

Perspective Through Experience with Dr. Marvin Newman
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Death and Dying INT 400
Spring 2006

Several years ago, Dr. Marvin Newman created the Death and Dying course as an opportunity for students to explore the ethics and issues surrounding this inevitable event. This course was developed from a personal experience Dr Newman had about thirty years ago when one of his students was in a serious car accident.

This seemingly dark course has a surprisingly long wait list; with about 80% of that list being seniors. According to Dr. Newman, the main question he wants to raise in this course is “What makes my life matter?” Through the use of service learning projects the students confront their mortality and the question of how to make their life matter for themselves and others. After students finish the course, it appears that they find their personal values, morals and views have evolved.

A quote important to this course is that by Ralph Waldo Emerson, which states that the best accomplishment in life is to leave the world a better place than when you arrived. This quote speaks to the challenge by Dr. Newman, that his students become citizens of their community and give back and take care of those around them.

At the end of the semester the students come to class for a banquet. While eating a buffet lunch the students candidly share their experience with their classmates, Dr. Newman, and a few visitors. The point is to cut the formality so they can freely talk about what they did, what they learned, what they experienced. During this spring’s end of semester banquet the students shared thoughts like, “You have to treat people like people. Not like they are elderly or dying, but like people.” Another student mentioned that he feels that the children he met while volunteering at Give Kids the World are angels, and that “we” are the people that need help with valuing and enjoying life. “The kids made me value life on another level” offered one student.

Lastly, while discussing her experience at Give Kids the World, one student was able to relate to the problems of one of the parents of a sick child. When reflecting on this moment, the Rollins student stated that she felt it was a big deal to say yes when people only hear no. “No your child won’t get better. No we don’t have a cure. No we do not know what to do next to make it better. No there is no hope.” She was truly touched at how powerful the word “yes” can be when all you hear is “no.”

These students often continue to volunteer for the organization they got connected with through this class, staying in touch with the individuals they have worked with for years. The added service learning component to an already challenging work load makes this course very demanding. However, all the efforts exerted by the students while taking this course, both emotionally, physically and psychologically do not compare with the knowledge they are able to gain through the experience, how to make their life matter.