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Better Choices for the End of Life

Ethnographer Karla Erickson '95 shares lessons that workers who care for the dying can teach us.

Story by **KIM HILL**

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 research by Karla Erickson '95, an associate professor and chair of sociology at Grinnell College, a top liberal arts college located in central Iowa.

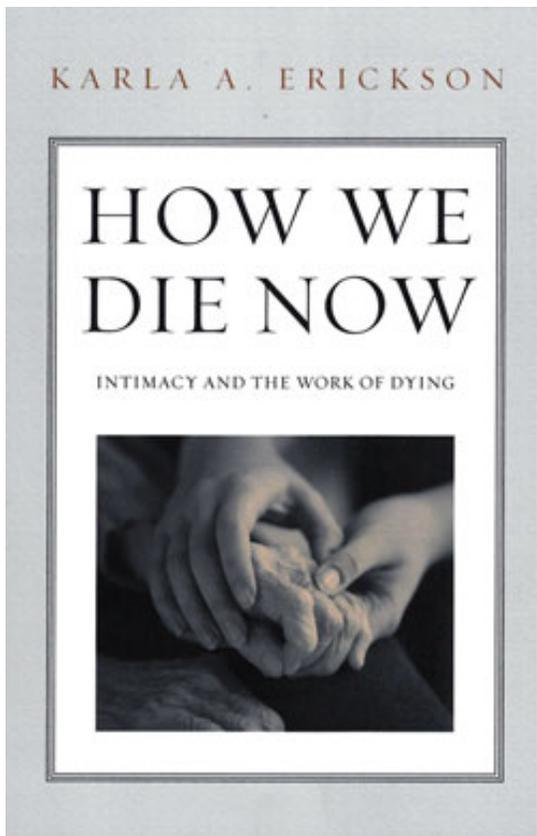
As an ethnographer, Erickson's research typically includes spending several years living among the population she is studying. Her particular focus is labor: why workers are attracted to their occupations, what they learn from their work and what sustains and challenges them.

To prepare for her newest book, *How We Die Now: Intimacy and the Work of Dying* (Temple University Press), Erickson trained as a nurse's aide to help to develop a deeper understanding of the daily lives of workers and elders in an Iowa retirement community. She and 12 of her students also spent more than two years observing and interviewing chaplains, nurses and other medical and support staff at the retirement community, as well as residents and family caregivers.

“I wanted to know more about aging and dying and to be comfortable in that knowledge,” explains 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 notes 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.”



Erickson (above) trained as a nurse's aide to help to gain a deeper understanding of the daily lives of workers and elders at an Iowa retirement community. (Photo courtesy of Grinnell College)



With one of the nation's highest percentages of people age 65 or older, Iowa is an ideal place to study aging in America. Average life expectancy in the United States is now 78 years, compared to 47 in 1900 and 69 in 1960. 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, according to Erickson. "Contemporary humans can now see their own death coming," she says. 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 was one of the first students to major in women's studies, an interdisciplinary program established at IWU in 1993.

Erickson, who also majored in English, names Alison Sainsbury, associate professor of English; Georganne Rundblad, professor of sociology and anthropology; and April Schultz, professor of history, as important influences during her time at Illinois Wesleyan and beyond.

Erickson, who also majored in English, names Alison Sainsbury, associate professor of English; Georganne Rundblad, professor of sociology and anthropology; and April Schultz, professor of history, as important influences during her time at Illinois Wesleyan and beyond.

"I had planned to become a lawyer," Erickson recalls — in part to avoid following in the footsteps of her parents, who were both educators. That attitude changed when Rundblad "let me take over her class for a few days, and I was hooked."

It was Sainsbury who first encouraged Erickson to consider graduate school and advised her how to obtain teaching assistantships to fund her education. "And April [Schultz] recognized American Studies as a good interdisciplinary program for me," says Erickson.

"The mentoring I received from all these women while at Illinois Wesleyan drove me." After earning a doctoral degree in American Studies from the University of Minnesota, she joined the Grinnell College faculty in 2004.

Erickson's interest in how people identify themselves through their work was piqued during her years waitressing while in college and graduate school. Her 2009 book, *The Hungry Cowboy: Service and Community in a Neighborhood Restaurant* (University Press of Mississippi), offers a behind-the-scenes look at the dynamics of social class, race and economics at a Tex-Mex restaurant in Minneapolis where she waitressed for two years.

The Hungry Cowboy “was this little place like Cheers,” says Erickson, referring to the 1980s sitcom about a Boston pub “where everybody knows your name.”

In contrast to the fragmented, isolated world she read about in her graduate studies, Erickson would go to work at night and observe how diners and servers “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.”

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,” she says. “I’m really interested in what their generation will experience in terms of labor.”

As Erickson reflects back on her experiences in writing *How We Die Now*, she feels grateful for its lasting lessons on how to embrace, rather than deny or avoid, the realities of the dying process. “Of the 50 people I interviewed who have ushered someone else toward death, the most common refrain was gratitude for the opportunity, because it helped them overcome their own fears of death, live more fully and do meaningful work. ... Their advice to pursue an intentional, sustained process of ushering another person into death reflects the rewards that they’ve experienced as a result of their work.”

Read advice on how to better navigate the dying process in [a related story](#).