. The narrative is a series of his experiences dying vicariously through those he writes about. Through the graphic novel, students are privy to these vicarious deaths and are asked to

reflect on the visual and textual representations of death and life, as well as the interconnectedness of the two. *Daytripper* not only presents students with a unique way to consider death and the relationship(s) between death and life, the dead and the living, but fruitfully connects to Stork’s novel. Just as Bras takes on the perspectives of the lives and deaths of those he is tasked with remembering through writing, *Death Warriors* provides readers a variety of perspectives of other characters (e.g., Pancho, DQ’s mom) who watch DQ live his life and plan his death. *Daytripper* could be read before or after (or alongside) *Death Warriors*, allowing students to keep a parallel character journal where they note the similarities and differences between the instances of vicarious dying. Doing so requires that they make meaningful connections to the characters in ways that foster their own unique experiencing of characters’ deaths. In other words, these texts position the students as those who vicariously experience death and dying.

Among other multimedia texts, we recommend including a variety of songs, Bob Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” for example. Dylan acknowledges that death is inevitable and that he is beginning to think about how this impacts life. In this contemplation of death, Dylan makes explicit connections between death and life and uses that to reconsider how he might live. Through analyzing the lyrics, students are exposed to another approach to the relationship between life and death, to another way of embracing that inevitability. In essence, “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” is a manifesto in its own way, as Dylan wrestles with his own mortality and what that means for his life. While reading the anchor text, students can compare Dylan’s frame of mind with DQ’s decision to compose a Death Warrior manifesto and how he uses that composition to drive his daily living.

## Summative Assessments

We have created a variety of assessment options for teachers that require students to apply the critical thinking and reflection skills they have learned in authentic ways. Some of these options—including the cemetery observation/reflection and funeral planning—may make teachers and students uncomfortable, and because of this possibility, we have included other projects. However, we do wonder whether any initial discomfort is, in fact, part of a larger problem

that this unit tries to expose and work through: the perception that the topic of death is unapproachable and inappropriate. We believe the projects require students to develop and extend their thinking about death and dying as a cultural and, ultimately, personal phenomena.

Two reflective writing prompts ask students to consider death as represented in related media or in their own community, to critically reflect on this representation compared to *Death Warriors*, and to apply these comparative analyses and reflections to their own life and developing life philosophies:

- Watch a TV program or movie (or read another YAL text) that deals with death. Discuss and critique the use of death and dying in this text. How does the text amplify, contradict, or otherwise complicate the themes of *Death Warriors*? What do you take away from this relationship and your analysis in terms of living your own life and living with those you care about?
- Spend time observing in a cemetery. Take notes of what you see, hear, feel, etc. Examine the symbols and representations of death and dying that you encounter. What do you notice? What do these symbols suggest about how we (as a culture) view and value death? What do they suggest about the dead and how we think about life and living? How does what you notice amplify, contradict, or otherwise complicate the themes of *Death Warriors*? What do your experiences observing, analyzing, and reflecting suggest to you about your own life?

The funeral planning and design assignment, described below, is meant to give students an authentic experience to help them think about what their life means and how they want to be remembered. We are convinced that our collective cultural and ritual practices give us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning we give our lives, and we approach the funeral planning assignment with this in mind. If teachers want to ask students to design DQ's funeral as a substitute, this is a sensible alternative that extends textual analysis. This assignment builds on the meditation and reflective writing students have completed throughout the unit. If teachers have asked students to compose part of their own Death Warrior manifesto, paralleling DQ's journey, that reflective work would connect to this culminating task as well:

- As a culminating project, you will plan your own funeral. Your planning may include writing an obituary or eulogy, composing the service itself (including music, literary or sacred readings, and related elements), and designing other elements of your choosing that we will discuss in class. Ultimately, this is a chance for you to think about and provide detailed instructions for how you would like your body cared for and how you would like your life to be remembered.

*Note:* Students will also reflect in writing about what they have learned about life and living from engaging in this assignment. Teachers might wait until students have begun or nearly concluded the funeral design process before informing them of the reflection. This delay is to forestall students losing themselves in abstract philosophies about life and living and to focus on the concrete details. We trust that students will be able to reflect in authentic ways about living because of and during their engagement with the funeral details.

## Conclusion

We often talk about preparing students for the 21st century, while we do not talk enough about preparing them to live meaningfully with their families and communities—and their own selves. Teaching about death and dying in thoughtful ways can support our students as they develop self-awareness and meaningful perspectives on living well. Death is part of our lives, without exception, and invariably influences who we are and who we might become. As such, teaching about death and dying needs to be a part of culturally relevant and sustaining teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). *Death Warriors* offers students an Eastern-influenced lens for considering death and dying, an approach that might provide a counterweight to cultures of isolation and silence surrounding death, dying, and related issues. We have extended texts and thoughtful approaches for teachers to use when teaching death and dying in their classrooms. If our students are to live more mindfully and meaningfully and, by extension, if our societies are to be more open and honest about taboo topics—and learn from the exchange—then our classrooms are the important places where those conversations begin.

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