

# A Commonsense Book of Death

By Edwin Shneidman, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008.

Reviewed by: William Schmitz Jr., Psy.D.

Edwin Shneidman's final living contribution to the field of suicidology is *A Commonsense Book of Death*, in which the preeminent thanatologist and founding father of suicidology offers what is, in his own terms, his auto-obituary. While the term auto-obituary, a neologism coined by Shneidman, may strike some as rather morbid, it fits in harmony with his personality and the content of the text.

*A Commonsense Book of Death* is comprised of two "Acts:" Act I contains significant selections (10 chapters) from his 1973 publication *Deaths of Man*, and Act II is composed of Shneidman's reflections on this seminal work, roughly 35 years after its publication. The book also includes an "Intermission" between Acts I and II which is a reprint of a retrospective review of *Deaths of Man* by M. Brewster Smith penned in 2005. The volume concludes with a "Matinee," which provides an entirely new perspective on Shneidman, as it was written by his therapist and was not previewed by Shneidman prior to publication.

The reprinting of significant portions from *Deaths of Man* introduces this seminal work to the newer generations of suicidologists who may not be familiar with some of Shneidman's earlier contributions. Many of the concepts and ideas initially proposed in 1973 still have great significance and applicability today as one easily sees the influence that Shneidman has had on the field. Interestingly, Act II provides the 90 year old Shneidman the opportunity to reflect on his thoughts from forty years ago, that provides the reader a fascinating insight into how his perspective of death changed as a topic of study and professional passion to a personal experience that was quickly approaching. The second act also incorporates the topics and ideas to which Shneidman is most proud: his development of the psychological autopsy, the concept of psychache, and the 10 criteria for a good death.

Shneidman points out the obvious shortcoming of research in thanatology: personal experiences with death can never be recounted. Nevertheless, Shneidman infuses his lifelong work in thanatology with his own personal experience to create a scientific review of his contributions to the field, while sharing his own experience of approaching death. He directs his intellectual prowess to the cultivation of his ever-evolving post-self and his explication of this important piece of the death puzzle permeates the entirety of the book. Those familiar with Shneidman's previous volumes will see the familiar homage to two of his icons – Henry Murray and Herman Melville – in addition to elucidating how one's legacy and post-cessation image are important features of what he describes as a "good death."

Edwin Shneidman was one of the most celebrated thanatologists and iconic figures in the fields of suicidology and psychology and will always be viewed as the "Father of Suicidology." However, this is the first book in which the person of "Edwin Schneidman" is on display and fully exposed. "Matinee," a chapter written by his therapist of four years, Ethel Oderberg, is perhaps the most naked and transparent depiction of who Edwin Shneidman was as a person. While many of us have mourned his passing, Edwin Shneidman's post-self will most certainly live on. The Father of Suicidology lived a great life and, based upon Shneidman's own criteria outlined in *A Commonsense Book of Death*, he appears to have had a "Good Death."