In search of a tranquil "silence of the leaving": Reflections on the Dying To Know Film Festival's (D2KFF) opening weekend

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As a communication scholar and educator with a background in thanatology (death studies) and film, my curiosity was piqued when, several months ago, a friend and colleague brought to my attention an upcoming film festival on death and dying. Films have the power to provoke visceral contemplation on matters of body and mind that we would prefer to avoid or sanitize. Of such matters, the termination of our cellular activities and cessation of our consciousness and self rank among the highest. If films can make us reflect and introspect, it stands to reason that film festivals, by their communal nature, can turn hushed whispers about life's finitude into audible dialogue, and I was curious to see how that would unfold.

I reached out to the festival organizer, Caren Martineau, via e-mail, and soon after, we met via Zoom. She shared with me the history and mission of Bevival (https://www.bevival.com/), the organization she founded (more on this ahead), as well as the roster of films to be shown at the month-long festival, aptly called "Dying To Know." I then discussed the books that I am writing, including two on suicide that are published and forthcoming (Alvarez, 2020, 2023), as well as relevant courses that I offer at the University of New Hampshire (End of Life Communication, Death in the Digital Age, and Cinema and Society). By the end of our call, I had enthusiastically accepted her invitation to attend the festival's opening weekend and serve as a post-screening discussion panelist.

In 2014, when I was a PhD student, I had the opportunity to help an advisor (the late Martin Norden, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst) organize and curate a semester-long film festival on physical and neurocognitive diversity titled "Cinemability." So in that sense, I was no stranger to film festivals. But I had neither heard of nor attended one on death and dying, which seemed like the perfect marriage of my scholarly, teaching, and artistic interests. In what follows, I present an account of the Dying To Know Film Festival's opening weekend, which took place from August 11 to 13, 2023, in Rosendale, New York. As I illustrate with my description of festival proceedings and my reflections on the individual films and post-screening talkbacks, moving image media can facilitate difficult, yet necessary, conversations and foster greater appreciation of life and its end.

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Day One: Friday, August 11

It was close to 3 p.m. when I arrived at the inn where I was staying for the weekend. The quaint town of Rosendale is roughly two hours north of Manhattan, and having sworn off of driving (I'd been a passenger in a collision that left the car totaled), I decided to take an Adirondack Trailways bus from NYC to get there. From the Rosendale Park & Ride, I walked the scenic mile down James Street, along Roundout Creek, to the 1850 House Inn. Within an hour of checking in, I unloaded my belongings, made myself presentable, and crossed the street to the Rosendale Theatre, where the next feature was about to play. Housed in a three-story brick building, the independently owned theater had apparently served as a casino in the early 1900s (https://www.rosendaletheatre.org/history). It started showing films in the 1920s and by mid-century, became a full-fledged cinema.

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During the Dying To Know Film Festival (D2KFF), all screenings took place in a single room, which could seat up to 260 people. About fifteen to twenty seats were filled when I arrived. Before the lights dimmed, the bespectacled Caren Martineau, event organizer and host, made some introductory remarks about how the festival came to be.

Drawing on her professional background in branding and culture change, Martineau founded Bevival.com, which creates programming on death literacy and facilitates open dialogue about mortality. In 2017, Bevival launched America's first Dying To Know death literacy event. Shortly after, Bevival launched the Celebrating Aging in Film Series, which drew a large following in Montclair, New Jersey, where Martineau had been living until the COVID-19 pandemic. The exigencies of the pandemic, and our aging society's lack of preparedness for what comes next, inspired Martineau to launch D2KFF in Rosendale (where she now resides), an endeavor that took eight months of planning. At the end of her remarks, she thanked and introduced her friend and mentor, Dr. Mario Garrett, Professor of Gerontology at San Diego State University, where for twelve years he has been curating the Coming of Age Film Festival. The two met five years ago in 2018, and he helped launch Bevival's Celebrating Aging series (now in its fifth season). Dr. Garrett served as the emcee throughout D2KFF's opening weekend.

The lights dimmed, the room darkened, and an animated short, *Beyond the Hill* (dir. Giulia Cervato, 2022), ensued. In the film, a grief-stricken young woman is unable to be with her grandfather during his last moments due to pandemic restrictions. While grieving, she encounters a mother fox and its cubs with whom she shares the pie she had baked for her grandfather. The creatures warm up to her, and for once, she is able to smile. *Beyond the Hill* is a quick, yet poignant, tale of rediscovering joy amidst loss.

The short film was immediately followed by the feature, *Defining Hope* (dir. Carolyn Jones, 2017). *Defining Hope* is a talking heads documentary that follows patients with life-threatening illness and the nurses who guide them. I appreciated the film's juxtaposition of old and young patients, since dying is not the exclusive province of aging, and I found the cast of characters rather diverse and endearing. One subject is a Black teenager named Alena, who was given a choice between prolonging her life by undergoing brain surgery, at the risk of losing her memories (because of the tumor's location) or living out her remaining days with her memory intact. Another subject is a young Hispanic boy named José who had undergone a heart transplant and is excitedly looking forward to the gifts on his bed back home. In an interesting twist, one of the subjects, a nurse named Diane, has been diagnosed with stage 3 metastatic ovarian cancer. Throughout the film, we see her at work providing care to dying patients, at medical appointments, where she is confronted with the reality of her life's finitude, and at home raising her young boys. Collectively, the individual portraits raise tensions between quantity of life and quality of life, between living well and dying well.

When the film ended, Dr. Garrett walked up to the table at the front and beckoned Carolyn Jones, the director, to join him. In the ensuing discussion, she revealed that during the filming of the documentary, her mother died and her father had a heart attack. These events, she said, "made me really noisy about talking about end of life." As Garrett noted, viewers expect subjects to die going into the film, but while watching, they may find themselves hoping against odds that the subjects will live after all. Jones pointed out that we do not actually see anyone die in *Defining Hope* and that she made this representational choice because, ultimately, "the film is not about death, but about life."

Garrett asked how many in the audience have advance directives; few raised their hands. Jones assured audience members that our loved ones will be immensely grateful if we planned our funerals and left behind concrete instructions. At the end of the talkback, she leaves us to ponder the following questions: "Do we have to be at the end of life to make life worth living? Why are we here, and what are we leaving behind?"

There was just enough time between screenings for a snack break. Before long, another short film was playing: *Grief and the Pandemic* (dir. Hugh Cowling, 2020), which combines animation with voiceover narration. There is no overarching plot, just a loose collection of stories. I found the aesthetic simple yet poignant: a panoramic view of a darkened cityscape whose windows light up one by one for every story of bereavement that is shared.

Without interruption, the short film segued to Friday night's final feature: *Into the Night: Portraits of Life and Death, Part 2* (dir. Helen Whitney, 2017). The documentary begins with tales of China's first emperor, who, according to voiceover narration, built the Great Wall to keep death at bay. This same emperor commissioned 8,000 terracotta sculptures of his entire army and retinue so that they could accompany him to his burial place and afterlife. The sculptures remain standing. In the present, scientists are enthused by the possibility of achieving *tangible* immortality through regenerative medicine, which can restore aging cells to a youthful state, and nanotechnology, which can repair damaged cells. Apparently, until recently, scholars of aging were against intervening in natural life processes. As noted by one of the subjects interviewed, there are actually few biological drivers of aging. If aging can be accelerated (as is the case with progeria), then it stands to reason that it can be slowed down, halted, or even reversed. I was taken aback by the unchecked optimism and hubris on display among the scientists, but I was even more disturbed by the ethical implications. It is no secret that people with greater access to capital (Bourdieu, 1983) – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic – are among the first to reap the benefits of technological and scientific developments. The reversal

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of aging will likely widen exisiting social inequalities, with the most privileged living an even more bloated existence.

The film then takes an abrupt turn, setting the science aside for stories of personal encounters with mortality, which are presented one by one: A prolific author with 21 books to his credit at age 62 reinvents himself and becomes a trapeze artist. A grieving artist confronts aging by bringing new life to old and discarded objects. A pharmacist in a small Colorado town is “afraid of dying without doing” and yearns to explore the world, but he cannot bring himself to leave the elderly residents that he serves. A Lakota woman in remission from cancer finds comfort in the belief that there is an essence that persists beyond death.

The post-screening discussion immediately turned to the film’s idiosyncratic structure. Martineau and Garrett concurred that the scientific and the personal anecdotes feel like two separate documentaries. Apparently, director Helen Whitney was supposed to be on the panel, but could not attend due to extenuating circumstances. It would have been interesting to hear her take on the structure of the film. In my mind, I reasoned that the two parts both speak to humankind’s timeless desire for post-mortem self-perpetuation, for (social) life after (biological) death, which finds new expression in our scientific age. The discussion then turned to the grim fact that two thirds of all people in the U.S. die in pain, as noted by Garrett, and that new paradigms are needed to ensure a more tranquil “silence of the leaving” (to borrow one film subject’s words).

To celebrate the successful launch of D2KFF, Martineau invited the weekend’s post-screening experts and panelists for dinner and drinks at her home. As an academic, I rarely get the chance to spend an evening with professionals in the film and death industries, which made the pasta, salad, and wine all the more enjoyable.

Day Two: Saturday, August 12

The second day of the festival saw an increase in attendees, with about thirty seats now occupied. It was a packed day for me, as I got to experience not two, but three films. The first two were documentaries: *Zen and the Art of Dying* (dir. Broderick Fox, 2015), and *Bury Me at Taylor Hollow* (dir. Orion Pahl, 2022). Both explore the desire to re-establish connection in the face of our individual and collective mortality, to move from death denial and sequestration to reincorporation.

Zen and the Art of Dying follows Zenith Virago, a death educator and activist whose avowed mission is to restore the communality of grieving at a time when grief has become increasingly privatized. Throughout the film, we see Virago facilitate affectionate interactions between family members and their dying loved ones before, at the moment of, and after death. We see, for example, bereaved children drawing on their deceased father’s coffin with crayons and feeling his skin with their hands. The scene brought to memory my teenage years when I witnessed my maternal grandmother’s decline from dementia and washed her body and her soiled clothes. At another point, when Virago says, “Nobody regrets speaking at a funeral, but people regret not speaking at one,” I suddenly recalled mustering the courage to speak at a memorial service. My words tumbled out more lighthearted than I’d intended, but the laughter they’d provoked reminded me, as this film does, that partings are also occasions for celebration. “We are all part of something that ripples out,” says Virago, and this theme is subtly and evocatively captured by the film’s opening and closing sequences, which feature a tree in the frame’s center encircled by a group of mourners at the beginning, and alone at dusk in solemn tranquility at the end.

Bury Me at Taylor Hollow follows another pathfinder, John Christian Phifer, who broke from traditional funerary industry practices (he’d been a mortician) to help create Larkspur Conservation. Larkspur is the first conservation burial ground in the state of Tennessee—and only one of ten such grounds in the U.S.—a nation that boasts over 150,000 graveyards and cemeteries. As Phifer tells viewers, his mission is twofold: to heal grieving families and to heal the natural environment. As with natural cemeteries, in which bodies are interred in a manner that allows them to be naturally recycled, conservation burials use only biodegradable (i.e., compostable) materials, but they combine the task of burial with the larger project of land conservation. Thus, of the 112 acres of land purchased for Larkspur, only a third are designated for burial; the rest serve as a nature preserve, a place for the bereaved and non-bereaved alike to experience oneness with the planet and the lingering spirits of the departed. The film was followed by a pre-recorded Zoom interview between Wendy Corn, filmmaker and death doula (https://www.exitstrategy.life/) and Matthew Kochmann, founder and CEO of Transcend (https://www.wetranscend.com) which seeks to make death a carbon-negative event by planting people as trees, so to speak (in contrast to cremation, which is carbon-positive).

In the post-screening discussions, Dr. Garrett, returning as emcee, was joined in person by Wendy Corn and William Turner Heath, licensed funeral director and end-of-life concierge (https://callinghours.co/). Their provocative conversations with audience members and one another touched upon the importance of normalizing contact with corpses in our death-averse society, the “remarkable paradigm shift” in which decomposition is becoming more widely embraced, the practical, legal and financial challenges of green burial, and the need to change our language around death (e.g., becoming a tree as “sexy”). They also clarified the differences among traditional, hybrid, natural, and conservation burial options, and as a sidenote, informed audience members that the town of Rosendale has its own green burial ground.

As with Friday’s films, Saturday’s features were also accompanied by short films. *Zen and the Art of Dying* was paired with *Forgot* (dir. Stephen McNally, 2014), an animated study of the memories we create and lose throughout

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our lifespan. *Bury Me at Taylor Hallow* was paired with *Show Me Your Casket* (dir. Martyna Starosta, 2015), an info-doc on the economics and materialities of the Jewish pine casket. The third short was *The Valley of Dolls* (dir. Fritz Schumann, 2014), a portrait of Nagoro village in Japan – in which scarecrows outnumber residents 350 to 37 – and Ayano Tsukimi, the elderly woman who created the scarecrows in the likeness of bygone residents. *The Valley of Dolls* is both somber and lighthearted, a contrast to the devastating feature that followed.

Plan 75 (dir. Chie Hayakawa, 2022) differs in several ways from the films showcased in the festival thus far. Whereas the previous films were documentaries, *Plan 75* is a fiction film – more precisely, a dystopian film. And while the documentaries center on Caucasian filmmakers and subjects, *Plan 75* is a Japanese film with two Japanese and one Filipina lead.

Plan 75 imagines a not-too-distant future in which elderly Japanese citizens are offered the choice to enact euthanasia upon reaching age 75. But the intent is not benevolent. The titular government plan seeks not to offer compassionate reprieve from unremitting pain for the terminally ill, but to curb Japan's elderly population, who are deemed "social waste" by society and provided little opportunity to enjoy their remaining years. The film follows three characters: Michi (played by Chieko Baishô), an aging woman who signs up for the plan, Hiromu (Hayato Isomura), a Plan 75 employee tasked with recruiting the elderly, and Maria (Stefanie Arianne), a Filipina nurse who labors overseas to save money for her ailing daughter's surgery back home. (For unaware viewers/readers, the Philippines is the largest exporter of nurses worldwide [Choy, 2003]). The three characters' paths ultimately cross, and throughout their individual journeys, they come to startling realizations about themselves and their place in society.

I came into the movie with no prior knowledge other than its basic premise (it's not commercially available on streaming platforms or disc until November 2023), but having previously studied Japanese language, literature, and culture, my mind was drawing connections throughout the movie's runtime. As one of the post-screening panelists, I was joined by Dr. Garrett and Alison Anthoine, Esq., an entrepreneurial lawyer, business strategist, and EoL navigator. She addressed the legal aspects of euthanasia and the feasibility (or lack thereof) of Plan 75 in the U.S., and I provided context by addressing the Japanese phenomenon of *kodokushi* ("lonely deaths"). Although *Plan 75* is fiction, in reality, thousands of elderly people in Japan die alone every year and are left undiscovered for days, weeks, and sometimes, months, due to neglect by family and loosening of social networks (Allison, 2017). This revelation came as a shock to some audience members, which is unsurprising given the idealization of Japan's collectivism in Western media. The discussion then turned to audience members' concerns about the growing power wielded by governments to decide who lives and who dies (i.e., necropolitics [Mbembé & Meintjes, 2003]) and to harness the bodies of the populace to achieve institutional ends (i.e., biopolitics [Foucault, 1976]).

As the evening's final film illustrates, fiction films are no less potent in addressing larger social and cultural forces that shape our experience and understanding of mortality. Futuristic as it may be, *Plan 75* provides a distorted reflection of present-day Japan, and Western viewers will come away appreciating forces that invisibly infiltrate our lives and our deaths.

Day Three: Sunday, August 13

I reached Rosendale Theatre in time for the Oscar-nominated short, *Negative Space* (dir., Max Porter and Ru Kuwahata, 2017), a six-minute claymation film in which a young man reminisces about his recently deceased father, who taught him the art of packing suitcases. At the film's humorous conclusion, the man laments the negative air space surrounding his father's body in the casket, which he believes could have been put to better use. The credits roll and up next was the evening's first of two feature-length documentaries: *Last Flight Home* (dir. Ondi Timoner, 2022).

Last Flight Home follows Eli Timoner and his family in the fifteen days leading up to his death. Eli Timoner was a humanitarian and entrepreneur who founded Air Florida to provide affordable travel to passengers. However, his success in the first half of his life was undone by a stroke that rendered him disabled for the remaining half. He was forced to retire from his company (because a wheelchair-bound CEO was "bad image," according to the board at the time), and he subsequently lost his status, income, and wealth. But he did not lose his family, who loved him and cared for him and supported his decision to end his suffering when he was later diagnosed with advanced COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and CHF (congestive heart failure).

The film uses title cards to mark down the number of days that have elapsed. In the 15 days we spend with the Timoner family, we witness Eli give advice to children and grandchildren (e.g., "Respect for the people you don't know, love for the people you do know."), unburden himself of shame as a person with disability by confessing to his rabbi daughter (who assures him, "You were not perfect, but you were good."), make wisecracks ("I'm not gonna come back as a horse's ass."), assure doctors of his cognitive capacity to choose medical aid in dying, and share memories and last words with family members, friends, and caregivers in person or via Zoom. (The film was made at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, prior to vaccine rollout.)

Day 15, Eli's last day, is especially poignant. We see his family prepare the various compounds that would slow down and stop his heart, and we see his children gently, yet firmly, hold his hands as he sips the concoctions through a

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straw, down to the last drops. (According to California state law at the time, they could not hold the cup themselves because doing so would make them accessories to murder.) We then see color escape his skin and his lips, a moment nearly as surreal for viewers as it is for the Timoner family onscreen. The film ends with a montage of the funeral spliced within the credits.

As viewers noted in the post-screening discussion, *Last Flight Home* is a portrait of a loving family that is united in life as in death, a family bound by deep trust for one another. It is simultaneously funny, heart-warming, uplifting, and gut-wrenching in its exploration of a life and death steeped in love. But as one audience member candidly pointed out, what we witnessed was a "death of privilege," a model for end of life that needs to be more equitably distributed. Few people die surrounded by loved ones, and contrary to popular belief, one does not receive round-the-clock care in hospice.

The discussion then turned to the New York Medical Aid in Dying Act which has apparently been pending for eight years and, if passed, would legalize euthanasia in the state. Another audience member asked what the impediments to passage were. Post-screening panelist Corinne Carey of Compassion & Choices, a nonprofit advocating for greater access to medical aid in dying (https://www.compassionandchoices.org/), provided three: the New York State Catholic Conference, lawmakers who fear political backlash should they support the bill, and leaders in the disability community who are concerned that the bill would diminish their rights (despite the fact that many persons with disabilities support the bill).

As Dr. Garrett (emcee) noted, the film provides an idyllic portrait for much of its runtime, but the legality of the end is messy. Alison Anthoine from the previous night returned as a panelist, and together, the panelists touched upon a variety of related issues, including the general unwillingness of physicians to participate in euthanasia and state law variations in what constitutes the last decisional act. In Oregon, for example, where medical aid in dying has been effective for 20+ years, it is perfectly acceptable for family members to hold the drinking cup. Discussion next turned to the feasibility of crossing state lines—Vermont and Oregon, for example, have lifted residency requirements—and the need for alternatives for people with dementia, who by legal definition may not be mentally capable to make the decision to die within six months of their projected demise. The talkback drew so much participation that it cut into the first 15 minutes of the next film. To wrap up the conversation, Caren Martineau urged audience members to take action in support of the campaign for New York's Medical Aid in Dying Act.

The short film preceding the next feature was *Lost & Found* (dir. Andrew Goldsmith & Bradley Slabe, 2018), a stop-motion animation in which two anthropomorphized animals spun of yarn attempt to save one another from unraveling (literally). I appreciate the skill and time that went into the production of Sunday's short films. I also appreciate their levity, because they provided much needed respite from the emotional intensity of the day's and weekend's features.

The last film of the day, and of the weekend, was the documentary, *What Time Is Left* (dir. Dakin Henderson, 2013). At age 25, Dakin, the film's writer, director, and editor, collapsed on a frisbee field; his breathing and heartbeat had suddenly stopped. He was effectively brought back to life by one of his teammates (a nurse), who administered CPR. Since then, Dakin has been preoccupied with a question: "When you die, what happens to the ones left behind?" In his quest for answers, he narrates his brush with mortality and the late stage journey of two women in his life. Maternal grandmother Edie is sharp, vivacious, and prudent, and she does not recoil from discussing her advance directives with her visibly uncomfortable children. In contrast, paternal grandmother Polly had no such opportunity to make her end of life wishes known. Diagnosed with progressive aphasia, Polly lost the ability to speak and to move, and after many years of life-prolonging treatments, she died a solitary prisoner of her own body.

Christine Herbes-Sommers, president and executive producer of Vital Pictures Inc. (https://www.vitalpix.com/), joined Mario Garrett and Alison Anthoine in the post-screening panel. They discussed the need for people to have frank conversations about their end of life wishes with loved ones, long before the shadow of death looms close. The term "wrongful life" also came up, which refers to situations where medical establishments fail to honor a DNR (Do Not Rescuscitate) order. The panelists said this is likely to occur when hospital staff do not know what a DNR order is, cannot find the form, or do not know how to enforce the order. They then reminded audience members that in the presence of such an order and in the event of a cardiac or respiratory event, they should call the person's hospice nurse rather than 911. The latter will ignore the order because it is their avowed duty to keep the person alive.

The day culminated in the host (Martineau), emcee (Garrett), and panelists posing for a photograph, marking the successful end of the festival's inaugural weekend.

Concluding thoughts

Over the course of three days, I saw an array of short and feature-length films that have much to say about the social, emotional, economic, cultural, legal, political, material, and technological aspects of death and dying. Whether or not the fear of death is learned or innate (Becker, 1973), our end is an inevitability for which we ought to be prepared so that we may live our lives more richly and fully, and tend to others with more compassion and tenderness, as the films collectively appear to be advocating. Like the elderly citizens of *Plan 75,* many people undergo social death long before biological death, severed from social networks and hidden behind institutional walls.

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I wager that if more people become death literate – and film is a potent avenue towards death literacy – we would experience a tectonic shift in which burdens are shared, feelings of loss are avowed, rather than denied, and legacies endure. As a number of films have shown, social death need not precede or coincide with biological death, and the end of a life does not mean the end of a relationship.

Films are evocative, emotive, intimate, sensual, and cathartic. Told well, they invoke the universal in the particular, so that one subject's suffering becomes the conscience of humanity. Told responsibly, they give permission to say the unsayable. But it is one thing to watch films on one's own. It is another to watch films with company. A film festival can make the unsayable not only sayable, but communal, giving participants the chance to share their thoughts and hear others' thoughts, including experts by profession and experts by experience. Though many film festivals revolve around the art and craft of filmmaking, the opening weekend of D2KFF has shown that film festivals have the potential to focus attention and stimulate conversations on socially relevant topics in ways that academic monographs cannot. The D2KFF is a profound contribution to the vital work of unburdening, and I look forward to future iterations of this timely and necessary intervention.

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