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Review of 'How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying,' by Karla Erickson

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Erickson, Karla (2013). *How we Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 192 pages. Paperback, \$25.95

How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying takes the reader on an engaging journey through the terrain of aging in America, with an emphasis on how our ideas about aging itself have changed the way we view death in the United States, and even the way we actually die. This book has an authenticity to it, as Erickson admits that her own inexperience with aging and death compelled her to enter this world and study it from the perspective of the insiders...those who care for older adults and the actual elders themselves. Based on hundreds of hours of participant observation and in-depth interviews with elder care workers and older adults themselves, Erickson critiques our societal response to what she calls the "longevity dividend." Although life expectancy has clearly increased, she suggests that we have not made good use of this extra time. The experience of living longer has many consequences for caregiving, quality of life, long-term care, and at the end, how we approach death.

She begins the book by providing an overview of aging in America, with a focus on the longevity dividend. She then moves into a discussion of long term care and its place in the care of older adults. Providing examples from her observations and interviews, she challenges readers to reexamine their views about long term care. Moving into a direct discussion of death, she reveals 8 lessons learned about the end of life from her study. Finally, she ends the book with suggestions for change and a call for increased interdependency in care.

Based on her observations and interviews with people inside the elder care system at a continuous care retirement community, Erickson suggests that because of our communal fears,

we have developed strong stereotypes against long term care. She makes the argument that this care is needed and that long term care facilities can even be places of life and joy at the end of life. In writing this book, she has also highlighted the importance of people working in long term care who are often devalued and underpaid, yet are essential to the end-of-life care in the United States.

This book has special applicability to those interested in women and aging, as Erickson stresses that not only are the elders who need care mainly female, but the caregivers are as well. She extends her analysis further by highlighting the fact that it is often women of color who are underpaid who take care of other women who have greater means.

In some ways, I think this book is more valuable in its analysis of our societal views about aging and the experience of living in long term care than it is about the process of death. I found myself wanting more depth and development of the discussion of death in this book. In chapter 4, she presents the 8 lessons that she gleaned from her interviews and experiences about death. Although important, they seem very basic and don't take an experienced reader or practitioner to a deeper level of analysis.

Practitioners who are not experienced in the field of aging will find this book to be very enlightening, and I recommend it as essential reading. Based on the changing demographics of our society, we can no longer evade talking about end-of-life care and the process of death itself. More experienced clinicians may find themselves looking for greater depth and analysis.

As a professor who teaches courses on aging and death, I would recommend this book for undergraduate students. Of particular interest to students would be the discussion of the changing population demographics, and the impact of class, gender and race on aging and end-of-life

care. One of the highlights for me as a teacher was Erickson's discussion of race, class and gender, as they impact aging and end-of-life care. Her suggestions for reframing the discussion and a call to increased interdependency should provoke thought and discussion among students, as well as lift some social taboos.

There is an increasing number of scholarly articles and books devoted to end-of-life care, as clinicians and academics now prepare to address these issues and respond to new challenges and debates. *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying* serves as an excellent introduction to these issues. It provides an understanding of the complexities of the care of older adults and the special need for addressing end-of-life care. For those who work with aging women, or students just entering the field, this book serves as an excellent source for basic information and as a vehicle through which to stimulate thought and important conversation.

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