

Dean Cantu Interview

Karen Wyatt: [00:00:00] Today I'm very happy to welcome my special guest, Dr. Dean Cantu, who is the Dean of the College of Health Education and Human Sciences at the University of Arkansas Fort- Fort Smith. He has conducted research on the personification of death and how throughout history we have attempted to give anthropomorphic form to death through its portrayal or depiction in art, music, literature, television, film, and popular culture, and we'll talk all about that today.

Professor Cantu is the author of numerous articles, book chapters, and books on history and social studies education, and has been quoted in several publications and interviewed on local CBS, Fox, and PBS television news affiliates. He has also presented three TEDx talks that we will [00:02:00] mention today, and I highly recommend them, and I'll leave links in the show notes for this episode to those TEDx talks.

His most recent one is titled Requiem: Death's Guide to Life, and it was recently presented at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. You can learn more about Dr. Cantu and his work at his website, deancantu.com. So Dean, welcome and thanks for joining me today.

Dean Cantu: thank you Dr. White. I appreciate the opportunity.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. I'm really excited to talk with you about your work because it's, a very different conversation than the ones I, usually get to have with people, but I'm also really fascinated about the research that you've done. But I was hoping you'd start by just tell us how you first got interested in, studying the subject of death in your work.

Dean Cantu: Certainly. It goes back to my time in teaching at the, K12 level. I was a high school history social studies teacher, and, I [00:03:00] taught to everything from, history, to sociology and psychology, and economics. And if you look at, death itself, and particularly the, my interest in personification of death, giving, death a- anthropomorphic form, you see a lot of that, in history.

particularly, with the, the Black Death or the Black Plague. out of that one, we would study that in our history class, in the mid-14th century. And we see from that, on other types of attempts to try to personify death, either, the Grim Reaper, or in centuries later, Dr. Beaky or Dr. Deak. and it was an interest of mine in terms of why we felt compelled to give anthropomorphic form to death. And then in teaching psychology and teaching, sociology, we cover death,

[00:04:00] in sociology. death and dying. and then in psychology, looking at that and, whether it's Freud or Jung, looking at, the importance of understanding death.

and, Freud talks a lot about how we just cannot, conceptualize our own state of non-existence, and I found that interesting, how we have this fascination with giving anthropomorphic form to death in art and literature, in popular culture writ large, and yet, it's something that we just can't conceive of.

And as and from a sociological cultural perspective, there are different, approaches to death, as well as death and dying. And, some are much more open, and it's talked about, at a very early age, and it's part of that, that upbringing. And in other cultures, it's all but a taboo subject.

So all of those things, combined to, to, serve as a, [00:05:00] an impetus behind my interest in researching this topic more, both with respect to, my role as a high school teacher, and then later on as a college professor teaching history and history education, social studies education, to, individuals who wanted to go into teaching high school and middle school history and social studies.

And so it was an avenue, that I found relevant both with respect to my time as a high school teacher as well as a university professor.

Karen Wyatt: It's, fascinating when I think about it that really death could be a topic in almost any class, in any subject that we're studying, because ultimately that's the end of everything, and so it it's hovering in the background no matter what we're studying, whether it's astronomy or chemistry, or biology of course.

It's just, it's there. There's a presence of death in everything.

Dean Cantu: It really is a nexus for so many, [00:06:00] academic disciplines. and you're exactly right. Even, in economics, I remember I had a, an economics, professor, that talked about, how individuals sometimes actually, like the focus was on Elvis Presley, for example.

Elvis Presley actually made more money, income, after his death than while he was alive. And it's just a fascinating thing that, you know, once again, death is at the, at the center or the prism through which we view things, even economics itself. So you're right. all of the social sciences and even outside of social science, for example, the sciences themselves, it's very much a relevant topic.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. It's, really fascinating. I think a lot of times, on this podcast because I'm a h- a retired hospice physician and we talk a lot about that we live in a death denying culture, and yet it seems that, we also live in kind of a death obsessed culture on the one hand. We, I guess- Yeah ... we're denying our own [00:07:00] death.

W- we can talk about other people's death, but not our own.

Dean Cantu: No, you're exactly right. it's, it's something that, we wrestle with quite obviously. we recognize or acknowledge, that, one day we will all die, and yet it's something that we just can't conceive of.

So in a way, we also are denying it. We're also, so many times operating under the assumption that we'll be the exception to the rule.

Karen Wyatt: I th- I think that's exactly right, and when we look at some of the issues we always look at is why aren't people filling out their advance directive forms, to prepare for when they die?

It's because exactly what you're saying. They can't conceive of the actual possibility that they will die. It just can't become important enough in their thoughts for them to sit down and fill out paperwork.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. it's, unfortunate, and it's-- I know that, a number of individuals [00:08:00] that work with, with, with patients, with clients in, in the final stages of their lives, will attest.

individuals, oftentimes will say one of their biggest regret is, that they thought they had more time.

Karen Wyatt: Yes.

Dean Cantu: So they didn't do those types of things that you're talking about.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. It's so very true. I've seen that in hospice all the time, people saying that "Oh, if only I had taken this more seriously and stopped to really think about it and process it."

And I'm curious to know more about your research and what you've found in art, music, literature, all of the, representations of death that you've found that you'd like to share with us.

Dean Cantu: Sure. In, my research, I, look at different types of, anthropomorphic form that we gave to death.

And, basically I found that there [00:09:00] are four major, types, categories if you will, and I named those, of death. And, the first one is probably the one, you know, that we're most, familiar with, sort of death as this macabre figure. oftentimes you have, the Grim Reaper. and a lot of that, like I say, came out of the, the Black Death or the Black Plague of the 14th century.

and it really was, our attempt to try to make sense of death on such a large scale. and, not only to make sense of it, but also to try to, see if we could, somehow control death, by giving it, some form. And like I said, from the, from the Black Plague, you had, the, Grim Reaper, you had the Danse Macabre or the Dance of Death, where, skeletal figures are dancing and [00:10:00] celebrating the death of individuals.

there's a, a famous painting a couple of centuries after, the, the Black Death, that, we see the Triumph of Death, and again, it's death winning out. and one of the, one of the takeaways from that is death will come and get us all. So even in some of the depictions, in those paintings and other illustrations, individuals, at all different, in all different stations, in all different levels of wealth.

and we all are victim of the same thing. So it's, in one way it's the great, equalizer. it is something that, awaits all of us. And so that, that, that's probably the most, the most famous, is the Grim Reaper, and we see that over and over again, and it's become, part of the, the landscape, if you will, for centuries.

and even today, if you look at, [00:11:00] whether it's movies or television programs, there, it's hard not to find, examples even in current society in which, death is portrayed Oftentimes in that sort of macabre or grotesque manner. and that's the one, that I guess makes the most sense because that's our initial fear of death that we talk about.

But as I started researching more, I started to find out that there's also, other depictions of death in a more, a romantic, form. almost as a, a seducer, if you will. and probably the, the most famous, of that motifs, is the, Death and the Maiden, where you show this young, youthful, female character, which is juxtaposed alongside of death.

typically, it's the, the Grim Reaper type of a [00:12:00] character. and it really serves a purpose though, because it, it shows that delicate balance between life and death. That juxtaposition illustrates it. So along the way, we start to see that

it serves a purpose when we see the first manifestation in art or literature of these motifs, or, such as the, the Death and the Maiden.

But it also is something though, in terms of the message that transcends both time and space in terms of we see it in other cultures, we see it throughout history, that kind of a, of a, a takeaway of the fragility of life, and that delicate balance between both of those. And it also, it, illustrates, sort of that, that- That kind of mix- mixture between this attraction to wanting to portray death in art and literature and other forms, but at the same time being repelled [00:13:00] by death itself.

And I think that, that second category of death as a, as a, a seducer or as a, a sort of an ambivalent character, is one that we see a lot even today. There is actually, there's, symphonies with the, there's a symphony, Death and the Maiden. we see it in film as well, and it's, not an unusual theme to see.

and that one there is again, probably one that, has the greatest longevity in terms of being illustrated, particularly in art. the third one that I found when I was researching, along the way is, looking at death as a friend or a comforter. And this is, again, another real common way in which death is portrayed.

and that is, the angel of death, for example. And a lot of individuals, when they think of death, they think of the, someone that is benevolent, someone that is going to [00:14:00] comfort them, someone that's gonna be with them at the end, and so that they're not alone. and so we oftentimes see that portrayal of death as, as that, that friend or that comforter, in, artwork, and in, in present day in film.

and it is, it's something again, that kind of, it provides a bit of, relief to those. I know, one of the things I, I discuss in, in, one of the TED Talks is, when my, in the, in the early 2000s when my mother, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, I know, I would sit with her, at night when, when I could.

I was a university professor, so I would come back home, and I often found myself thinking about what that might be like, and that, you knew that it wasn't going to be [00:15:00] take form, but, how comforting that would be to have the angel of death take away all of the, the pain and suffering that my mother was experiencing.

So of all of the different types of manifestations or personifications of death, that was the one I think that brought me the most comfort in, in thinking that. and it is, yeah, it's something I think that a lot of individuals, think about. even

though they know it's not gonna physically, there's not gonna physically be something there.

If there were to be, that would be what you would perceive, as, as death coming, to, relieve your loved one or to take you away, at the end and relieve you of suffering.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's actually beautiful, and I, when I think about our approach in hospice, it's probably that's how we try to envision death in hospice as a, peaceful or blessed end, in a way, to whatever suffering someone [00:16:00] has been experiencing.

Dean Cantu: There's, it's, been captured in television and film, for the last two or three generations. There's, Rod Serling's Twilight Zone. there's, just a, an episode I would highly recommend, to your listeners. it was in 1962. It's called Nothing in the Dark. and it stars R- a young Robert Redford, and he- plays the character of Death, and, and, he is just a, a nice young man who, needs some help, and there is a, there's a, an individual in the home who's fearing death, so she didn't want anyone to come in, but she let him in because he, was, hurt, and then over time he, he reveals the fact that he is Death, personification of death, to take her away.

But it's, Rod Serling does a great job though of just showing how it could be, and a- [00:17:00] again, it's, it's this angel of death as a comforter and as a friend. there's, also, there is a, series, the, The Sandman series by, by Neil Gaiman, and, there is a, Death is joined by, character of Death, that's joined by, her brother, Dream.

and, and, there's, there are, are a number of episodes again that just show someone that's there to comfort and take one, someone home. and those are, again, those are personifications of death that, I think, are ones that perhaps are most closely aligned with how we perceive of this personification of death that is the exact opposite of death as this macabre, skeletal, scythe-wielding, figure, if you will.

Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, that's really [00:18:00] fascinating.

Dean Cantu: Yeah. Go ahead

Karen Wyatt: I was, then I was going to ask about the fourth, the fourth category if you're... I don't know if you're ready to move on to that or not, but

Dean Cantu: Right. Absolutely. And then the fourth category I found in my research is death, as a, almost a, a, superhero, if you will, that's been portrayed in, in, in graphic novels, in film, on television.

and it's, And sometimes it's almost a, a bit of a comedic, approach as well. But what we find is, and again, it gets back to our conversation of, that conversation of death. Even if it's done in a way where it's a, a bit of levity a- about the introduction of the character, or it's within the, context of a, the Marvel Universe or a superhero, it's still something that, that I think serves as an impetus for individuals to have [00:19:00] conversations, to talk, to think about the topic of death, itself, and the role that it plays in our lives.

and, so a- again, it's, if you look at why we do it, variety of reasons. But, again, it's part of it, if you will, is our attempt to try to, influence power or, control over death. if we can take something that our, only our imagination can think of what it might be, and give it form, and give it form in this fashion where it could be more of a superhero or, a comic, or, a comical kind of a portrayal, then we feel that we won out over death, if you will, i- in that way.

So you see that there are, animated series such as The Simpsons and Family Guy and, you know- Others like, what is it? South Park, a lot of those, have characters that, are Death. [00:20:00] Oftentimes it's, a Grim Reaper type of portrayal, the, the stereotype. the, there was a series, Agatha All Along, that came out last year, was incredibly popular, and one of the, one of the characters is, was Rio, and Rio was Death.

And it was something, I literally saw, a newspaper articles about this portrayal of death in, in, in there. And again, so it's something that becomes, as we talked about, part of the zeitgeist, part of the, the conversation we have as a society, and it's because of its portrayal. same thing about a year or two before that, there was the film Puss in Boots: The Last Wish, and there was a lot of coverage over the character of Death, in that, in that, in that movie.

And, the fact that, if you look at it, it almost seems to be like a, a movie that's made for a younger, aged, [00:21:00] children. but there's this, this weighty topic of death itself in terms of the character and, so it, makes this personification portrayal of death all but ubiquitous.

and perhaps sometimes it doesn't spur the kind of deeper conversation that perhaps others, other depictions of death might, like an angel of death, but it still makes it part of our landscape. And so that it's still something, that provides an opportunity, if you will, for conversations about it.

I talked about Neil Gaiman's, Sandman series, one incredibly popular. Like I said, it was captured in, Netflix as a series, but it's also the graphic novels and comic, comic books, of that topic. And one of the characters, one of the most im- important characters is one we talked about, of Death.

there's, what is it? Terry Pratchett's, Discworld, series of books, and he has a, a [00:22:00] character, the Reaper Man. And and again, it's, it falls under that category that we're talking about here of sort of that comedic superhero of death, if you will. there's even, what was it?

Last year, I think was the first, season of, a, a team, the Golden State, WNBA team. And they actually chose the symbol of Valkyries, as their mascot, if you will. And if you go back, Valkyries were, psychopomps. These were individuals that, would fly over, a battlefield and take the spirits of those who were, fallen, on the battlefield, and take them to, the afterlife, if you will.

But, so even our mascots, if you will, for professional sports teams, take on, characters, or, images, that trace their genesis back to death itself. [00:23:00]

Karen Wyatt: This, actually really helps me change a little bit my perspective on our society, 'cause I've always thought we're just so avoidant of death, and yet you're pointing out how many images of death there are everywhere. In a way, we surround ourselves with it. We just may not be able, as you said, to envision our own, and therefore we may not have the depth of conversation that would be helpful to us as we approach our own death. that's the next step we need to take.

But it's not like we block death out completely. It's still, it's showing up. It's there in our culture.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. And we see that recurring theme even, with the, the most recent, COVID-19 pandemic. there was a political cartoon, and you had a, a doctor in scrubs, and he was sitting at a, a chess board.

And across from ... In th- in this case, it was a male character. Across from him, was the Grim [00:24:00] Reaper, and they were playing a game of chess. And if you go back and if you look at it, that actually goes back to, the, the 1200 BC,

where y- we found in one of the tombs Queen Nefertari. Queen Nefertari was sitting there playing a game, not chess, but it was a game of senet, against an invisible character thought to be death.

and we see that portrayal. And, there was actually a famous painting, Albertus Pictor's in the 15th century, again, of an individual playing a game of chess against, a skeletal character. And then in the 20th century, there was Ingmar Bergman's film, which I think a lot of folks know about, The Seventh Seal.

And again, it's about a soldier who had come back home, from the war, and, it was his time, but he challenges Death to a game of chess. So even those things where we see that, that portrayal of death, if you go back, there's a ... Oftentimes there's an in-depth sort of history behind each [00:25:00] of those personifications or those portrayals.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. So it's as if we humans have been doing this all along, this personification.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. I think, it's almost Carl Jung's, theory of collective unconscious. It's I think Jung would say that it's been part of a, of, our collective unconscious, since the beginning.

And it's just something that we enter into the world with, just like I think what you used as examples, fear of spiders or snakes. It's this fear of death. but this, this also this, interest in trying to, exercise some control over it as well.

Karen Wyatt: Yes, That makes so much sense. And you mentioned COVID-19, and from just from my experience in the work that I've done, it seems like since the pandemic there's been almost an awakening or real resurgence of [00:26:00] death, of people talking about it.

People are becoming death doulas and wanting to work in this arena more and more. So I wanted to ask a little bit more about how it's showing up now in our culture, and has it changed bec- because of the pandemic as far as you can see?

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. I think, because we found ourselves in a situation where we, saw, the scale of death, on an unprecedented level or scale, I think it, caused us all to reflect on our, on the fragility of life and on our own mortality.

And it helped to break down the walls, if you will, that had made death an all but taboo subject for far too many. and it was part of the conversation because individuals had, relatives... It, was hard to find someone who didn't have a

relative or a friend, That was either severely sick, from, [00:27:00] the COVID-19, the coronavirus, or had actually passed away as a result of that.

and, when you think about it, the levels, it's just, it's still mind-boggling, if you will. over a million people, died in the United States and over 7 million across the world. it's hard to go back, with the exception of, wars and find, anything that ever reached that level, and yet it happened, and we were all looking for answers, if you will, seemingly trying to understand that which we just couldn't even conceive of.

And because of that, we actually went back and looked at, periods like the Black Death. There was a, a documentary series on, the Black Death, that was incredibly popular, I remember, during the, the, the pandemic. and we made references to that, and there were articles with, the Grim Reaper and with [00:28:00] individuals talking about, how we responded to things, such as that.

Or it would go back a, a century earlier, to the Spanish influenza, the epidemic of the early 1900s, and see if there were answers there. We were searching for answers amidst, this unprecedented level of death.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, it's, interesting when, as a collective, we're brought to this point of awareness because each one of us might get there in our own family and with our own loved ones by experiencing death on a, personal level.

But to have so many people at once experiencing death and grief and pondering these questions together, it was a really f- it has been a fascinating time. It still is, 'cause I think we're still experiencing some of the, the changes from that era.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. Yeah. I, would like to think that we're more open, to talking [00:29:00] about it, to, and, to, recognizing or coming to grips, if you will, with our own mortality.

I know, there's ... it's hard because I think we still go back, the pendulum goes back if you will, to still, Of us recognizing that, death is both inevitable, and yet also for many of us still feeling like, it's impossible. and it's that ability to really come to grips with our own mortality.

And I think because of the, COVID-19 pandemic that we lived through, and seeing, other individuals pass away as a result of that on, on a much larger scale where almost no one was untouched. whether it was a, a relative, a friend, a neighbor, we hadn't experienced that, before, in recent generations.

And so I, think you're [00:30:00] right. I think it's, left an indelible mark in our memory. and I think that helps to shape and guide how we, approach death itself.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And it makes sense for, all of the awakening to death or awareness of death that may have happened, then there's an inevitable backlash.

As you were saying, the pendulum tends to swing the other way for a while. We go back and forth with, this a bit, and that's our human nature too because we get traumatized sometimes by our own awareness what we just realized, and we want to reverse it a little bit and be, feel safer once again.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. i- if you recall even during the pandemic, if you recall that the coronavirus itself, that, ultra, structural morphology of it's- they called it sometimes the, the spike blob that was on nightly news. when they were talking about anything relative to, the number of individuals, [00:31:00] that had passed away for example, that was the symbol.

So in effect, we created our own personification of death, if you will.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, that's so true, and it even became an emoji on my phone. There's the green- That's right ... blob with spikes on the, on the phone. Yeah, you're so right about that. That's really fascinating. I'm curious because you teach on the university level, what you experience from students, college level students.

Has there been an increase of interest there in the subject of death and the personification of death, or

Dean Cantu: I think so. And in particular, I, believe if you, in sort, if you go back to tracing my origins as a, history social studies teacher and professor, I think particularly for the social sciences, history and, psychology and, and sociology, and even to a certain degree, [00:32:00] in our college we have social work, as well, I think certain areas I think it really is, is something at the forefront that we see.

Again, I think a, a, greater readiness to have those conversations and, about it, and I think a greater interest, if you will. I, and I don't know if it's, it has to do with, it just being a younger generation or a generation that went through, the COVID-19 pandemic when they were, whether it was middle school or high school, and now they're in, now they're in college, and so they, carry that with them.

and it's more real to them perhaps, and they can relate to, it's more relevant, if you will.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. that makes lot of sense to me, that we would be seeing changes in younger generations just because of, of what we've just been through in the last decade

Dean Cantu: Without a doubt. and I, think, [00:33:00] also because in our popular culture, as we talked about, those personifications of death, particularly that latter category, if you will, the, superhero in the, in, in the comedic form, in television programs and in movies, in graphic novels, that are of interest, particularly to a younger generation.

I think, there's a greater familiarity with it. and I think it's a topic that at one point, many, producers of television programs, for example, would have steered away from, and now I think they see it as, as something that they can cover in a variety of different manners. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, there's more interest and more will to witness this. And I'm curious, I don't... Maybe this isn't related at all, but I'm curious about our use of euphemisms for death, which to me goes along with personification, of not directly naming death, but having, [00:34:00] the Grim Reaper as a name, or when we personify it, we may call it something else, or we call it passing away or pushing up daisies, whatever whatever- the image is that people use. And I'm curious if that's come up for you of, any connection there.

Dean Cantu: and that's a great, a great point. a- and I think it, it, it's part of that, that reluctance to, still acknowledge, death itself. So if we, if we personify it in visual form in another way, then perhaps, or the way in which we articulate it, is it may be, prone to that same, a approach of trying to do it in a manner where we don't have to 100% acknowledge it, if you will.

and there's perhaps a greater comfort in, like you said, someone's pushing up daisies or something. it's [00:35:00] something that individuals may be more comfortable saying. but I think it's that avoidance, if you will- to acknowledge our own mor- mortality that it may be part of the reason why we adopt those.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah, and similarly, one thing I've noticed a lot on social media, in the last few years is a lot of death related humor, and it usually involves the Grim Reaper. As I think about it, so many cartoons with- Yeah ... the Grim Reaper, and that really fascinates me too. And is humor one of the ways that we try again to gain control over death in some ways?

Dean Cantu: I think you're right. I, we definitely saw that in the, during the pandemic. there was ... I remember there were, one of the, one of the, news stories, that, I came across was there was a lawyer who was protesting opening up, beaches, too soon. And so this individual [00:36:00] dressed up like the Grim Reaper.

And so you had that, portrayal. and then there was, University of Texas A&M, there was something in their student publication, where they showed, the Grim Reaper was pledging a fraternity as they- returned to campus. and so you're right, I think there's that, That, that use of the visual to try to introduce levity, to perhaps diffuse the fear that we have and the concern and the anxiety.

and so by doing so, perhaps we feel like we're trying to, again, exercise control over death. So now that we're in charge because we have, we made it into this comic portrayal, if you will. you're right. There was, I remember I came across, it was a Washington Post article and, during the pandemic and, they talked about how they asked the question, the Grim Reaper, why is it showing up [00:37:00] in all these pandemic cartoons?

And is it to provoke or to provide dark humor? and it's y- it's something that we even, thought about as we were doing it. At the same time, we were cognizant of what we were doing, and yet we were s- as it seems to me, as a society, we are asking ourselves almost like, is this okay?

What are we trying to accomplish by doing this?

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. That's so interesting. And when I think about it, that figure of the Grim Reaper, you don't have to use the word death. Everyone knows what it means. But at least it seems universal here in our society and culture. Is it for other cultures around the world a similar symbol of the Grim Reaper or so- or something else?

Dean Cantu: that's, it's interesting. What, when ... During my research, I basically confined it to, my focus was on the United States. and so I, didn't, juxtapose how we use, those, those personifications like the Grim Reaper if it's shared by other cultures. [00:38:00] Um, I looked historically at different, personifications, but, but that's an interesting point.

It would be interesting to see if there are similarities, if it's like a conceptual Venn diagram where we share certain personifications. My, assumption is that the Grim Reaper would probably be one of those that's shared, by other, other countries as well. but there m- and probably Dr.

Beaky, certainly in European, nations- both of those, if you trace the genesis. but it would be interesting to see though, is that shared as well in, African societies and in-

Karen Wyatt: Yeah ...

Dean Cantu: societies, countries in Asia, for example.

Karen Wyatt: It makes sense that it, would be in Europe because of the Black Death, because that image came from that time.

But you're, right. Okay. I'm just fascinated- ... by, by this and how each culture approaches it and how we tell our stories about death in a way, and [00:39:00] how we record those stories and what images we attach to it, and I think that's really fascinating.

Dean Cantu: No, I, I agree. and it, really, if you look at this, the fear that we had of the, the COVID-19, coronavirus, it's something where even the portrayal of it, as we talked about this spiky blob, but there was a movie back in the mid-1950s called The, The Blob itself.

And, and it was, it's been interpreted different ways whether it was about, nuclear war or, if it was about, other countries, presenting a risk to the United States. We portrayed it as a blob, and it's there's similarities there.

I know there was one, article, uh, that came out in, during the pandemic, and it was, entitled Dance Macabre or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Death. And if you look at it, again, they were taking, [00:40:00] if you go back another generation or so, that was, it's a, spinoff of, Stanley Kubrick's, film, Dr.

Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. And so there's this thing that we fear itself, and so our... Again, it gets back to what we talked a- about, introducing that levity there along the way or drawing those historical comparisons or parallels with it is, again, I think a, an attempt to try to, to make sense of what we're doing.

and, I think too, certainly we d- we found ourselves doing that during the, the, pandemic, but I think even today, I think those, those personifications, those portrayals, depictions of death can also spark similar types of conversations, if you will

Karen Wyatt: And I really appreciate in your work, boy, like your, most recent Ted- TEDx talk, Requiem: Death's Guide to Life, how you have gone further into the subject of death [00:41:00] to see it almost as a portal or a teacher for us to learn more about life.

And so I think that's a really nice way to look at it, that by studying, the personification of death and these symbols, it can actually help us learn more about life. So I'd love to have you tell us more about your thoughts there.

Dean Cantu: Yeah, absolutely. I think if you look at death, I think it, it really can be, and this was part of what, I, I, talked about.

I think death can be, a teacher, if you will, for us, if we allow it to be. And that may sound odd, peculiar, if you look at it, there's so many lessons, that we can learn from death itself and, and its impact it has on all of us. there's ... And we try to, one of the lessons, and again, we talk a little bit about this, [00:42:00] is, that individuals, far too often have regret at the, at, at the end of their lives that they, felt that they had more time.

and, And there's a, there's an author, Oliver, Burkeman, wrote a book called Four Thousand Weeks where he talks about the fact that, when we look at-- let's not write off time, first of all, recognize, it, we complain about Mondays or whatever it is, and we only have so many of those, and he uses four thousand weeks because that's, equivalent to someone that would live 80 years. and he-- and he talks about this state of finitude, if you will, where we, we recognize there's only a finite amount of time that we're, we're, gonna be here. And, he talks about these last, time reflections, where what we should do is everything we do, we should, approach it as though it's the last time.

So we wanna try to not only do our best, [00:43:00] but also wring from that experience as much as possible, um, and our time is limited here. I think, that y-- when you start with that, I think that's one of the big takeaways or one of the big lessons, if you will, of death itself, is to acknowledge that or recognize that, if you will.

it, you know, memento mori, is the big takeaway from all of this, remembering that we have to die. There's, there's examples of this, numerous ones. There's, one that I, I talk about that I, I, really find, is it, it, really does perhaps illustrate this better than any other.

There was a, a church in, just north of Rome, Santa Maria delle Concezione, and they, in the 17th century, the cardinal ordered the remains of thousands of

friars exhumed and transferred over [00:44:00] to the, crypt of the church, and it was divided into five chapels. In one of the chapels, you had the, the remains of the monks there on, on display, and there was a, uh, there is a, a, a plaque with an insignia that says, "What you are now, we once were.

What we are now, you shall be." and that's, the big takeaway. And again, it's this, this acceptance of the fact that we're not, immortal, or w- we, and we never know when our, time will end. so don't take anything for granted, and don't think that you're gonna be the exception.

And also, I think part of that also is time itself. time will go by much quicker than you, you even think. In a blink of an eye, you, yeah, you will, not be here any longer. So, you need to do something about that. and that's again, it's part of that, that whole thing about, that we're talking about is what are the lessons?

What, can we do? And I think it's, it's, also wrapped [00:45:00] in with, time itself and, in, in recognizing that it is something that has such a tremendous impact on our lives, on our thoughts, and on our actions, and yet we don't consider it enough. We don't, recognize that. And so therefore, we're not necessarily good stewards of our time.

And I think that's a big lesson that teaches us.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, and I remember from your TEDx talk, you quoted, I'll probably mess this up, but something about the fact that time stays. We are the, we move on. And so we're always using these as if time is doing something to us. Time's flying by.

Time's going too quickly, but time is actually still, we're the ones who are moving.

Dean Cantu: That's exactly right. Yeah. It's, it's, And it's one of those things, it's one of- It's one of the things I think that, if we look at death itself as a teacher, I [00:46:00] think it's a takeaway that I think we all should have from it, is that you don't want to find yourself at that stage of life, where perhaps you're facing death and having those regrets, if you can do something about it now.

I remember there was a, an actor, Yul Brynner, and, he was, he played, uh, Ramesses on, The Ten Commandments and The King and I and everything. And I remember he was a smoker, and he actually, he, uh, did a commercial talking about, trying to prevent people from smoking, and he only wanted it to air after he died.

and, and it did. and I don't know what impact it had on individuals, but it was haunting to see a commercial by someone who's telling you, "You're watching this. I'm not here any longer, and I made a big mistake, and I don't want you to have that same regret, with your life."

Karen Wyatt: Wow. That's really powerful. And, even a person who is [00:47:00] dead still being a teacher and still getting that message across to people.

Dean Cantu: Right. Absolutely. So it's... Yeah, there's, so many, there's so many ways in which we, can learn from, from death. And, like I talked about, I mentioned, psychologists, again, social scientists, psychologists, like Carl Jung who talks about it, y- we need to- accept death and try to learn from it and see what it has to teach us about how to live.

and it's so true. there's so much there, that we can learn from that can help guide us throughout the, the remainder of our lives. It can help us, in terms of our interaction with loved ones as well, I think. and so that we don't have those regrets, so that we can live life more fully, and not take anything, for granted.

Yeah ... those are absolutely, I think the big [00:48:00] takeaways or the lessons there. There's a, there's one, quote I, I, love and it's, by a individual, Robert Herford is his name, and he talks about, quote, "It, it's too bad dying is the last thing we do because it teach, it could teach us so much about life."

And it really is unfortunate that we couldn't take what we know at the end of our lives and somehow implant it into our brains, into our minds as we start to go through life. I think we would just, it would, we would ring so much more from life and it would, we would pursue things perhaps much differently than we do now, that we in the end recognize, really wasn't worth it.

And other things that you, gave up, or, took away from, those are the things that are most important.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah. And maybe we can learn as well from being present for the deaths of the people we love and, learning about death [00:49:00] by being at the bedside and witnessing that. And you, did tell a poignant story in the TED Talk about, when your own mother died-

Dean Cantu: Right.

I was a, a professor at, Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and, we were getting ready, my wife and our kids to, to go home for the, for the winter break back to Illinois where my parents lived and where I grew up. And, I, I'll never forget, but, we were gonna leave a little bit earlier in the day, but there was something that, was work-related that I felt like I had to take care of so that way I could just not worry about it and then just leave and, spend the, the next, week and a half there at home.

and, so as a result we left, a few hours later than we had originally planned and, we literally were between an hour and two hours from home and my, my, my other [00:50:00] brother, I- one-- my one brother was at home with my mom and my dad, and, and, my other brother, was, was coming from St.

Louis. He was an FBI agent and, he and I didn't make it back in time and our other brother called us to tell us that our mom, had died and, so we, we were at different points in our journey back home. but we talked to one another and I, I, I-- as I, as I mentioned, I don't remember whatsoever it was that I felt I had to stay there and work on for a couple more hours that delayed our trip back home.

but I'll never forget the fact that I wasn't there, to be with my mom-

Karen Wyatt: Mm ...

Dean Cantu: when she died.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. And that's, a such a painful experience. It's actually so very common. I hear it all the time, from people who wish, they had been there and weren't able to be [00:51:00] there and for whatever reason it w- it works out that way f- for a lot of people.

But it does help you maybe change priorities in some ways to think about how do we use this precious time that we have?

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. I think it gets back to what we talked about. If you, could see the end, the last chapter of our lives, it could so inform and guide us, as we go back to the first chapter and live our lives, and it's just unfortunate.

But I guess then, it, it has to do with, coming to the realizations when there is time to, to, guide your life and go in that direction and, perhaps not to make those, mistakes or have those regrets later on that perhaps others have had. Yeah. And, to give value to, what they say, when they pass along that sage advice.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. Yes. I know one of the things I took away from working in [00:52:00] hospice with people at the end of life is wanting to live my life differently, better in some ways- and with more meaning and focusing on things that really mattered to me. And I was curious to know if doing research on death has led you to a similar point or has changed how you live your life day to day?

Dean Cantu: That's a great, question. I think it, it has informed more what I do. I'm much more cognizant of it, and I try, I try to, ensure that, I, I think I've always attempted, I've felt I've always attempted to do it, but obviously, there are examples such as the one I just shared with you, and there are other things where you know that you, you're at that crossroads and you have, a decision to make.

And, I think I'm probably more aware and I am probably more guided by, my research and, my understanding in reading what, [00:53:00] sage advice that others are passing on at, the end of their lives, and taking that to heart. and, and as a result, seizing on more of those opportunities to, to be with family and, not sacrificing that time, as much as I did perhaps in my, the early part of my, career, and not trying to rationalize it.

I think that's the other thing is, so often I think we rationalize it. And, in a way, it doesn't mean every time that the situation warranted not spending that time, as much time with family, as it did us convincing ourselves that was the case, when in fact we really didn't have to do that.

And so I think I'm more, more cognizant, uh, more aware of that, if you will.

Karen Wyatt: That's a really good point. G- we're such a cerebral society in a way. We're very good at rationalizing ... everything. But I have to say, your [00:54:00] research really gives me hope in a way, because it reminds me that death is just part of our lives, and as much as it seems like we're trying to ignore it or avoid it, we really can't.

it's there. It shows up everywhere, and we're really seeing images and reminders of death all the time. And that g- it gives me some hope that people, however they go about it, whatever it is that helps them become more aware or contemplate their own life and the meaning of life and the meaning of death more, at whatever timing it has to, even if it's in the last weeks of their life, people do seem to get to a point where, they start to face death

Dean Cantu: Right.

Absolutely. I, y- you're right, and I, think that, I, I guess it goes back to our experience during the pandemic. I, out of something just horrific, something, terrible, [00:55:00] perhaps if that lesson, the fact that we, are wrestling with our own mortality, if that acknowledgement and that recognition that our time here may be much more limited than we think, if that ig- recognition that, that those things that should have priority, family for example, that we need to give it that priority.

and, and, if that is, something that's come out of the, the pandemic, and if it's something that has, a long half-life, if you will, in terms of its manifestation in our society, and it's not just something that impacts those that went through the pandemic, but it's passed on to other generations, I think then that, is an example of something good, coming out of a, of a terrible, era that we all lived through together.

and yeah, I'd like to [00:56:00] think that we're, we're in a better place relative to at least starting to have those conversations. It's not that they weren't happening, but it just, I think it's on a larger scale- across, the landscape, if you will.

Karen Wyatt: Yes. I, think you're exactly right.

I think it feels to me like something has shifted, and we'll see. We'll see how far the pendulum swings, back. But, this has been such a rich conversation. I've enjoyed it so much, and I was about to say time flew by, but now I know I should... Time doesn't move. But we moved quickly. We moved

Dean Cantu: through- That's right.

Karen Wyatt: We moved quickly. We moved through this hour together. And, That's

Dean Cantu: right ...

Karen Wyatt: and, I

Dean Cantu: appreciate the opportunity, like I said before, Dr. Wyatt.

Karen Wyatt: You're a treasure trove of information, and I'm really fascinated with everything you've done, and I want to point people back to your website, deanCantu.com, and check out the [00:57:00] TED Talks, 'cause they're really wonderful.

I actually really hope that you'll write a book someday. Are you thinking of that at all?

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. that's one of the, one of the things that, that I wanna do, is to, is to write a book on this topic. it's, I've done all of the research and like I said, it, I, I've used it, in, many, together with the TED Talks, but I think there's

Yeah, I would love to, to write a book on, on this, focused solely on this topic.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, I'd love to see that, and then you can come back on the podcast again, and we'll talk about your book and...

Dean Cantu: that sounds perfect. Thank

Karen Wyatt: you. Thank, thank you so much.

Dean Cantu: Absolutely. Thank you again.