This course presents an overview of the major issues, themes, and controversies in the death and dying literature. Historical, cultural, ethical, and psychological aspects are considered, but the emphasis is on sociological dimensions and perspectives. As this is a core course, it has been designed to introduce you to sociology by emphasizing the sociological approach to these issues and by contrasting the sociological approach to those reflected in several other approaches, including: the historical approach, the psychological approach, the anthropological approach, and the like. One goal of this course is to introduce you to the history and methodologies of the discipline of sociology. Toward that end, you will be reading and I will give a number of lectures that put these issues in historical context. Where appropriate, we will link discussion of these issues to classical studies in sociology. One example will be our discussion of Durkheim’s very important work on suicide. The course will also expose you to a range of different methodological approaches used in sociological research including historical analysis, cross-cultural analysis, qualitative field studies, the analysis of aggregate data, and survey research.

There are a number of other goals we seek to achieve in a core course such as this: One is to integrate material from culturally diverse perspectives. Toward this end, we will be discussing how death related beliefs and practices in the United States differ from those in other countries around the world. We will draw on anthropological resources for similar reasons. Where appropriate, we will highlight gender, race and class differences.

The course will offer an opportunity to formulate, analyze, and deepen your own opinions on a number of issues. This will be particularly true with respect to our discussions of suicide, euthanasia, and medical ethics. The central goal here is to help you work out your own personal philosophy with respect to many death-related practices and ethical issues. My hope is to get you to rethink some of your taken for granted views on such issues. You may end up rethinking some of your views about American funerals when you find out how people in Borneo react when told about American practices. You may end up rethinking your views about how to deal with grief after an analysis of the consequences of some of the alternatives. You will be given the opportunity to work on your personal philosophy with respect to doctor assisted suicide and euthanasia for the terminally ill. You will be asked to work out your personal philosophy with respect to a number of ethical issues we as a society are confronted with, such as whether or not those who have been declared brain dead biologically should be kept alive for the primary purpose of their parts being utilized through transplantation, (i.e. as organ donors) for others, over subsequent days, weeks, months, or years. You will also be asked to evaluate the evidence with respect to near death experiences and assess what impact, if any, this evidence has on your own thinking about afterlife.

In this course we deal with a number of what can be called perennial questions. The topic of death itself is one of these issues. In our analysis of death related issues and ethical questions we will touch on many death related perennial questions, such as: To what extent are our beliefs about death largely social constructions, i.e. products of our culture? Is there a best way to die or will what is an “appropriate” way to die vary a great deal from one person to another? To what extent are our lives driven by our need to deny the reality that each of us will one day die? Is it preferable to die at home or in a hospital or in a hospice? How extreme can the reaction to the death of a loved one be and still be considered within the realm of “normal”?” How do children form their conceptions of death and how do those conceptions change over time? Is suicide ever justified? Is euthanasia ever justified? Is the death penalty ever justified? Do we survive death?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:
If you are a student with a documented disability seeking reasonable accommodations in this course, please contact Kathy Duggan, (617) 552-8093, dugganka@bc.edu, at the Connors Family Learning Center regarding learning disabilities and ADHD, or Paulette Durrett, (617) 552-3470, paulette.durrett@bc.edu, in the Disability Services Office regarding all other types of disabilities, including temporary disabilities. Advance notice and appropriate documentation are required for accommodations.
For added details about each of the 4 course requirements listed below, see the course webpage: https://www2.bc.edu/~jbw/SC097A.htm

1. Mid-Term 1,500 word Essay (20 points): Due Thurs FEBRUARY 13 (See course webpage for details).
2. Mid-Term Exam (20 points): THURS, FEBRUARY 27 (Topics 1, 2, and 3) (See course webpage for details).
3. Final Exam (40 points): Monday MAY 12 9:00 -11:00. (Topics 4, 5, 6, 7) (See course webpage for details).
4. In-class essays (20 points): (See below for more details).

There will generally be assigned reading for each class. See the readings by date posted on the course webpage. Be aware that I do make changes as the course goes along so you do need to check the assignment for each class again a couple of days in advance to see if changes have been made. Sometimes I will add something like a web based assignment to look up material on a specific topic for that class. If there is to be some web searching for a specified class, it will generally be announced at least one class in advance. If you have missed a class, it is particularly important that you check the assignments for the next class.

There will be frequent and generally unannounced, brief in-class essays that will often require having read one or more articles assigned for that class or require having done the assigned web searching. Sometimes the essay topics may be announced in advance. There will be 13 such essays during the term. Your grade will be based on the best 10 of the essays that you do. Each essay will be graded 0 or 2 (there will never be partial credit). That means that each person will be able to miss (or do very poorly on the essay) on up to three of the essays without any loss of credit for this component of the course. However, there will be no make-up essays and it will be very difficult to get credit for missed essays beyond the first 3. The reason for allowing you to drop three essays is to do away with the need for notes from doctors and the like so long as you miss only a few essays. Suppose you miss 4 in-class essays. If you have legitimate excuses with documentation (e.g. 4 medical appointments with dated notes from the relevant health care provider justifying your absence or similar notes from coaches for those on BC athletic teams), you will be given credit for that 4th missed essay even though you were not present. In practice, this situation rarely comes up. Keep in mind that it does not work to bring documentation for just the 4th missed essay when you do not have similar documentation for the other three. Thus to be safe, each time you do miss an in-class essay and you have what you believe I will accept as a justifiable reason for not being in class, keep very thorough documentation of the reason you were not in class. Save that documentation; do not send or bring any of this documentation to me until you need it, that is, until and unless you will need it to make the case to be excused from having missed a fourth essay. You would then turn all of the documentation in at the end of the semester and at that point I will decide whether the case is strong enough to allow credit for one or more essays above the standard three. If you are at all unclear about this set of rules, please come to see me (or the TA) for clarification. If you end up with full credit (i.e. credit for 10 or more essays) you get 20 points for the in-class essay component of the course. The maximum credit you can get from these essays is 20 points. The number of points for this component of the course drops by 2 points for each essay under 10. So if you have credit for 9 essays, you get 18 points; if 8 essays, it will be 16 points, etc. Everyone gets sick from time to time or has a doctor’s appointment or an important job or graduate school interview. So please be very careful not to miss class except when you must do so. If you come to class prepared almost all the time, you should end up with 20 points toward the 100 total and that will help bring up lower grades when you get less than a score of 100% on the other components of the course.

HANDOUTS ON THE PAPERS AND EXAMS:
Memos with detailed instructions will be posted on the course website well in advance of the due dates for the mid-term paper and the exams. The mid-term essay will be a take home 1,500 word essay addressing a thesis or research question linked to one or more of the readings, lectures, or films for topics 1-3. The mid-term exam will cover all of the readings, lectures, and films relating to topics 1-3. The final exam will cover all of the readings, lectures, and films relating to topics 4-7.

COURSE GRADING: To compute the final grade for the course, I compute the total score for: (1) the mid-term essay, (2) the mid-term exam, (3) the final-exam and (4) the in-class essays. Then a course grade is assigned as follows: 95 and over (A), 90-94 (A-), 85-89 (B+), 80-84 (B), 75-79 (B-), 70-74 (C+) 65-69 (C-), etc.
WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU ARE NOT PRESENT FOR AN EXAM? If you remember there is an exam while the exam is still in progress, come directly to class and speak to me or the TA. Under most circumstances it will be possible to work something out with no loss of time to take the exam or no loss of credit. If you are unable to do that, as soon as you are aware that you have missed the exam (or know that you are going to miss an exam), immediately contact me or the course TA. There will generally be a penalty for missing an exam with the size of the penalty a function of the reason for missing the exam unless you are in the hospital, on an athletic team playing out of town, etc. I do not give permission to take an exam early or to take it late even when you have several exams on the same day or have purchased a non-refundable air ticket, etc. If the reason you miss the class is a medical emergency, bring a note from the appropriate medical person with a name and a phone number to call.

REQUIRED TEXTS: (Both books will be in BC bookstore)
1. The Death of Ivan Ilyich (Bantam Books edition 1981) by Leo Tolstoy
2. Tuesdays with Morrie (Doubleday, 1997) by Mitch Albom

- All of the readings listed below are available on reserve at O’Neill Library. You should buy the two books, but you will be able to download most, if not all of the articles. Do not leave your reading to the last minute the library system for downloading copies sometimes fails to work for the better part of a day.
- In addition to the readings listed below it is likely that a few additional full-length articles and a few short articles will be distributed by e-mail during the semester or put on reserve at O’Neill Library. When this happens the item added will also be added to the assigned reading on the course webpage.

TOPIC 1: FINISH THESE READINGS BY JANUARY 28
INTRODUCTION: ATTITUDES ABOUT DEATH
HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES
AIDS AND PLAGUES
1. “Facing Life with a Lethal Gene”
   by Amy Harmon
2. “Death in Popular Culture”
   by Michael C. Kearl
3. “The Terror of Death”
   by Ernest Becker
4. “Imagining the Downside of Immortality”
   by Stephen Cave
5. “Preventing the Global Spread of AIDS”
   by Gregory E. Pence

TOPIC 2: FINISH THESE READINGS BY FEBRUARY 18
THE TERMINAL PHASE OF LIFE
DYING IN VARIOUS SETTINGS
6. “Mother Shall I Put You to Sleep?”
   by Shahina Kk
7. “How Doctors Die: Showing Others the Way”
   by Dan Gorenstein
8. Tuesdays with Morrie (read the entire book)
   by Mitch Albom
9. “Learning to Fall”
   by Philip Simmons
10. On Death and Dying, Chapter 3
    by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
    by Francis D. Glamser and Donald A. Cabana
12. The Death of Ivan Ilyich (entire book, but skip the introduction by Blythe )
    by Leo Tolstoy
    by Debra Parker-Oliver
TOPIC 3: FINISH THESE READINGS BY FEBRUARY 25
FUNERAL PRACTICES AND MORTUARY RITUALS
   by Jessica Mitford
15. “Death Be Not Strange”
   by Peter Metcalf
16. “How Different Religions Pay Their Final Respects”
   by William J. Whalen

TOPIC 4: FINISH THESE READINGS BY MARCH 18
GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT
CHILDREN AND DEATH
17. “Disenfranchised Grief”
    by Kenneth J. Doka
    by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler
19. “The Death of a Child” (Ch. 26)
    by Beverly Raphael
20. “Worlds of Dying Children and Their Well Siblings”
    by Myra Bluebond-Langner

TOPIC 5: FINISH THESE READINGS BY APRIL 10
MEDICAL ETHICS, EUTHANASIA, and SUICIDE
21. “The Terri Schiavo Case” (pp. 31-38 in Chapter 2, Comas)
    by Gregory E. Pence
    by Greg Miller (This article is also available with color diagrams from:
    http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2013/02/searching-for-consciousness/all
23. “Harvesting the Dead”
    by Willard Gaylin
    by Robert Jay Lifton
25. “Death Becomes Him”
    by Bruce Falconer
    by Albert Axell and Hideaki Kase
27. “The Truth about Jonestown”
    by Keith Harrary

TOPIC 6: FINISH THESE READINGS BY DECEMBER APRIL 24
VIOLENT DEATH
28. “Rwanda—The Legacy of Inequality”
    by Neil Kressel
29. “Capital Punishment in the United States”
    by Stephanie Picolo Manzi
    by Michael C. Kearl

TOPIC 7: FINISH THESE READINGS BY MAY 1
BEYOND DEATH
31. “Vigor Quest”
    by Tom Dunkel
32. “Living to 100 and Beyond”
    by Sonia Arrison