

Reframing the Conversation By David Seidler & Clara Hendon
End Well Symposium, December 7, 2017

Start of Transcript

Clara: In Celtic spirituality, *Anam Cara* is the belief of recognizing someone as a soul friend, reconnecting with them, and helping them back home. But since this is a symposium about death, I can just go ahead and say it: helping them back home and helping them die. When I met David Seidler, the Oscar-winning writer of *The King's Speech*, I was surprised at the immediate friendship we struck. In fact, it felt more like reconnecting with a long-lost friend and then I learned about the term *Anam Cara*! And I thought "Oh, that's what it is!" And not bad, an Oscar-winning *anam cara*. So I called up David and informed him that we are *anam cara*'s [00:01:00] and that I would be helping him die and whenever that might be. He somewhat reluctantly accepted my offer and he later admitted that his greatest fear was dying alone. So together we began to look at death, specifically how one can prepare. While it's no surprise and hint for me for the symposium that our culture doesn't believe in death. Birth? Oh yes! We follow over ourselves preparing ourselves for death, I mean birth. Sorry. But death? No way! So David and I decided to join forces and make a documentary series about death... with the very ambitious goal of changing culture. David is our guinea pig on a journey to seek mentors to help him prepare for his own death and [00:02:00] we have a very able partner on this journey, *Boardwalk Productions*, who makes the award-winning shows *Chef's Table*. It seems there is a sea of changes but the *New York Times* is BJ Miller's talk whose had over 6.5 million views. And there are currently many television shows in development about death and most recently, *Disney Pixar's* new blockbuster *Coco*, an animated family feature about the day of the dead, is topping the box office week after week. To quote our friend Tony Bossis, Dr. Tony Bossis, "I am increasingly certain it will be the artists, musicians, authors, filmmakers who will be the change agents of death [00:03:00]

[Crowd Applauding]

Here's our teaser for the *Death Project*.

{{Presentation Playing 00:03:10 to 00:07:35}}

I return to nature seeking solace. My father died angry, grieving a life he felt wasn't fully lived, and the last minute, because he hadn't prepared himself. He was terrified. Sad departure, disturbing to witness... I promised not to do the same to our children nor to myself. But now, years later, how much progress have I made? Everywhere I go, I hear people of all ages asking the same questions, "Stick to our frontier, and forget going to Mars, that's easy..." [00:04:00] Death is the final frontier"

In Video Text: "Deal with the death thing, get it out of the way, so you can live."

There's gonna be the largest die off of people that's ever been known to humanity. There's more people that are gonna be dying in the next 20 years than we're ever seen. Just from natural causes.

InVideo Text: Grandmother Flordemayo, Spiritual healer and Mayan priestess.

Grandmother Flordemayo: We have to really start talking about it. We need to start a dialogue.

Each of us should take responsibility on how we wanna die. It's a choice.

*Surely the moment has come to demystify this vital frontier. Now is the time...
... for the Death Project. Six one-hour segments going upon the leading figures of our
time to step into a role that holds the potential to be the most meaningful of their lives.*

In-Video Text: Neil deGrasse Tyson, Astrophysicist, cosmologist, author and science communicator

Neil: Knowledge them going to die. That creates the focus that I bring to being alive
[00:05:00].

In-Video Text: What are you afraid of?

You can be whole. You can be healed.

In-Video Text: BJ Miller, Palliative care doctor and leading death educator

*Even though your body's falling apart, even
though you're dying, even though I'm dismembered, even though I'm in pieces, I can
still be a whole person.*

We don't die well in America. We die in a severe existential and psycho-spiritual distress.

In-Video Text: Anthony Bossis, PhD

They take this medicine once, at one session but it's a transformative experience that it sustains and recalibrate how they die.

By exploring their relationship with their eventual passing, they would become your mentors and mine.

In-Video Text: Deal with death.

In-Video Text: Benjamin Buell, Stage four cancer patient

Benjamin: In the sense of acknowledging that one possibility here is that I'm gonna die sooner, part of that is using death as your teacher and a lot of things I've delved into in my life, there's a piece of it that has to do with death.

*One journey we all must make **[00:06:00]**. From unsung heroes to deathrow inmates, people from all walks of life who have experience to contribute. When the fear of death is put to rest, then you're free to live.*

{{ Music Video Playing 00:06:20 to 00:07:35}}

If you could live forever, would you? What are we so mortally afraid of? Why can't we treat death with a certain amount of dignity and decency and God forbid, maybe even humor?

I'm so absolutely grateful...

... that death does not have the final word.

I don't know how long I have to live, but certain it is that every year takes [00:07:00] me closer to the end, whenever that end is.

Wonderful [Inaudible]! I mean, who could've imagine such a mystery?

Death is not the opposite of life, that's where you're wrong. Death is the opposite of birth.

—

David: Make sure your picture is worth a thousand words and you've just been presented with a cascade of pictures and therefore a plethora of words and so really I should just get off the stage and sit down or I could try to explain what some of these pictorials, words, admit to me, as Clara and I have gathered. Everyone [00:08:00] in this conference knows we live in a death-phobic society. Why else attend a gathering entitled "End Well"? The implication is unavoidable. Millions, terrified, might be one horrified at the concept of their own annihilation, and badly. Perhaps that's why nice people don't talk about death at the dinner table and yet, and yet, that is changing. Death dinners are popping up in America and European cities. In fact, when I was in the green room, there was a whole stack of death dinner pamphlets of a Jewish death dinner, which I thought was interesting one could have guilt, angst, and indigestion in one sitting.

[Crowd Laughing]

David: In New Zealand, provincial New Zealand [00:09:00] suddenly coffin clubs are their age. Truly elderly folks gather together over a nice cup of tea or a bracing ale and that they make their own personalised caskets. They're very clever with their hands and they are getting at ease with the inevitability of their own demise. Suddenly people everywhere are realising no one gets out of here alive, so be prepared!

David: There's a story that — George Harrison, towards the very end, turned to his wife suddenly and said, "You know, if you wait til' you're dying to know God, there's such a thing as waiting too long. And starting to wait." And there's another famous expression of "passing the farmer" When is the best time to plant [00:10:00] a tree? Actually the farmer was Stephen Jenkinson and his answer was "Oh about 25 years ago." Anyway being an impatient youth myself, I rejoiced in all of this but it's taken too bloody long but it is happening. Just ten years ago, could you imagine that on October 7th, in the year of our Lord 2017 in the city of San Francisco by the bay, 400 of souls, seemingly same souls, have gathered to consider how to end well. Oh how I very much rejoiced on that.

David: But before I get too smug, which I have a tendency to do, what have I learned so far in this exploration? Well during — I'd just give a few — during two days of filming with the wonderful whimsical spirit creature by the [00:11:00] mythical name of *Aram Das*, I learned from him that my ego is not necessarily my "amigo"

[Crowd Laughing]

David: And that his new mantra “Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh joy, oh joy, oh joy!” Is now my new mantra. In a moment of brotherly love, at the end we exchanged shirts. I rejoiced in getting his signature “Hawaiian Aloha” and he rejoiced in getting my faded blue “LLBM Croc Mosaic” but we rejoiced in each other’s rejoicing! BJ Miller was brave enough to tell me that even though he is a world renowned palliative care expert, he had no personal guarantee of how we would react when he’s dying. He felt that it was possible that he too would rage **[00:12:00]**, rage against the dying of the light. And I rejoiced in his doubt because it made me feel supported by a brother in my own doubt.

David: I rejoiced in Professor Bob Thurman’s definition of death: A sexually transmitted terminal disease.

[Crowd Laughing]

David: Really sums up rather nicely. Then there was my ill-advised DMT trip. Captured on film, not released yet... of a screaming and tearing, “Get me out of here! I’m not ready to die. Save me!” A timely reminder of how far I still have to go. Finally, I’m beginning to understand the words of the Mayan Shama, Flordemayo. She said when I asked her how she thought she might die, she said, “Oh, dying is going to be **[00:13:00]** so much fun!” I only do things that are fun. And if it’s not fun, I’m not gonna do it.

[Crowd Laughing]

David: I embarked upon this treasure hunt with Clara hoping to learn how to die. And to my utter amazement, I think I’ve learned ...oops back again, yep. I believe that one was a deal with the fear of death. To free oneself of that heavy burden, so one can stand tall, and truly live, I’ll end by quoting a world renowned philosopher, Gandalf from “Lord of the Rings,”

[Crowd Laughing]

David: “Whoops! It went on me.” Maybe it’ll come back. Yes. It doesn’t matter how much time you have, it’s what you do with it. I humbly **[00:14:00]** believe that’s how to die well. Thank you

[Crowd Applauding]

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