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How We Die Subject of Alumna's Book

Jan. 7, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— It is a certainty, as Benjamin Franklin said, that all of us will face. Yet the circumstances around death — the causes, when it occurs, and how it happens — have changed dramatically for many Americans since Franklin's time.

Many today are living longer, dying more slowly, and more importantly, dying differently than their ancestors. Examining both the societal impact and individual ramifications of this "longevity dividend" is the subject of new book by Karla Erickson, a 1995 Illinois Wesleyan University graduate and now an associate professor of sociology at Grinnell College.

As part of her research for *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying* (Temple University Press, 2013), Erickson, an ethnographer of labor, trained as a nurse's aide in order to develop a deep understanding of the daily lives of workers and elders in a Midwestern retirement community. Erickson's research investigates why workers are attracted to their occupations, what they learn from their work, and what sustains and challenges them. For her book, she spent more than two years observing and interviewing chaplains, nurses, residents and family caregivers in the retirement community.



Karla Erickson
Photo courtesy of Grinnell College

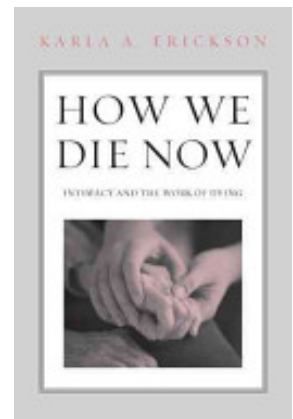
"I wanted to know more about aging and dying and to be comfortable in that knowledge," writes Erickson, who began work on the book after observing the spiritual, physical and emotional support hospice workers provided to her dying grandparents. "I wanted mortality to be less hidden, more familiar." She noted that both as individuals and as a society we "find ourselves navigating a changing landscape of old age and death for which we have no training and little preparation to encounter."

Average life expectancy in the U.S. is now 77 years, compared to 47 in 1900, according to the U.S. Census Bureau statistics. This longer life span, coupled with a dying process that is more incremental when compared to the sudden deaths experienced in the past, has resulted in a dramatic social change, Erickson writes. "Contemporary humans can now see their own death coming," she said. Yet, "our social rituals and the social organization of old age and death have not kept pace with our longer lives and slower deaths."

Erickson's path to ethnographer and college professor began at Illinois Wesleyan, where she said she was one of the first students to major in **women's studies** at IWU.

"It was really important to me that I could pursue a program that wasn't even formally recognized, and I could develop a program (of study) I was interested in," recalls Erickson, who also majored in **English**. She names Alison Sainsbury, associate professor of English; Georganne Rundblad, professor of sociology; and April Schultz, professor of history, as important influences during her time at IWU and beyond.

"I had planned to become a lawyer," said Erickson, who adds she had tried to avoid following in the footsteps of her parents, who were educators.



"Georgeanne let me take over her class for a few days and I was hooked (on teaching)," Erickson recalls.

Erickson said it was Sainsbury who suggested graduate school and advised Erickson on how to obtain teaching assistantships to fund her education. "And, April recognized American Studies as a good interdisciplinary program for me," Erickson said. "The mentoring I received from all these women while at IWU drove me." Erickson earned a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota in 2004 before joining the faculty at Grinnell College.

During both her undergraduate and graduate years, Erickson worked as a waitress, where she became intrigued with ways people identify themselves through work. She said her academic coursework and popular culture declared the sense of community in America was dead.

"Yet, the restaurant where I worked in Minneapolis was this little place like Cheers," says Erickson, referring to the popular 1980s sitcom based on a fictional Boston pub. "People were using this little restaurant like we once used backyard fences, and I began to wonder about using consumer spaces to connect to each other."

This research resulted in *The Hungry Cowboy: Service and Community in a Neighborhood Restaurant*, a book examining class, community and gendered labor in a Tex-Mex restaurant in Minneapolis.

Erickson's next project will focus on young workers in a global economy. "I'm interested in young people who have some social capital, such as graduates of Grinnell and of Illinois Wesleyan, who are encountering a job market so different from that of their parents," said Erickson. "I'm really interested in what their generation will experience in terms of labor."

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