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COLE IMPERI: DEATH BECOMES US

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H. Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where we are going to have the pleasure of a conversation with Cole Imperi. Cole Imperi is a dual-certified thanatologist, and one of America's leading experts on death, dying, and grief. As a writer and podcast host, she's enthusiastically changing the way we approach loss, death, and dying in the United States, and she teaches how to live a brighter life by finding the light of loss. Cole, thank you so much for joining us.

Cole Imperi: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be a guest.

JH: The first thing that we need to figure out is, what is a thanatologist?

CI: Yes, that is quite a \$10 word, is it not? [chuckle] Thanatology is the study of death and dying. And the field itself is, on the one hand, kind of small. Most people have never heard of it. However, on the other, it's actually a huge, huge area of study because death intersects with basically every aspect of life, and therefore that is what thanatology looks at, anything that intersects with death, dying, grief, loss, and bereavement.

JH: I can only assume that your work takes you in to places where you interact with hospice and other fields where people also deal with end-of-life issues.

CI: I have the good fortune of being able to experience multiple aspects of the field. For many years, I've been an active hospice volunteer, I have led support groups, I have served my community as what's called a death companion, so I've actually been with people as they died. And that's the sort of one-on-one, actually being with death and dying. On the other hand, I've worked with funeral homes, cemeteries, and crematories for over a decade in the United States. And then I hang out on the research end, so I get to explore death and dying in real life, and then from an academic perspective as well.

JH: So, the complexity of death and dying... We're gonna talk about all kinds of aspects

of it, including the degree to which it's a touchy subject. And that's part of your work - moving it from being touchy in a less constructive way to it being sensitive in a meaningful and powerful way. And that begs the issue of religion, and you have a very compelling arc to your own religious development. And so I was wondering if you could introduce us to yourself as a religious person, and then specifically link that to maybe how religion relates to your own understandings of or relationship with death.

CI: Okay. In my own personal experience with faith, I am what you might call religiously promiscuous. My mom and my mom's family is Catholic. I was raised Catholic, and I went to Catholic school through eighth grade. And then in eighth grade, I really was upset and tripped up by this idea that Jesus was Jewish and he died Jewish. And I didn't understand then why are we Catholic, and I was never able to get any answers on that. And so at 12 or 13, I decided I wanted to go to public high school, because I felt, even at that age, that there was a misalignment in values or what I felt was right. So I went to a public high school, and as luck would have it, that high school, more than 10% of the population, was Jewish. As a result, it was a public high school, but we were closed for all of the major Jewish holidays because so much of our school would not show up for classes on those days. And, for whatever reason, I became one of the Jewish kids, and almost immediately I started observing Shabbat, whether it was with my friends. And then I also started to observe it at home in my bedroom on Friday nights, and to this day it's very rare if a Friday goes by that I do not observe Shabbat.

Anyway, moving forward in college, I was still having conflicting stuff with religion, so I ended up picking up a degree in Judaic Studies. I learned to read and write biblical Hebrew. When I was 26, I actually went over to Israel. I had a symbolic bat mitzvah over there and got my Hebrew name. And then... Oh, I forgot to mention, I also served on the board of a synagogue for, I think, three years in my 20s. But after all of this, I found out that I come from what turned out to be a long line of Jews, in particular, Alsatian Jews from the northeast part of France. And so what I've been able to figure out, this all started with a DNA test, just uncovering my great grandparents and beyond, the reason that everybody came over to the US was to escape persecution, and they also left their faith tradition as well. So, for me, my religiousness has been really interesting to have been dedicated and devoted, and to have within me my own identity as a Jewish person, but to not find out that I actually was Jewish to some degree until after I had already committed to it. That's been a really special experience, and something I really treasure and value about my own life path.

JH: For most people, I think there is a stereotype about many religions and their relationships with death, and certainly Judaism, Catholicism evoke probably preconceived notions about those religions' relationships with death. What about yours? And how did it change together with your adoption and then discovery of your own Judaism?

CI: Most faith traditions explain death. And I'm gonna boil this down really simply to a punishment and reward system. If you're good, you go to heaven. If you're bad, you go to hell. At least we understand this as far as with Christianity. In my case, I was raised

Catholic, part of the Christian tradition, Jewish, all this, and so I understood this idea of heaven. But as I moved into adulthood and started looking at things from more of a thanatological perspective, we can unpack that dichotomy in a ton of different ways, because we have replicated it in other areas of society. For example, Santa Claus. Santa rewards you with toys if you're good, and he punishes you with coal if you're bad. Right? And so this is the framework that death has been taught. But the reality is, death doesn't... That's not accurate for death at all. And in my work as a thanatologist, this dichotomy, this way of presenting death as a punishment or reward, really can cause a lot of issues for people at end of life, because they're left with, "Oh, my gosh, am I gonna get punished or rewarded?"

JH: Forgive me for interrupting, but you're saying that even if you're not necessarily a devout Catholic, or Christian, that this cultural baggage, even when it comes filtered down and directly through things like Santa Claus or other parallel, certainly it's stereotypical. In other words, Catholicism is associated in the popular imagination with those dichotomies, as you laid them out. And do I hear you saying that, if you're around it a lot and if it's part of your culture, being raised at home, even if you're not pious or a dedicated religious person, you carry that with you to your deathbed, and it's a source of stress or worry?

CI: It can be, for sure. Some of the students that I teach, I teach sociology, I teach thanatology classes. I have students that were raised completely a-religiously, without any faith tradition, yet they still have these ideas of heaven is a reward and hell is a punishment, based upon how do you behave on earth. And this is a concept that they have internalized that is not from a religious background, yet it comes ultimately from the religious traditions. And at end of life, I have seen people who perhaps they were a practicing Jew for 50 years, but they were born to a Christian family and that was part of their early formative years. It's interesting, these things that we were exposed to before the age of 6, they still live inside of us, and they can erupt at end of life, and they can be things that are questions for people and that they have a hard time grappling with.

JH: Is there anything about Judaism that alleviated this for you?

CI: Well, what I loved about the Judaic perspective, from my vantage point within the faith tradition, so I'm obviously not Orthodox, I would identify more as reconstructionist, is this idea that it's not... How it's not reward-punishment, it's not so cut and dry. I have a book that is almost 500 pages just called "Jewish Views of the Afterlife" by Simcha Paull Raphael. Judaism is not really amazingly that clear on what happens at end of life or after we die. And I think that that's actually really healthy. I think it's a real problem if you tell somebody, "If you do these things while you're living, then you're going to hell, and that's the end of the story." It's much more healthy to have this idea that we don't know, that none of us really know.

JH: Certainly Judaism has spent a bulk of its long history in a pretty ambiguous place with respect to some of those things that are detailed much more explicitly in places like Dante, so I can see why that plays itself out emotionally.

CI: Yeah. Judaism itself also values and I guess I would say rewards questioning. We encourage questioning, right? How many of our holidays is there questions that we're supposed to ask and ponder? And this is a quality that I think is very special to the Judaic tradition that it doesn't exist in other faith traditions in quite that way in my experience. And I think, if we process this through a sociological lens or even a psychological lens, it is a much more safe experience and environment for an individual person. Would you rather be in a room with people who everyone is open to questions, or would you rather be in a room where questioning is not okay, is not allowed?

JH: In your very, very personal experience of both Catholicism and Judaism, do you, in fact, find that... A notable difference in the openness to questions?

CI: Yes, absolutely. I am not speaking on behalf of all Catholics obviously, but when I...

JH: Or of all Jews, yes, of course.

CI: Or all Jews, right. This is my personal experience. But when I was an eighth grader, that's pretty young, I remember asking everybody about this conflict that I saw, like, "Why were we Catholics, if Jesus died, Jewish?" I got in trouble for asking that. And I have met other people who have had similar experiences. They may not initially have been Catholic but from other faith traditions, and I don't really have an explanation or any more information about why that is there, but religions themselves have cultural norms within them. And in Judaism, it is normal to question, and that I think most Jewish people would not respond by shutting someone's questioning down. And that is the cultural, social aspect there.

JH: Yeah, I tend to agree, but it's always good to question that because it can sometimes appear self-congratulatory when Jews talk about how we're open to questions.

CI: Yeah, you're so right, 'cause ultimately everybody has some sort of unconscious bias somewhere towards something.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu, for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click "sign up" at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing. Help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

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JH: I wanna shift gears a little bit because one of the most interesting things that I think you bring to the conversation is an appreciation of the sociology of death and the way in which religious mixing in American families, which is increasingly common across the spectrum complicates... I'm sure it enriches, but it also complicates how we approach death, and certainly you and your work must encounter it with some frequency.

CI: Yes. I'll say that this sort of, what is called a challenge... And the challenge being that today it is more normal to take a family unit, and that family unit, let's say, that they're in Cincinnati, Ohio, maybe that whole entire family relocated for job prospects, 10 years ago. So, it's more normal for people to live away from the place where they were born and/or the place where generations of their family members have lived. On top of that, it is more of a norm for, within a family unit, you have multiple religious traditions that are represented and being practiced, and to have differences in even languages, like primary languages that are spoken, countries of origin, all of that. When we get all the way to death and one family unit is grieving the loss of a loved one, this is where the thanatological, sociological lens comes into play, because what helps one tradition or culture, or even region of the country, feel better about grief may not make another feel better about grief and loss. And so you can have one family unit where some of the people are comforted by certain rituals and others are offended by the same rituals. And this is something that, in funeral service, we encounter. Funeral directors are the ones that are given the honor of having to create a meaningful service and conclusion for a family, and it can be a real struggle to find a way to take care of everybody's grieving heart.

JH: Do you have a story you can tell us, an anecdote, something that would capture the attention?

CI: I can tell you. There was a funeral director, I believe it was like a very mixed family. There were multiple religious traditions. Some people were from... Not all from the United States. English was not everybody's first language, so there were even some family members that couldn't communicate with each other directly. And so the funeral director was like, "What can I do that is meaningful to everybody?" Well, the individual that died, she was known for her baked beans that she would prepare. And so what that funeral home did was, when everybody showed up to the service, they actually had a bunch of baked beans brewing in crock pots and then they put fans on them. So when everybody walked into the room, it smelled like baked beans. And for this family, that was incredibly meaningful, and it was non-offensive to anybody because everybody associated their loved one with her baked beans. That is an example of how you can find something that is personally meaningful across religious traditions, across backgrounds, across languages, and that's something that I've noticed in my research over the years in thanatology. There are two things that are very safe in terms of things that are likely to not be offensive to anybody across any category, and that's food and plants. Food and plants. Those tend to be two things that people don't have hang-ups with, bad experiences, trauma, those things. Food and plants. Yeah.

JH: Which leads us to... If thanatology were not recondite and niche enough, you are also a thanabotanist.

CI: Yes.

JH: Beans are plants and food, you can tell us a bit about thanabotany.

CI: Thanabotany is an emerging field that I am pioneering, and I just completed a research fellowship in that area earlier this year out of the Lloyd Library and Museum. Thanabotany is where thanatology, the study of death and dying, intersects with ethnobotany, which is the study of how people use plants. Thanabotanists look at how did we use plants to deal with death, dying, and what comes afterwards, the grieving process. And then we look at it across time, across cultures, across countries, across religious traditions. One of the outcomes from this fellowship was a thanabotanical database where you can now go in and pick a plant, a flower, a specimen, something. Let's say that we pick the pine tree, then that will pull up information that will quickly tell you, "Oh, the pine was used for death, and/or dying, and/or grief and bereavement, and then it will show you what countries, what religious traditions we have documentation for this usage in.

CI: For example, rosemary, something that would show the user that rosemary was used for dying before you actually die, the process of dying. We also have documentation that it's used for death, and that it is used for post-death. And what else we'll pull up is Italy will show up, and then whales, we have a lot of rosemary usage out of whales over the last 400 or 500 years. That's one of the things that we do in thanabotany. And then when I... One of the applications of thanabotany is... Was the example I just gave you with the baked beans basically. How can we take these plants that we know about their past usage, and help connect them to grieving families to help them create meaningful ritual, because we know that when a person is able to identify something that is meaningful to them, which usually comes in the form a ritual, they have higher day-to-day levels of happiness and well-being, and are less likely to experience complicated grief.

JH: Complicated is a nice way of saying bad, right?

CI: Bad or distorted, or just a type of grief that is truly debilitating your life. There is no such thing as ideal grief, but the idea is that, when you are grieving, which is totally normal, and you can grieve the death of a person or you can grieve things, like a divorce or a friendship ending, you should still be able to function and not lose control of your life. But when grief becomes complicated, some of the outcomes of that are people start to lose relationships, and stop paying their bills, and having just a hard time functioning. And so I'm interested in, well, what's the medicine there, so to speak, that we can use to help prevent that from happening.

JH: Is there any... Thanabotanicly speaking, is there any plants that you've come across that is surprising either because it's universal use or because of a curious use

that you never imagined?

CI: I will say that perhaps one of the most interesting is the yew, the yew tree. Yew trees were planted in the United States in a lot of churchyards. Churchyard is the term that we use for a cemetery that is on the same property with a church. And the yew tree was originally started to be planted because of its association with the Greek underworld idea, and that the yew tree will actually help take folds from above ground down to the underworld. But then the yew tree started to be planted because people believed that they would help prevent disease and help with keeping things inside the cemetery inside the cemetery. But we also found usage, some groups of people would actually take the leaves from the yew and then use those as a preservative for the bodies to help temper the natural process of decay. And one of the things that I researched was, is there any science behind that. And the yew tree, there's components that we actually harvest from that tree that are anti-cancer, and they're used in anti-cancer drug, so it's kind of interesting.

JH: I've noticed on your website that you work with tarot cards and you've even written an article on how to use tarot cards in a way that is a psychological window into people and their lives, as opposed to in any way defining magically... Things that some people use tarot cards for. And I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on what insights or what's the mechanism of the tarot card that opens up access to people's thinking or psychological state.

CI: Tarot cards, most people in the US know them as these things that people use to see the future. But they're just pieces of paper, and there's nothing magical about them, and all of that is just influenced by the movies. I have had tarot cards since I was a kid, like 9 or 10 years old, and they were presented to me as just ways to know yourself. Now, fast forward to my work as a thanatologist. Death and dying are really uncomfortable for a lot of people to talk about, really, really uncomfortable, and there are people, who I've interacted with over the years, who really want to talk about something even just to share an experience. This is totally in a non-clinical scenario, but they have no... They've never done that before. The tarot cards, early on, became a doorway that I could use to help people get there.

CI: The thing about a deck of tarot cards is there are 78 cards in a tarot deck, and each card represents a theme that is common to any normal adult life. For example, there is a card called the chariot, that is a person driving a chariot and there are two horses that are usually pulling it. So, that card asks, "Who is driving in your life? Are you driving, or is that PhD program driving? Or are your kids driving? Or is your guilt over something actually in the driver's seat?" And so when we can take a deep question like that and get people to chew on it, that allows people to move through blocks and issues and challenges, and it really ultimately helps people become more present.

CI: There are three things that in my work in thanatology I look at. Rumination is living in the past, presence is being in the here and now, and then worry is existing in the future. Most of us pivot between ruminating and then worrying, and then ruminating and then

worrying. And engaging in social media is something that I classify as rumination, because all of the posts that you see in any social media forum are from the past, they're not from the present. So, something like a tarot card helps people be in the here and now. And from the realm of grief counseling, in order to move through a trauma or a loss, or whatever you're grieving, you can't do that while you're ruminating and you really can't do that while you're worrying. You have to be in a present state. So, I figured out, kind of an unexpected way, to utilize tarot cards and to teach this in a way to help get people more familiar and comfortable with being present. And I take it real seriously, 'cause actually, in June, I traveled, had an appointment to see the oldest surviving tarot cards that we have in the United States, and I was able to see that they were 500 years old. So, these guys have been around for a long time. And the other thing I love about the tarot cards is we have hundreds and hundreds of years of usage in history, and I think that there is value in old things, we'll say that.

JH: Fair enough. On the Jewish podcast, that resonates. [chuckle] The last thing I wanna ask you has to do with regret, because if you spend a lot of time with people in their last moments in life, you must encounter powerful, powerful experiences of people grappling with regret, maybe even panic, I don't know, but I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that.

CI: So I'll say that for the people who are facing end of life that are coherent and there mentally, the thing that was surprising to me in the earlier part of my career was discovering that people do not regret what they did do, they regret what they did not do. People die with the regrets of businesses they never started, children they never had, relationships they never pursued, the countries they never visited. Those are the regrets that people have most often at end of life. I personally do not have any memory of working with anybody who at end of life was like, "I regret starting the business," or, "I regret having the kids." It's always that they did not do those things. And so that's something I always try to talk about in my public education work, my public health work, because it takes a lot of presence in your own day-to-day life to know what you actually want to do. And a lot of us go weeks and months, and months turn into years, where we know there is the thing that we wanna do, but we're not letting ourselves do it for some reason. And you have to be careful because, at end of life, that might be the thing that you regret, that you have no opportunity to pursue, and you just have to face that. And that can be really painful to watch somebody grapple with that.

JH: That's a surprising answer because I would... If I would have guessed, I would have guessed that the deepest, most poignant and enduring regrets have to do with things that one did do badly or wrongly or harmfully. Do you think it's not the case? Do you think the regrets are mostly about things undone because there is a vehicle in most cultures for confession as you approach death, and that the confession covers the sins of commission, but there is nothing really in place to cover the sins, for lack of a better word, of omission?

CI: Yeah. That's such an insightful question, because I have encountered people who, by their own admission, say that they did bad things. And even in my work with my

colleagues in the field, at end of life, most people are like, "You know what, I wasn't the most generous," or, "I could have been more generous," or, "I could have been better in these ways." But that never seems to be the things that cause suffering. And the people who... Individuals who are facing end of life, who work with what we may call a death companion or a death doula, that's one of the things that individual will ask you, or they'll ask their client, they'll say, "What are the things that you regret doing?" And so if they say something like, "I regret that I've been estranged from my sister for five years," the doula will usually help encourage the person to reach out or go through a ritual to make amends. Because even at end of life, you have opportunities to change the course of some things or to put a foot in the right direction. And when we throw religion in the mix... This is kind of interesting. There is a study that was done that found that the more religious people were, the more afraid of death they are likely to be. The more religious, more afraid, which is interesting because...

JH: Sounds like religion is doing it's job very well.

CI: I think it depends on your relationship with religion. It depends on that individual relationship. If you view your religious tradition as the thing that's going to punish you at end of life, then I can understand why somebody may be really upset confronting that. But if you view your religious tradition as something that is there to provide support and to help you work through and face problems and conundrums, then that's more of like a peer relationship. So, that's something that I've always thought was really interesting, that the study clearly shows that. But then when you break it down to an individual basis, no matter what religious tradition you might be from, ultimately you either have a friendship with that religious tradition, or you may have more of an antagonistic or some sort of conflict that is within there.

JH: So, let's leave on a happy note. What is the single most uplifting message that you feel people need to know about death?

CI: Research shows that when you spend a little bit of time thinking about it, that the levels of death anxiety go down, that you have less of it. So, if death or dying is something that makes you uncomfortable, you're scared of it, I wanna tell you and reassure you that spending a little bit more time with it actually won't hurt you and actually will help you become more present, and that's going to reduce the anxiety that you have around it.

JH: Thank you. And thank you for spending the time with us and sharing your amazing wisdom. It's really a pleasure to talk to you.

CI: Thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate it. And if anybody is interested in learning more about my work, I've got some resources on my website. You can find me at americanthanatologist.com.

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JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts, or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.