

BOOK REVIEW
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The False Door between Life and Death
Supporting Grieving Students, Teachers & Parents
Torin M. Finser, PhD

SteinerBooks, 2019, 168 pages, ISBN: 978-1-62148-244-4

Dr. Finser's slim volume of myths and ideas surrounding death and loss takes the reader on a breathtakingly intimate journey through the grieving process and allows for space to reflect on loss from many angles. Perfect as a resource or a quick read, this book can easily fill a small but important space in any person's library.

We live in a world filled with uncertainties, a world that is unfortunately seeing children and those close to them dying more frequently through school shootings, car crashes, disease, and the opioid epidemic. The author's main arguments are these: we cannot let children face grief over death without guidance, and we as a community must connect to those who have passed to form a more fulfilling relationship with death and the deceased. In both of these ideals, the author relies on personal experience, interdisciplinary examples, and the universal feeling of loss to carry his narrative.

Finser acknowledges early on that talking to children about death is not an easy thing to do. Grief is different for everyone and requires certain supports at different stages in a child's life. The book draws on psychology to suggest ways of approaching death with children of all ages, and then provides methods of processing grief that are segregated more by age to allow for the best approach to the grieving child. The author provides many examples from his long teaching career of the use of art, music, and especially storytelling to allow children to approach their feelings about death in their own way and share their revelations in a supportive classroom community. While all methods are considered useful and valid, it is the use of storytelling that receives particular attention from the author, for as he says, "Rather than preaching, the meaning of a good story can be grasped at the level a child needs to hear..." (Finser, 64).

As such, the author draws on a wide variety of cultural traditions and scholarly resources to discuss our relationship to death and, often, our struggle to find purpose in it. Featured are tales from the brothers Grimm, African parables, Norse legends, ancient Egyptian religious practices, and stories the author has collected and used over a long life of teaching. Woven in among these examples are the author's personal anecdotes of loss and stories shared with the author of the impact death has had and the opportunities for connection and growth such losses provide. The book abounds with perspectives on death that offer hope and present death as merely a change in relationship to the deceased, rather than a loss.

The False Door also explores how we respond to death, both individually and as part of a community affected by a loss. The loss of any one person is felt throughout all whom they might have known, and each of those people longs for some kind of closure or connection

to fill that loss and make sense of it. The author describes this universal feeling succinctly as a possibility for connection: “When the heart is cracked open through an unexpected death, or even...with a death that was expected, there is a vulnerability that allows for bridge building” (Finser, 90). This is indeed what we see from the reprinted articles and personal testimonies in the volume: communities that came together around a tragic loss of a child and built new relationships, traditions, and meaning as they processed the death in their midst.

Toward the end of the book, Finser takes this idea of connection one step further and urges connections with those already gone to be nurtured and maintained. While unconventional, this argument abounds with beautiful stories of loved ones sending messages from beyond and provides a picture of loss that allows the living to feel close to their loved ones again. Once more, stories provide the connection here: remembering the deceased’s favorite things, recalling their personality, and reading to them as a means of reconnecting beyond the grave.

For its exceeding use of tales and anecdotes, that is where this book truly excels. Its masterful use of stories provides context to suffering and loss that can be understood at almost any age. There is one particular such story; “The Golden Casket,” which in a few short pages examines ideas of the finite nature of life, the importance of compassion, and the rewards of the afterlife in language accessible to any second-grader. The stories and myths contained in this volume draw from a multitude of perspectives and maturity levels to build a case for helping children and their communities to face death and begin to process their grief in a healthy way, be it from the loss of a parent, a sibling, or a friend.

At barely 160 pages (the final third of which are elaborate appendices filled with additional stories and meticulous background research), the book is a quick read but one that demands the reader’s full attention. This is not a “how-to” volume but rather a set of tools and tips for addressing grief and loss. It is a deeply personal exploration, but universal in its application. Teachers and community leaders of all walks of life will find wisdom within the pages that offer opportunities for community reflection on loss and examinations of the meaning of death.

The False Door is a great resource for parents and teachers of all kinds to have on hand before a crisis strikes; and something to return to as often as necessary to help the healing process within their school.