

International Workgroup on Death, Dying, and Bereavement

The International Workgroup on Death, Dying, and Bereavement (IWG) is a unique organization within the field of thanatology. Having returned from my fourth IWG Conference, held in Bergisch-Glabach, Germany (outside Cologne) from May 9 – 14, I was impressed again with the distinctive experience that IWG provides for its members at their gatherings, which are held once every 18 months at various locations around the world. Unlike the typical professional conference, which consists of formal (and often rather dry) presentations of research studies, theoretical ideas, or clinical techniques, IWG was created to provide a setting where the opposite can happen. That is, IWG meetings maximize informal, highly collegial, and essentially unstructured conversation among colleagues around a topic of mutual interest. In essence, IWG can be thought of as a kind of week long “thanatology think-tank”.

The core of the IWG meeting is the workgroups. These are topic oriented discussion groups that are formed on the first night of the meeting by a nomination process where the attendee’s propose and then rank-order the top 7 to 10 topic-focused groups they would like pursue for the coming week. Each attendee then commits to attending a workgroup on a particular topic for the remainder of the week. In my previous IWG meetings, I have attended workgroups on “Mass Death” (such as genocide, famine, etc.), “Spirituality and Death” (on both organized religion and personal spirituality and experience), a workgroup that I proposed called “Personal Mortality and Our Professional Work” (focusing on the intersection between our own personal experiences with loss, illness, and our own mortality and our professional work in the field), and my most recent workgroup at the Cologne meeting on “Complicated Grief” (a combined discussion of cases from our work with complicated and traumatic loss, and our ideas about resilience, trauma, and complications in the mourning process). Other workgroups at this year’s meeting focused on the language of grief; the effects of armed conflict (a standing group that has met for several meetings); the multi-generational impact of World War II; the growing use of digital media in thanatology education, research, and practice; resilience after loss; and setting a future research agenda for thanatology.

The workgroups have no formal agenda other than to discuss the agreed upon topic, and no task to achieve or product to produce, although some of the groups continue from one meeting to the next, and end up generating a consensus position paper on the topic that is typically then published in a thanatology journal. All of the groups in which I have participated have been fascinating, memorable, and different in both their content and psychological “tone”.

While most of the meeting time is spent in face to face, open discussion in one’s small workgroup (anywhere from 5 to 20 people), the meeting also includes plenary presentations that are geared to issues relevant to the locale where the meeting is being held. For example, this year’s meeting in Cologne included a panel discussion on the effects of World War II, and particularly the Holocaust, on Germany. Local visitation to sites of interest to thanatologists are also typically integrated into the week long conference, with this year’s meeting including a guided tour of the remarkable funeral establishment of Fritz Roth (see www.puetz-roth.de). Fritz, who helped to organize this year’s conference, is funeral professional like no other. He has built an extraordinary institution that is a combination funeral home, participatory art and theatre gallery, cemetery, and educational institution, all sited on acres of a beautifully wooded hillside

in his home town of Bergisch-Glabach. Fritz practices what I would describe as a deeply “person-centered” form of death education and funeral practice, and the visit to his professional home was truly enlightening. Lastly, much time at an IWG meeting is simply spent in informal but meaningful conversation with old friends and new, over meals, while sightseeing, and simply in walks on the grounds of meeting facility.

Membership in IWG is an honor, as prospective members must be invited by existing members to attend two or more meetings to “try out” the unique collegial process of an IWG meeting, and then apply for membership to the Board of Directors of the organization. Members must also demonstrate leadership within thanatology within their country, and typically, on an international level as well, although the form that leadership takes can vary. The membership includes leading researchers and scholars in thanatology from around the world, pioneers in the development of the hospice, death education, and grief counseling movements, and outstanding clinicians and practitioners in their home countries. While the majority of the members of IWG are either in academia or the medical care professions (including doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, etc.), the organization also includes clergy, funeral professionals, lawyers, and others. All are united by a common bond of a passionate intellectual and personal interest in the field of thanatology, and a love of the supportive collegial exchange of ideas and experiences that happens so well at each and every IWG meeting.

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