

Thanatology with Cole Imperi

Ologies Podcast

November 1, 2017

Hooooo boy. Wow. Okay. Here we go. From the moment I heard that this ology existed, I knew I wanted to run as far away from it as humanly possible, which then made it obvious that I should dive into it, sooner rather than later.

In fact, when I sat down with this week's guest, the first thing I said was that I'm a little anxious about mortality. She said she'd listened to other episodes and [Cole Imperi, "I picked up on that and I was like, 'Oh. We have this locked and loaded.'"]

She had my number! Now, I've wanted to do a project about ologies for over a decade. Each time I write out "ologies," my computer autocorrects it to "eulogies," and I get a li'l shiver. I get a li'l scared, and then the wiiind whispers at me, "Aaallllie, one day everyone you know and love will be eaten by a fungus and rotting back into the earth." And guess what? I don't like it. Even just the word "eulogies." Heebee jeebies!

I can tell you though, after recording this episode I felt way better. It's weird. You're gonna have to listen to figure out how and why that worked. It's probably going to be a long-ass episode. I don't know, I haven't put it all together yet. I'm just starting to edit it, but it's gonna be worth it. Listen when you're cleaning out the shed or, I don't know, bathing an elephant -- when you've got a lot to do. Or you can break it up and listen to the last half after. But listen to the whole thing because it might seriously change the way you live.

First things first: thanatology etymology. Now the word -- straight up Greek mythology. Thanatos, just being the god of death and dying. What a god. Apparently, he was referred to often but seen seldom, kind of like one of those weird exes that everyone talks about but you hope you never run into at brunch. So not only was he the bringer of mortality, but he also had SUPER shitty siblings. The whole family sucked. Among them: one sibling, the god of old age; another, the god of retribution; the god of suffering; the god of deception; the god of doom; another sibling, the god of strife; and yet another one of his homies, the god of blame. First off, I come from a really big, large Catholic family and that is still a lot of kids. Secondly, they sound awful.

So, humans: fear death much? I wanted to come to grips with it. A few months ago, I wound up doing some light Instagram stalking of #thanatologist, and up popped the feed of this fresh-faced, mohawked woman in Cincinnati. I followed her in case I ever wound up in Cincinnati and I wanted to talk about death.

Wouldn't you know it, a few weeks before Halloween, I flew in to shoot *Innovation Nation* (which is my other job), and I was able to coerce this woman to meet me in the hotel lobby of a Hampton Inn at 9:30pm on a Tuesday, where we chatted about mortality, and the best way to be buried, and what people regret on their deathbeds, and why you shouldn't shit-talk anyone in a hospital, and why we're all so scared. But more importantly, we talked about just being alive. And that's kinda where I was shocked. This guest, in just over an hour, stripped a lot of the darkness from death and honestly, helped me a shitload. I felt like I should have paid her at the end of it and I didn't. Maybe I still should.

Anyway, we talk about disposition methods: Do you get buried, or do you fling yourself via catapult into a pile of burning mattresses? Whatever. I didn't want to make this all about fear and gore of death. You can get that somewhere else. This episode is about death and dying as much as it is about being alive. It's getting released on Halloween, so I hope, as you listen, you remember that you are sitting on a subway full of human skeletons, and you are a big bag of blood and atoms in a skin suit, and more importantly, you are alive. So, please let your mind and heart get blown away by thanatologist, Cole Imperi.

[intro music]

Alie Ward: Let's get right down to some real bare bones questions: What is thanatology?

Cole Imperi: So, first of all, it's the study of death and dying. And to me, death is the easy part. The dying part is much more fascinating, and rich, and deep, and intense than the actual death part. Anyway, there is also no such thing as a job of just being a thanatologist. Because I've looked, and nobody will pay me to just walk around and know about death and dying. What I have found is thanatology is an enhancer. It is something that enhances whatever you already are.

Aside: And that will help you with whatever your other job is, like a school counselor who's also a thanatologist. Something like that.

Cole: There's actually thousands of thanatologists that are certified. I'm a very intense individual, so I had to get not only one thanatology certification, I had to get two, which is all of them as far as I know.

Aside: One of her certifications is in Integrative Thanatology. I didn't know what that was. Apparently...

Cole: We looked at, in that program, more of the esoteric stuff, funky stuff.

Alie: What would you count as funky death stuff?

Cole: Well, one of my most favorite pieces of that training program was about the use of psilocybin and other hallucinogenics at the end of life, because we're finding that those can help your death. It can be great. It can mitigate a lot of pain, but it can also help with things like existential pain. [Alie giggles]

Key word. Existential pain, if you don't know, is something where -- usually it happens on your deathbed. It's when you're confronting all the stuff from your life like, "Am I a good person? What is a good person? Or, where do I go after I die?" Those can be actually very, very painful things to think about because they're all attached to all kinds of junk from the life that we lived. Religious stuff -- think about how you were raised religiously, all the way to the end of your life, and all the baggage you pick up with that stuff.

Alie: What happens if you have those thoughts all day every day?

Cole: Welcome to my life. [both laugh] Yeah, I think about this stuff a lot, and a lot of people do. One of the problems I see socially in the United States is that these big questions, they're not uncommon. But the problem is, we don't really have containers for them. It just doesn't exist, and it's not necessarily appropriate party conversation or water cooler conversation.

We don't have a place for these big conversations to live, so we end up keeping all of that inside. And I think that that is sad because talking about death -- it's a great, easy way to be really intimate with somebody and to really connect with someone on a deeper level. I find that when you talk about something like death and dying, you leave feeling way more connected to the world, and it can actually be very positive and freeing.

Alie: Take me back a little bit to how you grew up. When did you have an interest in death and dying, and when did you decide that you weren't terrified of it?

Cole: Interesting question. Growing up I never had a crazy death experience as a child. I never had anything crazy happen, but it is something that I've always been immensely comfortable with, and really interested in, and really enjoyed. Anyway, several months ago, the mother of my best friend in grade school mailed me a card that I made for my best friend in third grade when her dog died. It was full of me writing about the meaning of the loss and grief.

It was really interesting to look back and see my thoughts and stuff on death and dying as a child. And I don't know where I picked that up, because I didn't grow up in a funeral home, I didn't grow up around that at all. I just kind of entered the earth with that. Like, software expansion pack: already in. *[both laugh]*

Alie: Do you think you carried it over from a past life?

Aside: Science people, I was kidding. Actually, what does science say about the afterlife? I read a whole article by lauded cosmologist and physics professor Sean Carroll. He said:

The laws of physics underlying everyday life are completely understood, and there's no way within those laws to allow for the information stored in our brains to persist after we die.

So in short, "WOMP WOMMMP," says Science. "Shruuug?" say some other folks.

Cole: Anyway, looking into death and dying opens up thoughts and ideas, and makes you question so many of the things that you think you know. And it's only when you're pushing yourself to these different areas where things are uncomfortable that you can really grow. That's the purpose of life, right? It's to grow, to continue to expand.

Alie: Until you die.

Cole: Until you die. That's right.

Alie: What about your schooling? At what point did you start steering your academics toward death and dying?

Cole: I don't know. I've always kind of been into it. Even in high school, I wrote about death and dying a lot, and I had it in a bunch of my papers. So, I've always had it in there. My purpose in life is to positively change the way that we die in the United States in my lifetime. That's my goal. Just putting it out there. And I have felt that way for a very, very long time. There's no magic thing I can say that was like, "Oh, I almost died! And then this thing happened!" No. This is what I'm supposed to do, so I'm trying to do it. It's hard though.

Alie: What does your job entail? What's a typical day like, or a typical week like for you? Are you involved with funeral planning, or embalming, or speaking to the public? What kind of stuff do you do?

Cole: I do not have a traditional 9 to 5 job. I own a small consulting firm called Doth, and we specialize in death care. One of the ways that I'm changing the way that we die is, people like funeral homes, cemeteries, crematories, those businesses, I know those businesses really well, how they work; they'll hire my company to help make them better.

Aside: Cole also travels overseas speaking about death and death care, and also, oversees a local cemetery making cool events like movie screenings. I imagine there's a lot of cute hipsters with really, really good picnic game.

Alie: Are you afraid of dying, or are you excited about it to see what happens?

Cole: Let's talk about death and dying. Death is just when you die. You're dead. The light switches off. The dying process leading up to the death, that is the thing that I am most concerned with and the thing that tends to cause the most issues for people, because you can be dying for months or years. Then there's this whole question about when do you start dying? Some would argue you start dying at birth, technically. But then you get into actively dying, which is when your body is in the shutdown process, which there is kind of an order of things that happen.

Aside: First let's get all up in death's business and define it. Death is the cessation of all vital functions of the body, including the heartbeat, brain activity (including the brain stem), and breathing. Some researchers say that there's evidence to suggest that there's a burst of brain energy as someone dies. I was reading this article about near-death experiences, and about 18% of people who had them reported being able to recall some portion of what happened when they were clinically dead.

According to some researchers, the conditions that make you have near death experiences, like low oxygen, low blood flow, low blood sugar, those can kill your brain cells, and then the brain just doesn't know what to do. It responds by having this flood of chemicals, and it's apparently very similar to the drug ketamine. That is what they think produces out-of-body sensations, and hallucinations, and all the cool shit that happens when you die.

This info was from an article written by author and science journalist, Jennifer Ouellette. Now, remember that physicist, Sean Carroll, I mentioned earlier? They're married. That is a lot of good brains in one relationship. I went ahead and emailed them. Both. And I said, "Hey do you guys talk about cool stuff like this over dinner or while you're grocery shopping?" Jennifer wrote me back and said, "We actually do talk about things like this. But, not always. Other times we talk about our kitties."

Alie: Yeah, what happens?

Cole: What happens when you're actively dying? From a medical viewpoint, your body shuts down. It has a process, and there is kind of an order that it follows, just like when you're born. Birth and death are actually very, very similar. A lot of people ask me, "Oh, I'm so afraid to die. Is it going to hurt?" I always say, "You know, I haven't died so I can't tell you," [Alie laughs] but I'll ask them, "Do you remember your birth? Did it hurt when you were born?" And they'll be like, "Well, no." The word on the street is it's pretty similar.

The last sense that remains, because your senses will shut down, is hearing.

Alie: Oh, they go in they go in order?

Cole: They don't necessarily go in order. There are people who would argue, probably, that they do. But I'm also a hospice volunteer; I've been with people as they're dying, and everybody's death is different.

As you're actively dying, hearing tends to be the last sense that is there. Imagine that you're the dying person. You can't see, you can't smell, you can't taste, and your sense of feeling is... Have you ever gone to the dentist and they put that lead thing over top of you and you get an x-ray?

Alie: Yeah.

Cole: Imagine that that is the feeling that you have. That's kind of a good way to describe when you start to lose your sense of feeling. Everything's dark. You can't talk. All you can do is hear. *[Alie gasps]* That's kind of where you go. Plus you're foggy. That's a good way that I can describe the shutdown process, which not everybody has that. That's a disclaimer, but that's kind of how it can go.

Alie: So, you should never shit-talk someone while they're on their deathbed?

Cole: That is right, because they can hear. Yes, they can.

Alie: Dang!

Cole: And that's why, one of the things that if you're with someone who's dying, you need to always talk to them and say what you're doing. Their body may be reacting in a way that makes you think that they are long gone, but they may not be. A lot of times when you're dying, you lose control, but you're still hearing. Well, we know that the hearing is there.

Another sign of active death, it's often called the death rattle. But it has to do with usually when you're actively dying your mouth is open and you're breathing out of your mouth. It's *[inhales sharply and exhales through mouth in loud, audible bursts]*, like a sort of congestion. And that can be really scary for people to hear who are not dying because it's like, "Oh. This is getting real." But it's not something that the dying person necessarily feels or is aware of, because remember, they're kind of shutting down.

Alie: I feel like that would be scary to hear even if you were another dying person. It'd be scary to hear if you're not dying, as well if you happened to be dying next to them. Like, "Are you going? Am I going? Who's going first?"

Cole: Yeah. "Is this ok?" *[both laugh]*

Alie: Is a lot of the work you focus on in terms of dying, is usually the death a result of an illness? What about traumatic deaths, or more sudden perishing?

Cole: In my work... I am not a counsellor, I'm not a medical professional, but I do have the opportunity to be brought into or involved with specific deaths, situations, and scenarios. Man! Humans can die in all kinds of ways. Statistically, I brought some numbers, 20% of all people will die in an ICU, an Intensive Care Unit.

Alie: Really?!

Cole: Yes. But 90% of Americans want to die at home. [*Alie gasps*] So keep that in mind. You want hospice. It is good. It is next level care.

The problem in the United States is we don't deal with death. We don't like to think about it or talk about it. So we will do these last-ditch efforts, like things that put you in an intensive care unit, when we know the outcome is: you're going to die from this. When you really should have just gotten on hospice and just rode out the last few months really comfortably, not in pain, and not with tubes and all kinds of junk coming out of your body.

Aside: If you're wringing your hands convinced that you're gonna be eaten by a shark, let's look at statistically what causes deaths, at least in the United States. Number 1: Heart disease. 2: Cancer. 3: Respiratory disease. 4: Accidents. That kind of threw me off because I thought it would be another illness. But who knew? Essentially the fourth biggest threat to each of us is just gravity, in a nutshell. I mean, brush up on physics, make sure you wear a bike helmet. Maybe don't climb the roof on a snowy day trying to hang, like, an illuminated candy cane or something. It's not worth it.

Cole: So that's most likely probably going to be what you die of.

Alie: So, not of embarrassment, like I've oftentimes thought would be the cause of my death.

Cole: Yes. [*laughter*] And from all my work with death and dying and seeing all kinds of stuff over the years, the thing that makes life LIFE -- that makes it special, that makes it meaningful -- is the fact that we die. If we didn't die... Like, the whole reason it means anything is because it ends.

It's difficult for me to... I mean it's awesome because for science, we need to understand what makes us die, what makes us live. But death is very important, and it's critical, and it's an important lifecycle event that happens to all of us, and it is what makes life meaningful.

Alie: I guess if you lived at Disneyland, you wouldn't be as excited about going to Disneyland. Do you know what I mean?

Cole: That's right.

Alie: Life is kind of like a short-term stint at a theme park. You know it's gonna end so you better enjoy it, I suppose. And you personally, how has your work and your focus on death and mortality changed the choices that you make on a day-to-day basis?

Cole: Just being exposed and around. Even just stories and things like that. I am so grateful for my life day-to-day, but it's made me hyperaware that it ends. I've seen people on their deathbed who are facing a lot of regrets about the stuff they didn't do. Not the stuff they did. It's all the stuff they didn't do.

Alie: Really? Like what?

Cole: Just businesses that they didn't start, or girls they didn't chase after, or the kids that they didn't have, or the risks of that they didn't take. It's the stuff that you didn't do. And sometimes it's more painful to see someone who's dying grappling with those questions than it is to see someone who's dying in physical pain, to be honest.

Alie: The anguish, emotionally, is worse than the pain. Wow.

Cole: Deep. We're getting heavy. I'm really sorry about that. I tend to bring that with me wherever I go.

Alie: No! I mean it is about death and dying. I think about this stuff all day every day. I used to have nightmares about graveyards. I had this recurring nightmare that I was walking through a graveyard and coffins were overturned. I had a crippling fear of graveyards where I would start panicking when I was a kid, just driving past them. So, I've always been really, really spooked by dead bodies, by morgues, by cemeteries. I also grew up Catholic. We had open casket funerals, so they were like, "Go kiss your dead great grandma" and you're like, "I'm eight. No. But here we go." *[Cole laughs]*

So do you find that death is something people can accept over time? Or are there people who can deal with it and people who can't?

Cole: Well, there's a multi-faceted look at that. People who tend to be more religious, statistically, by some studies, also tend to be more afraid of dying.

Alie: Why?!

Cole: Interesting, right? It's interesting because my mom's side is Catholic and I went to Catholic school, and there was always this talk of when you die you're either going to go up or down. I feel like we had to bring this up every single day. I feel like as growing up Catholic, that was always talked about. But it was never talked about in any depth beyond that. It was just like, "You're going to be judged if you're good or you're bad."

Alie: It was like Santa almost. Like, someone's gonna decide if you're on the good list or bad list, and you might go to an after party in the sky or you might have hellfire forever. Which, death is terrifying because you're like, "What happens if I steal someone's parking space and then I get hit by a bus five minutes later? Where am I going?"

Cole: Yes. I remember as a kid being anxious about, "Ugh. I took a piece of paper from my best friend, Becky, and now I'm going to go to hell, I'm pretty sure," and just being really concerned with that.

Anyway, at the end of life, depending on how someone was raised, just religious values or cultural values, that really goes a long way in impacting how well or not well they're able to talk about or deal with death and dying.

If you are listening to this and you know someone in your family who is avoiding death or who needs talk about it, or you need to talk about it with them, talking about death is like trying to approach a deer in the woods. You cannot go directly at a deer because it will run away. But if you go around the side, and curve around some trees, and come up and be like, "Heeeey!" then you can get close to it. Then you might be able to actually touch it. So, talking about death usually directly doesn't work well for, I'd say, sometimes most people. But coming at it from the side and kind of easing around it, that tends to be much more effective in getting there.

Alie: At what age should people have a will? Because I'm realizing... I'm sitting here, we're sitting in a hotel conference room in Cincinnati and I'm like, "I don't have a will. I don't know what a testament is."

Aside: Okay. Will versus testament. Samesies. Roughly the same thing. Now, they start at about \$69 if you want to get them through LegalZoom, who is not sponsoring this podcast. So you're welcome, LegalZoom.

There's also a book, and it's called *I'm Dead. Now What?* It is a planner. You can put your passwords, what to do with your pets, what you want them to do with your body, etc. in it. I looked this up on Amazon and there are a few reviews that are like, "Helpful book. Not feeling the title." And there's a competing book; I looked at it. Same table of contents. Verbatim. And it's published by the same company. There's *I'm Dead. Now What?* and then they make an identical book called *A Peace of Mind Planner*. Know your demo, people! Know your brand.

Now, wills. Do they all have to be notarized? I thought so, but not necessarily. I thought you had to sign them in blood and a priest had to put a special stamp on them. Not so. It does depend on your state, so check first. There are also a few different flavors of wills and their names sound like racehorses, or they sound like smoothies at a really obnoxious juicery.

There's the holographic will. This just means it's in your handwriting. That's convenient. There's mystic will, which is [*speaking dramatically*] sealed until your demise. A will in solemn form. That's a legit one. It's signed by you and some witnesses. And then there's a living will, and that is a directive for your medical care if some shit goes down. Pretty much when to pull the plug. That's totally different than a will. Living will - totally different thing. Now, of course Cole is covered on this front. I mean, duh.

Cole: Well, I'm sitting here in a hotel being interviewed about my expertise in death and dying and [*whispers*] I don't have a will.

Alie: [*high pitched, shocked*] Why don't you have one?! [*Cole laughs*]

Cole: [*high pitched*] I just said that on camera! I'm just too busy working on death and dying to do my own will. Here's the deal; yes, you should have one. When you're an adult you should have one, you should have something. I did write up a sheet about some things like, if I died and my husband died, who would take my beagles, who I would want them to go to. It's in an email. Having that's better than nothing.

But the problem is, when we die, a lot of times wills or these notes usually aren't found until after the funeral, because when someone dies, then it's all hands on deck to get the person buried or cremated or whatever, and that stuff isn't looked at until after the fact. Also, FYI, what you want to happen with your funeral, a lot of times if you put it in your will, depending on state law, it's not valid or enforceable.

Alie: So you have to tell your loved ones, "Shoot me out of a cannon," or, "plant my ashes in a pumpkin patch," or something?

Cole: Yes. Your best bet is to tell the people who will be the ones making decisions about what happens to you while you're alive, and be real clear about it.

Alie: What do you want to have happen to you when you die?

Cole: I actually... At this point, because it's changed over the last ten years because I see everything death and dying all the time, right now I would like to be buried in a green cemetery and then just wrapped in a shroud. It's called a shroud. It's not actually, like, a

full-on casket or coffin. You're kind of wrapped in fabric, swaddled. It's like a little death swaddle.

Alie: I was gonna say is that like a death Pashmina of sorts?

Cole: Yes. Mine will be stylish. It might be purple. *[both laugh]*

Alie: And the ways of being 'disposed of', let's say? I hear you can get planted underneath some tree roots. You can get cremated. What is the best for the planet?

Cole: 'Disposition method' is the lingo for what you do with your dead body, just in case you want to know about that. The two most common disposition methods in the United States are burial or cremation, and about one in every two bodies in the United States is cremated now. It was not like that...

Alie: Half?!

Cole: Half. Yeah.

Alie: Wow!

Cole: Cremation just went over the 50% mark. Very exciting times.

Alie: *[laughs]* Do you have, like, a scoreboard in your office?

Cole: Yep yep. I got a ticker. And what's interesting is, state by state it really varies. So Kentucky, which is where I live, we're, I think, a bottom-five state for our cremation rate. We're a burial state. But if you go out to Nevada or Arizona... Washington state, I think, is 80, 90% cremation rate.

Alie: Really?

Cole: Yeah. You can go all over the country and what you do with your body differs significantly.

Aside: Okay. I just looked up a map of the United States colored state by state according to the popularity of cremation. Then I looked up red states versus blue states, and they are almost the same map.

Cole: Those are the two main. There's also something called alkaline hydrolysis, which is legal, I believe, in 13 states now, only. It's your body plus water plus lye. *[Alie gasps]*

I learned how to make soap this past year, and you use lye in soap making just like you do when you want to alkaline hydrolyze yourself. Sometimes they'll call it 'liquid cremation' or 'water cremation'. That's just the word they use. At the end of that process, you know how when you're cremated, cremated remains are left? At the end of alkaline hydrolysis, it's basically the same end product, except there's not fire that does it to you. It's water, technically, or this chemical reaction.

Alie: But is it moist?

Cole: No, it's dry. All the liquid and stuff goes into the drains.

Alie: Can you imagine if someone just handed you a bucket of grandpa and you're like, "Thank you. It's moist. No." *[both laugh]*

Aside: Okay. I'm going to give you the quick rundown on how alkaline hydrolysis works. I'm gonna just tell you like it's a recipe. Okay. You take 1 human body, not living, and you add 92 gallons of water, 4 gallons of lye, essentially. You put it into a big chamber,

preheated to around 350-360 degrees. Let simmer under pressure for 4 hours and then you just drain off the excess, which is kind of the texture of motor oil. [reserved horror] What's left are some well-cooked bones. It's easy.

Alie: Is this like what happened in the very beginning of *Breaking Bad*? Didn't they try to dispose of the body in a bathtub that way?

Aside: That was an acid bath. This is an alkaline bath. Also don't DIY either of these. Ever. Okay. Some other disposition methods are: buried at sea; there's also promession, which is a technique invented by a Swedish biologist. This process she invented is where you're freeze dried, kind of like astronaut ice cream, and then you are vibrated into dust. It's said to be pretty eco-friendly.

You can also be a tree pod. This is a thing invented in Italy. It's called [fake Italian accent] Capsula Mundi, and it means 'world box,' and it looks like a huge, dusty Easter egg. They pose your body in the fetal position, then they pop ya in the ground, and they plant a tree of your choosing (as long as it's indigenous to the region) on top of you. Then the tree kind of slowly eats you, and you become the tree! Sidenote: not legal in Italy. Yet.

There's also Viking funerals. I think a lot of people want to go out this way. This is where you set a boat on fire with flaming arrows. I went down a rabbit hole watching mortician and founder of the Death Positive Movement, Caitlyn Doughty. She's got a YouTube channel called *Ask a Mortician*. Very good. I wanted to figure out if Viking funerals were legal. Yeah, that's a big No on that. They are not only illegal, but they are also ineffective. They're not hot enough for long enough, so you would be like a floating, burnt chicken. Which is a super bummer.

Now, Sky Burial. This is where it's at, fam. I did not know what this process was called, so I googled "funeral Mongolia eaten by birds," and zip zop zoom, right to the wiki for Sky Burial. In Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the ground is too rocky to dig ya a hole, so they feed you to carrion eaters.

Okay, I'm looking at this right now. [pause] Okay. Wow. All right. I just pulled up some images. All right... Okay... I thought that maybe this would be a lonely mountaintop situation, with maybe birds taking a nibble here and there. Um, but the birds are pretty hip to the process. I don't want to go into too much detail, I'm just gonna ask that you envision this instead. This is a parallel:

Picture a European town square. Cobblestone. Cloudy day. A large flock of pigeons bustles nearby. Onto the stone you lay one steaming hot, aromatic everything bagel. Picture what would happen. Now that is the type of eager consumption involved with a sky burial where your body is fed to vultures. If your goal in life was ultimately just to be wanted, then sky burial is clutch, folks. I regret learning as much about that as I just did.

Alie: Sometimes when I get weird and sad about death, I think it's cool that all of our molecules are just recycled. Hopefully there's part of me that used to be a frog, and it would be cool if part of my body now went on to become somehow a frog. I don't know why a frog. [giggles] I guess if you eat a frog, then part of your body becomes a frog. But the idea... Or rather, part of frog becomes your body. You know what I'm saying; I'm not on psilocybin. But becoming another living animal sounds less harsh, for some reason.

Cole: Yes. What makes you YOU, all of your parts and pieces, has been around long before you were in you, and you will continue to be around in different forms. I believe that. I mean that's just science, right?

Aside: The You that's sitting there knitting while listening to this, or driving, or putting a stamp on a birthday card to your mom, is made out of dying stars. Stars die and implode, and the atoms change, and it lands on a planet, and it's rearranged to become you.

Astronomer, astrophysicist, and beloved turtleneck aficionado, Carl Sagan, is known for saying, "The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff."

So, if someone didn't return your text, or you thought you'd get more likes on a selfie than you did, it does not matter. You are a walking Tetris fortress of exploding star shit, and no one can fuck with that. And it's great.

Okay, Cole gets personal with me here.

Cole: Let me ask you this: You say you think about death and dying. What scares you about that? Or what is the thing that makes you sad?

Alie: I think, about my own death, what freaks me out is the, like, "Surprise!" of it. It's the not knowing when it's coming. It feels like walking around all day in white pants and someone's like, "You're going to get your period at some point today," and you're like, "Goddammit!" So, it's just this idea that this thing's going to happen, but you won't have any control over it. It could be tomorrow. It could be when you're 80. But you don't get to decide. It's the biggest moment of your life, and you don't get to decide when or how or where. You know what I mean?

Cole: Yes. So first of all, our own deaths, usually it just, like, happens *to* us. Usually we have to deal with death only when other people are dying. And that can, more often than not, be the harder one to choose because you don't get to pick when your sister dies or your brother dies. But it'll happen. You get the call, and then you've got to jump in and drop everything and deal with it right? And your whole life can be discombobulated.

With our own deaths, we don't know when they're happening, but we know it is happening. Guaranteed. And if we spend too much time in the future, which is worry, or too much time in the past, which is ruminating, we end up missing out on the present. And you know what we regret when we die? When everything flashes before you? It's all those present moments that we just skipped out on.

I think about when I'm on my freaking cell phone and I pick it up without... Have you ever been in line and you look at Instagram, and then you get to the front of the line and you pull your phone up again to look at Instagram? [*Alie laughs*] I'm not actually doing anything worthwhile with my life and at my end of life, how am I going to feel about the number of times that I checked Instagram? You know what I mean? So, the best way to combat this death anxiety, what I would call this idea of being freaked out about, "Oh my god I'm going to die and I've no idea when and where and how it's going to happen," is to be as present in your day-to-day life as possible.

Humans, we are wired, all animals are, to seek out stability, safety, shelter, and comfort. Right? Well, not knowing what's going to happen causes anxiety and is the opposite of that. One of the most powerful things anybody can do is to work hard to get really clear about what your purpose in life is, or why you're here, or what you are most passionate about.

For me, I had a real hard time coming to terms with, like, that I love death and dying, because just how I was raised and where I grew up, what part of the country I grew up. I felt a lot of pressure to, "Man, I should be a nurse. I should get married and have a bunch of kids, and home school them maybe, but bake cookies regularly too." All these pressures. It was real hard for me to come to terms with, "Okay, this is what I'm here to do."

But that's how it is for a lot of people with what their purpose in life is. A lot of times it's the thing that you have a hard time accepting that that's what you're good at and that's what you're meant to do. So, being clear about that can really help reduce death anxiety, and also help you do stuff with your life, accomplish things so that you're not spinning your wheels.

Alie: Do you take more risks in your life, creatively or personally, keeping that in mind? Like, you have amazing hair; you have almost a purple mohawk. *[Cole laughs]* Is there a part of you that's just like, "You know what? I want to live my life with a purple mohawk, and I'm not going to worry about that anyone wants me to have a blond bob or anything. I'm going to do what I want to do, and be who I'm gonna be," because you have end of life in mind?

Cole: Yeah. Absolutely, without a doubt, it has taught me over the years it's always better to be myself. And apparently, I'm a purple-haired person when I'm myself. I have met more people and had more people in my life since I've had a haircut that I just really enjoyed than when I was having one that wasn't this.

It is very freeing and liberating to be who you are, but it's also real hard to be who you are. You gotta accept who you are. That's the step number one. Once you start to do that, your outside shows who you are on the inside. I know we're talking about all this life-meaning stuff; all of this is directly related to death and dying.

Alie: Did you have a moment where you realized that you weren't being yourself, and that you kind of had a pivot? Or do you think it was a gradual bolstering of your own self-esteem, and confidence, and sense of self? Did you have a moment where you were like, "You know what? Fuck this!" and then you just started doing what you wanted?

Cole: You know I did. In the last few years... Currently online, there's all these posts about like, "Me too." MeToo, right?

Alie: Right.

Cole: I was assaulted several years ago, and I actually pressed charges. I did the whole deal. I mean, I took it all the way. Going through an experience like that -- which is another thing that you don't have control of, you don't know if someone's going to mug you. You don't know if you're going to be the victim of some random thing. I mean, we're all afraid of dying, but there's all kinds of other crazy stuff that can happen to you.

Alie: I'm so sorry.

Cole: You know what? It sucks. And I still am dealing with it all these years later. But -- but, that horrific experience connects me to so many people that I would not be able to be connected to without it. And for that I'm grateful, because the worst thing in life is to be alone. Just to feel like you're alone. Even when something terrible happens to you, you can feel so alone when it happens, but you know what? It doesn't take very long, and you find a bunch of other people that have been there, too. It sucks, but there is some level of good there.

I find that with my work in death and dying, when people are actually on their death beds and things, what people remember is the things that made you weird, or distinct, or the crazy experiences that happened to you. That's what sticks around you, not that you dotted all your Is and crossed all your Ts and you responded to every email in your inbox. [Alie laughs] That doesn't matter at the end of your life when you look back over what you did. What matters is: where were the explosions in your life? You know? Where was the crazy stuff? That. Yeah. That's life.

I feel like death is salt. Death is the salt of life. You live your whole lives and every day, every week, you're putting ingredients in that soup. Then when you die, Death comes in and adds the salt. Your death is a reflection of how you lived. So if you were a bitter, angry, closed-off person your whole life, who always had a chip on their shoulder and an axe to grind, your soup is going to be nasty at the end of life and no one's going to want to have any of it, and no one's going to want to know what the recipe was. [Alie laughs] But if you die and you are happy, and you put good in the world, and you embraced as much as you could, even the really terrible stuff, people are going to want to know the recipe.

Alie: That's amazing.

Cole: And that's how you live. Yeah.

Alie: Do you have to use, in your experience, things that you've been through? Also, in your work in death and dying, do you look at the grieving process? Do you apply the grieving process to things that you've encountered in your own life, or do you think the grieving process is really specific just to death?

Cole: I kind of believe we're grieving our whole lives. There's something called a 'big death' and a 'little death', which is just, like, my own terminology. We all know 'little death' is also a term for...

Alie: Right. [laughs]

Cole: Okay. A 'little death' is something I would call like when I was assaulted. That was a little like a death, actually huge death for me, because it was my sense of safety and security that died. I will never be the same moving forward. I mean, it permanently alters you. I had to grieve the loss of the way life was before that happened. Little deaths can be like when you have a miscarriage or you get fired. You grieve that stuff.

A big death is one like a human or an animal that you knew or loved dies. A lot of times the big deaths are easier to deal with and get through because you have a dead body somewhere. It's harder to deal with the deaths in life that don't have a corpse involved, like divorce or your best friend just ghosted you or something. I mean, that can be horrific to go through those things.

Alie: How does the grieving process, in a healthy way, help you through those things? What are the real cornerstones of the grieving process, of getting through stuff like that?

Cole: First of all the grieving process is a rollercoaster. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is known for her five stages of grief.

Aside: The five pack: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance.

Cole: But that's often portrayed as it goes in order, and it doesn't. You'll wake up one day and be angry and then the next day you'll be like, "Oh it's cool. I get it." Then the next day you're in denial about it. So you kind of flip around.

I believe that you can grieve non-deaths, divorce, all this other kind of hard stuff, and it puts you in the same vulnerable position. Have you ever had something that you've dealt with in your life that wasn't a death, but it threw you off your rocker, and you missed meetings, and just things were just all kerfluffled?

Alie: Yeah.

Cole: It's the bereaved brain. It's a real thing. It's real.

Alie: What about other animals? Are you fascinated by how elephants or primates grieve, as well?

Cole: Oh yeah. And if anything it makes me sad sometimes, because I'm a big animal lover, and animals have, in my opinion, the same depth of emotion that humans do.

Aside: Evidently, until the 1980s, the notion that animals had emotions was schmaltsy. People weren't into it. Then, using imaging, researchers started looking at brain activity of animals and were like, "Ooooooh shiiiiit y'all." In 2012, a group of neuroscientists attended a conference on Consciousness in Human and Non-Human Animals, and together, they signed the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness in Non-Human Animals, which says, "Hey assholes! Animals are conscious and their brains can feel shit! We're all on the same page with this. Get on our level." Just to be clear, that wasn't verbatim.

Cole: Humans are not that different than animals. We really are not. We all get sad. We all grieve the loss of things. With looking at thanatology, you'll see how deeply connected death is to life. [*mimics angels singing*] "Aaahh!"

Alie: Then why is death so sad? I know that that is, like, such a general question, but why do we cry at funerals? Why do we cry at movies? What do you think that sadness is?

Cole: So if I was going to be scientific or analytical about this response only and have that hat on, I'd say it's because of change. Humans don't like change because we're built to seek out stability and safety. And what is change? Not safety.

Alie: Right.

Cole: So any type death forces a change, and usually a death is not just like, "Oh so-and-so isn't in my life anymore." Like when my grandma died. My grandpa died first, then my grandma died on my mom's side. When she died, the hierarchy of the family kind of shifted because then it wasn't holidays at Grandma's house anymore. It kind of branched down, and then the aunts and uncles started hosting their own holiday events. So, a death

is never just 'the body is gone.' It's all this other stuff attached to it. It's change, and that's what makes it so hard, and why, I think, sad and all those kinds of emotions.

If I was putting on my more touchy-feely side, I'd say it's so sad when something dies because of love. Because we love. Because that's what people do. And it's hard to shift from loving somebody who... You know, it's a two-way street when you have a relationship, but when they die, you then are left having to send your love into someone that's not there anymore, and that can be so hard because you're not getting the feedback. So then you have to convert to, "Where do I put all this love that I was giving to Grandma, or that I was giving to my husband or whoever." Right? That's the hard part.

Alie: And now, speaking of husbands, you work with yours. Your husband is your business partner, as well.

Aside: Cole's husband, Victor Imperi, was actually sitting a few feet away during this recording because, you know what? It's weird to hangout alone with a stranger in a Cincinnati Hampton Inn at 11pm. I mean, I get it.

Alie: Did you guys meet through death and dying?

Cole: No. No, not at all. My business was sort of growing and my calling is death and dying. I'm very fortunate that I have a partner who supported that. For several years, he had a full-time job. Then we grew the business; he was able to leave it. We travel together. We're often booked to speak together.

Aside: Victor is tall, with bookish glasses, and a few years ago these little cuties recreated the American Gothic painting for the cover of *American Funeral Director*. It's adorable.

Alie: Stupid question, but are there any movies about death or dying that you particularly love, that seem to strike a chord with you?

Cole: *David, the Gnome*.

Alie: I don't know it.

Cole: *David, the Gnome* was a really popular cartoon series when I was a kid. It came from Japan, and came to the US, and was on PBS in the early '90s, late '80s.

David, the gnome, and his wife, Lisa... The whole series is just, like, gnome stuff, basically. On the last episode... Gnomes only live to be 400 years old, but they know they're going to die on their 400th birthday. He and Lisa Gnome go up to a hill, [*clip from David, the Gnome: Lisa, "Farewell my dear, David. My husband. My love.*] They're, like, weeping. [*clip from David, the Gnome: David, "Farewell my beloved. I thank you for all the love you've given me."*] Then swirls come, [*music from David, the Gnome with a swirly, windy sound*] and they die, and they turn into trees. They had a pet fox. The fox comes up there and sees his mom and dad are now trees and are dead. Then he was left, and he had to walk back home with two dead parents. [*Alie gasps*]

And that was the last episode. And yeah that's a real clincher. Yeah. You know what? It's probably not actually helpful to see that.

Aside: Oops. I watched it and cried. And if you want to watch this, it's on YouTube. The title of the clip is just *David the Gnome Kicks the Bucket*.

Alie: How do you feel about how death and dying are portrayed in popular culture?

Cole: In real life, when somebody dies, it is messy afterwards because your whole life is discombobulated, and everything is just off kilter. I think that is a contributing factor, because we don't have exposure to examples of good coping skills, really, in other parts of your life unless you grew up around it, or you grew up in a family that talked openly about death and dying.

I'm an instructor at a mortuary college, and I teach thanatology for a Bachelor program. All my students are funeral directors or embalmers. Really interesting crowd to be able to teach, because I'm thinking, "Okay, they want to learn and I'm teaching them thanatology, but they work day in and day out with death and dying."

One of the first assignments in the course is they have to tell me about their upbringing and how they deal with death and dying. A lot of them, even the ones who grew up in funeral homes, never actually talk or talked about death and dying with their families. There'd be dead bodies downstairs in the funeral home but they'd never really, like really, talked about it. That, I think, is the most healthy thing that any family can do, is just have a real conversation about death and dying. Whatever comes up, you talk about, instead of it just being, "Grandma died. The funeral is on Wednesday." Done.

Alie: "Please kiss her, if it's open casket, on the hand."

Cole: "She will be cold and hard, but it's still your grandma."

Alie: "Go put your mouth on her." [Cole laughs] Just to rewind, when you say, 'Funeral home' and 'the bodies are downstairs', I'm sorry, is that actually a home? Do you live there and then... Do people in funeral homes live there and then the bodies are downstairs?

Cole: Not all funeral homes, but some funeral homes. It's very common. This is a vestige of history, sort of, but it'd be very normal for the undertaker in town to have a home. He was also the undertaker, but he had his family there. Currently today, I know a lot of... Even my students, they're living on the third floor of the funeral home in the little apartment, and then the funeral home is on the main floor. Then the basement usually has body storage, and the morgue, and all that stuff.

But, I'll tell you what. I go to a lot of the conventions and stuff in death care. There's just some wonderful, wonderful stories about a lot of these couples, funeral director couples that, first date or second date and, "we're going back to my place and I have to tell my date that I live in a funeral home." It's just different. It's just interesting. I think it's fascinating. I think it's also lovely. It's a great way to weed out people who can't tolerate your life.

Alie: Yeah. You know how people are like, "Oh, basements are so scary"? You're like, "Oh mine's an actual morgue."

Cole: Yes. Mine actually has dead bodies in it. Yes.

Alie: Have you ever seen anything creepy? Or has your exposure and your familiarity with death and dying kind of let you understand that there's nothing creepy, ghosts aren't real, there's no bumps in the night?

Cole: Yeah. I mean, regularly I'm around dead people and it doesn't bother me, and it really never has. In terms of being scared of stuff, actually I'm not afraid of ghosts, but I'll be home by myself sometimes and I'll hear a noise and be like, [*raspily*] "Oh my god the demons are coming into my home," because I'll have just read some book about demonology within some weird-ass tradition or something. I'm like, "That demon is here. It found me because I summoned it because I read its name out loud!" So, I am the most successful freaking myself out, but I am not... I don't do the ghost thing or whatever.

Although, I've been studying quite a bit about Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, and their traditions; Tibetan Buddhists do not play when it comes to death and dying. When you die, if you're a Tibetan Buddhist and you believe that, they'll do kind of like a horoscope at the time of your death to figure out, according to the stars, how long your body should be left out so that they can identify when the soul actually leaves your body. Because you do not want to bury or cremate someone while the soul is still in there. That's what you're trying to avoid.

Alie: That's a party foul.

Cole: I don't know why I was talking about this. See, this is the problem.

Alie: Ghosts!

Cole: Ghosts! So, Tibetan Buddhists, it's about getting the soul out. There's this whole field of study within that about what happens if your soul isn't doing what it's supposed to do and it's left behind. I have read some pretty compelling stuff over the years about those kinds of things. I'm not saying that it's real or not real, I'm just saying that those accounts exist and are very thorough, and documented, and all that kind of stuff.

Aside: I'm alone in my apartment. It's Saturday night, and I'm looking up Tibetan ghosts for this episode. I'm reading about a type of spirit that is just next-level, bummed-out ghost. It's called a hunger ghost. They have a tiny throat and huge stomach, and they can never be satisfied. They're said to arise with traumatic deaths. Anyway, right as I'm reading about this, this happened. I quickly turned on my phone to record it.

[clip from phone recording]

Alie: Hi there.

Man: How's it going?

Alie: How are you?

Man: Good. How are you?

Alie: Good. Thank you so much.

Man: No problem. Here's your change.

Alie: Oh, sweet.

That was the sound of a man coming up to my door, delivering an extra-large pizza to me. Just me. I'm reading about hungry ghosts. I'm eating an extra-large pizza by myself. But you know what? It's vegan and gluten free because I live in Los Angeles and I'm the worst, and I don't wanna die of any of those causes of death that don't involve falling off a roof.

Okay. Let's get back to it.

Alie: Do you have a book or resource that you recommend to people who are just going through the throes of a grieving process?

Cole: This gal, her name is Joanne Fink. She has a book because one day she woke up and her husband did not wake up with her. It was very sudden and unexpected. I always recommend books that are written by people that have had like, "Phew. Whoa." She has this little book; I actually buy this book, and this is what I give out to people when they've had a loss. It's called *When You Lose Someone You Love*, by Joanne Fink.

I have a book that I recommend for people who are going to be around someone who is dying, like actively dying, so that you know what to do. It's called *Attending the Dying*, and that's by Megory Anderson.

Aside: Okay. Super important, scientific question:

Alie: If you could become a ghost, would you become a ghost?

Cole: Look, I'm going to be honest. I've looked into this.

Alie: Really?

Cole: Yeah, of course I did. [*Alie laughs*] I will look into anything. Do not check my search history because I guarantee you it is probably offensive in some way. But all that information is out there. That probably makes me sound very hippy dippy, but if anything I've learned over the years, it's... I don't make assumptions about anything anymore.

Alie: What does science say about the soul leaving the body?

Cole: I love this question because this is where religious and cultural and social beliefs intersect with science. It's where we hit the big question mark, the big conflict about our physical bodies. There is nothing scientifically, that I'm aware of, that's like, "Oh, this is where your soul is." This idea of soul is informed by the non-physical science side of things, and it comes down to: what do you believe?

Aside: So there's a whole mess of people who think that the soul is a thing and it weighs 21 grams, partly because of the 2003 blockbuster, *21 Grams*. From the trailer that I just watched on YouTube, it seems to be about a bunch of sad people. Benicio Del Toro's in it, needing a makeover.

This original idea stemmed from the scientific experiments of a fellow named MacDougall, who in the early 1900s, had this idea to wait around, like a really eagle-eyed umpire, near the dying, and then scoot them over to a big scale at their big moment to see if they lost any weight as they passed.

He measured a bunch of folks and ignored most of the numbers, but he did report a small handful who lost about 21 grams of weight as they died. He also tried this on dogs. He wanted to at least, but he couldn't find any super sick dogs. Then suddenly, he had a bunch of data on dogs and people were like, "MacDougall. Did you poison the dogs?" And he was like, "Huh? What? No." Nobody believed him. In general, people didn't believe him because that 21 grams of weight loss wasn't a consistent figure anyway, and also because that could just be due to sweat loss.

Can I just say that when I was looking up the trailer for *21 Grams*, YouTube suggested a video about why Hollywood doesn't care about Hillary Swank anymore? I was like, "Yeah

I'll click that. I'll take the bait." I found that video more depressing than the part of the website about pod coffins that detailed waiting out rigor mortis before shaping you into a fetal ball and putting you into the biodegradable egg. Let the woman win some Oscars. Why you gotta hate on her?

So, some people believe in souls. Some people don't.

Cole: This is the thing that impacts the way that you are going to live your life or approach your life. If you believe that your soul's a real-deal thing, that's probably going to impact your decision making process. But if you don't believe it, or if you've never heard of this concept before, you may make decisions differently.

There's this thing called 'ensoulment'. Another key word, learning word. Ensoulment is discussed in every religious tradition that I know of, and it discusses: when does the soul enter the body? Because religious traditions look at that point to decide when you are an actual life. Because you're not a full life until you have a body plus soul. So, you become a life in different points. In Judaism, it's the 40th day of gestation. That's when you're life.

And in Judaism, well, traditional I guess is the way to say, if you have a miscarriage, technically there's no grieving, in quotes, because it wasn't actually a life. And then that is something called 'disenfranchised grief'. Keyword. Disenfranchised grief is something that happens when, let's say you have a miscarriage and people are like, "Oh, well at least it wasn't a real baby." And you're like, "I'm still sad. I'm still devastated." That's disenfranchised grief. It's when you're grieving, but society or cultural norms will say, [*snobbily*] "Oh, but you're not entitled to those feelings."

Alie: So, it's other people being bitchy about your grief. Also known as disenfranchised.

Cole: Yes. People are dicks. Yes.

Alie: So you are a certified crematory operator?

Cole: Yes.

Aside: Sorry to jump back to cremation, but it's growing in popularity and I felt hazy on the details.

Cole: A lot of states now require that for someone to operate the crematory that you need to have certain... And it's really like just a little, simple test. I mean just you need to not be an idiot.

Alie: You need to not be an idiot. Don't throw your car keys in with the body.

Cole: Yeah. Like, don't get in there for fun because it's not. Yeah.

Alie: This is such a stupid question, but when someone is cremated, they're cremated in a casket, right? Or no?

Cole: A lot of times. Okay. [*singing*] Crematiooon! I believe all states in the United States require you to be cremated in a cardboard outer container at a minimum. That's basically a cardboard box. It's basically body, cardboard, and you get slid in. People also will buy wood caskets. Let's say that Cole dies. Husband buys me a beautiful casket, cherry wood, then I'm laid out, and there's a visitation. Then, I get cremated in that same casket, so it'll burn up the wood. But not in a metal casket.

Alie: No. Some of the ashes might also be casket ashes?

Cole: Yes. Carbon is... Well no, because at that temperature... Okay, so the wood goes completely away because you're cremated between 1600 to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. It's very hot. When the body is cremated, all that is left if the cremation is done to completion, if it's done right, is calcium bicarbonate. That's what's left. There is no genetic material left. Let's say that I was just a bunch of cremated remains and you wanted to DNA test it to see like, "Let's see if that's actually Cole." If you're cremated appropriately, there is no genetic material left at all to be able to test that.

Alie: And I understand that there's a pretty good chance that you might get a couple of flakes of dust from somebody else in there, too.

Cole: Yeah. That absolutely happens. There's no way to get 100% of everything out of the retort, the cremation chamber, because think about what happened. You have a bonfire. What happens when it gets really hot? It swirls. It swirls around and you get hot wind. That happens inside the cremation chamber. The cremation chamber is much bigger than the size of a body, so you get all these little parts and stuff that fly around. And there's things like static electricity that can hold things up.

Alie: And what about embalming and body preparation? Do you do any of that, or are you like, "Nah. That's not my bag."?

Cole: I am not a licensed embalmer; however, I have witnessed them, and know about them, and I deal with that in my job pretty regularly. Embalming is... It's interesting. Quite a few of my students, all they want to do morning to night is embalm. That's it. That's all they want to do. Just like I'm, "I love working with death and dying. I'm into it.", they're like, "I love embalming." They love it.

Alie: What?

Cole: That's what they... You know, there's got to be somebody. There are a lot of families and people who embalming is part of their family tradition or their religious tradition, and it's important to them.

Alie: Do you think that people who are in the death and dying industry are a certain personality type, or does it totally run the gamut? Does your stereotype of what a mortician is, you know, kind of stoic and quiet, is that is completely untrue?

Cole: I love talking about this. Because in death care, currently in the United States, we are having a huge shift in who our "typical" funeral director is. Twenty years ago, it was by far, male dominated. Like men, men, men. Now, it's female dominated. Most of the students enrolled in mortuary school are women, and I believe that's nationwide now. You know how the nursing profession was male dominated and then it became women? Now we're having that happen in death care. I'm personally very excited about that because I feel like the role of the funeral director is shifting in the United States right now.

Also within death care, the profession, we're starting to see an increase in our educational standards. I'm teaching part of the Bachelor's of Funeral Service degree because the standard now has been a two-year Associate's degree to become a funeral director or embalmer. And not all states require that. It varies state to state. In Colorado, for example, there's no requirement for education to become a funeral director.

Alie: Whaat? I love it. Like, "I can buy a dime bag at the grocery store of weed. I can be a funeral director." Like, "Colorado! Wild West." *[both laughing]*

Cole: I hope that all funeral directors are required to have a four-year degree in the future.

Alie: You ready for some questions from listeners?

Cole: Oh, yes.

Alie: Oh my gosh. We've got some questions. Other than I feel like I have a million questions to ask you just because I'm like, *[nervously]* "What's going to happen when I die? Should I be afraid? What am I doing?" Okay. Aaron wants to know: How accurate is the expression "la petite mort" in describing an orgasm? He said: I won't be mad if you don't ask this.

Cole: Actually, let me talk about this for a second. In many Eastern traditions, in that world, the Eastern tradition teaches that when you're asleep, it is 1/60 of death, so we actually take yoga to practice death. We leave that out in America because Americans don't believe they're going to die. But that's why you do the physical practice of yoga, is to become more comfortable with it.

When it comes to orgasming, different traditions teach that you are between death and full life. You drop into this, sort of, in-between state, and you become more closer to death at that point.

Alie: Really? So that's an actual thing? That's not just the French being French and dramatic?

Cole: No. No. Good question. Points.

Alie: Okay, Good question! John wants to know: What'd your parents say when you told them you wanted to study death? Death is in all caps, I just want you to know.

Cole: Mm-hm. Because it's scary, and you should fear it. I never asked them. I just kind of did it.

Alie: There you go. Mark wants to know: Through science, might it be possible for human death to be permanently postponed? Is that something we should strive for? If so, how will that change us? I think that would make us bigger dicks.

Cole: Yes, yes it would. And dicks for the wrong reasons. I think, from a scientific viewpoint, it's great to understand the dynamics of that process and how that actually works. How you turn it on, turn it off. But I don't think, for the good of society or the world, that having a deathless world is good. That's bad.

Alie: Too many people.

Cole: I'm sure I have people who would be like, "Ahh. You're wrong," but that's what I believe, and I've worked with death and dying a lot.

Alie: Right. I feel like humans are kind of like a cockroach plague on the earth a little bit. There's a lot of us.

Cole: Yeah. We're dirty. We're messy. We don't leave things better than when we found them.

Alie: No. We've got to die off, or else we can't make room for new people.

Cole: That's right.

Alie: Phoebe wants to know: Cell death being what it is, is there a layman's terms, short version of how the chemicals used in funerary prep postpone the decomposition process until

after our weird, open-casket funeral rites? She's asking: With cell death, how do the chemicals postpone decomposition? How do they do that?

Cole: It's chemistry basically. When you die, your skin and all that stuff dehydrates, so when the chemicals... If you're doing embalming, your blood is drained out and it goes down the drain, like, into the sewer, just like your pee and your poop does.

Alie: Really??

Cole: Yeah. And the water treatment plants process all that out, just like they process out pee and poop and whatever the heck else you flush down there. There's also blood and guts. That's step one. Step two then, depending on how you died, like, if you were jaundiced when you died, you're going to have a yellow cast to your skin. Well, there's embalming chemicals and ingredients that are designed to counteract that so that you don't look yellow when you are in your casket.

Alie: Right. You got to look good. That's the last time some of these people are going to see you.

Cole: That's right. Because we are vain even though we're not aware that we're vain. We just know that we want to continue that.

Alie: [laughs] You gotta look tight!

Cole: This mixture is made, and the mixture is a chemical reaction, but it rehydrates the skin so that you don't look dead. It also corrects. It can like do things like color correct, or counteract whatever made you be dead.

Alie: Whatever made you be dead?

Cole: [laughs] Yes.

Alie: Cause of death: the thing that made me be dead. Oh, Jennifer. This is a great question, Jennifer: I keep hearing that when you die the same chemical in ayahuasca is released into your body by your brain. Are we really all tripping when we die?

Cole: Dimethyltryptamine aka DMT. Ayahuasca, is that how you say it? Ayahuasca. That has DMT in it, plus other stuff. The pineal gland in the brain makes DMT, basically. We make a little bit of that, and then that's what makes us dream. Okay? Next level, our bodies are.

When you die, as far as I'm aware, and I'm sure someone will post to correct me if I'm wrong, your body does release DMT and other stuff. There's other chemical things that happen. So this idea of, "Are you tripping when you die?", keep in mind that all of your senses are probably, if you're dying sort of naturally, your senses will have shut down.

If you have ever tripped as a living person, you had sensory input happening. When you're dying and at the moment of death, you're not going to be physically where you were when you were tripping and alive. So it's not going to be the same thing; it doesn't function the same way. Does that make sense?

Alie: Right. Because you're not at Bonnaroo using all of your faculties. You're somewhere much more quiet without those faculties. I get it. It's kind of like if you had a kaleidoscope but you had less input into the kaleidoscope.

Cole: And the thing is, we don't really know what's happening there. But I look at that and I keep in mind that our bodies are not functioning the same way that they normally do. So, it's going to be different.

Alie: So, it's probably not going to be like you're in Joshua Tree at a weird, trippy orgy. [*Cole laughs*] You're not at Burning Man; you're definitely not at Burning Man. Blake wants to know: Is there any truth to involuntary body movements after death? Like, bodies sitting up, muscle twitching, and groaning, and stuff like that?

Cole: Okay, the sitting up thing: I've never heard of that actually happening, but [*exhales loudly*] the breath thing, that happens. That's not uncommon because depending on how you die or what you die of, there can be a pocket of air or something that [*exhales*] comes out. Sometimes it's the result of just moving the body around or shifting it. I've never heard of somebody sitting up in actuality, and I hang out with a lot of funeral directors.

Alie: You've got the scoop. You've got the goods.

I did hear that, that a friend of mine and her fiancé were at his grandmother's funeral and they went up to the casket and they both swear they heard her breathe: like a [*short exhale*].

Cole: Interesting.

Alie: I don't know. [*both*] Hmmmm...

Aside: I am 100% not a doctor, but I'm going to guess that this sound is akin to the breeze, passing through a flute. Just the gentle song of happenstance.

Alie: Stephanie [ph.] had a question. She wanted to know if... And this is funny because I know her and her birthday's on Halloween. She wants to know if you find Halloween, not irritating, but what your stance is on Halloween because it's such a macabre holiday. You deal with a lot of the themes that we explore one day a year in your daily life. How do you feel about Halloween and how macabre it is?

Cole: I enjoy Halloween. A lot of people within the death and dying world, whether they work in the funeral side or even like the hospice workers or something, there's a lot of people that love it and they live for Halloween.

I appreciate that and I like Halloween, but I'm not obsessed with it. Honestly, I give it a C+ in terms of holidays in my calendar of events.

Alie: What's your A+ holiday?

Cole: I love Yom Kippur; I'm Jewish, and that's the Day of Atonement. It's where you think about what you did, and obviously, because I deal with death and dying, I really enjoy the opportunity every year to really think about what I did. Also, I'm a little bit intense, so I love Yom Kippur. Anyway, Halloween. What's interesting, probably, if you met me, because you only are hearing me, I do not dress in all black and I'm not like, "Grrr."

Alie: You're not uber goth.

Cole: You probably wouldn't look at me and know that I'm a death person or whatever.

Alie: I would think you're a graphic designer or an artist.

Cole: A design person. So yeah, I like and appreciate Halloween, however, it's not my number one.

Aside: So what's scarier than Halloween? It's being a pansy. Here is where I casually shower Cole with wonder and praise about all the things she's gotten done in her life.

Alie: I do feel like knowing your life, you're getting... you have gotten the most out of it. I think that if anything, your proximity to death and dying shows in how you choose to live your life, and all the things that you're so passionate about, and what you've learned, and what you've done. A lot of people, I don't think, would take that risk probably because they're like, "Huh, me? I'm not going to die. I'm going to live forever. And I'm also going to win the lottery."

Cole: "Put it off, put it off, put it off." A lot of people are just waiting for the thing to discover them. It doesn't work that way. And death and dying is not to be feared. It's the living; like fear your life choices. That's where the fear can come from, and the fear of like, "What happens if you don't do the thing that you've been wanting to do?"

Alie: Ah! That's so real. So true.

Cole: You owe it to yourself to do that, and you owe it to everyone that came before you to do that. You owe it to the world. You owe it to us to be who you are supposed to be.

Alie: What is your... We'll go least favorite to favorite. What is your least favorite thing about your job? And it could be anything. It could be early hours, could be being on call. Anything.

Cole: Not a fan of e-mail.

Alie: Not a fan of e-mail? Okay. *[laughs]*

Cole: That's real hard for me because I want to be talking to people, and I really don't like e-mail. I don't appreciate it. I don't enjoy it. I don't want it in my life.

Alie: I love it. *[both laughing]* Someone who deals with corpses, the worst thing is email.

Cole: Yeah.

Alie: What's your favorite thing about the job, or favorite moment on a job? Or the thing that really gets you out of bed in the morning?

Cole: A lot of times it's... I don't know what it is. I think I have radar or something, or like a beacon that is sending out. I can be in an immediate, deep, intense conversation involving tears with somebody I just met, in a heartbeat. And it is because of my work in death and dying. One time I was in...

Aside: I took out the name of the museum at Cole's request, just in case, just to keep identities private. Let's pretend, for the sake of anonymity, that she was at the British Lawnmower Museum, which is a real place.

Cole: ...Which is a fantastic museum. I got my ticket, and I went to go upstairs, and the guy that takes the tickets, he was like, "Oh you have interesting hair. Are you an artist?" I'm like, "No," and I was trying to go upstairs. He's like, "Who are you? What are you doing?" "Oh, hi. I actually work in death and dying." And he, like stone-cold face all of a sudden, he goes,

“My best friend committed suicide recently, and I almost didn't come to work today because I've been struggling.”

I was able to immediately talk to this individual for well over 30 minutes. I wouldn't have had that wonderful opportunity to connect with that gentleman, who was feeling very alone, if I didn't work in death and dying and have this training in thanatology and all this kind of stuff. And for that, I'm incredibly grateful, because being alone is the worst thing in the world for anybody. A lot of times people feel alone with stuff related to loss and there's so few people in the world that are equipped or comfortable to be present for that, you know? We want to push it away. That's an example of something I love, which is intense and sad, but overall great.

Alie: It's funny because I'm leaving this conversation much more cheerful than I thought I would be.

Cole: Yeah! [*both laughing*] That's good.

Alie: I was ready to start, I was like, “Meh. I'm probably going to end up super scared and bawling,” and I'm not. I'm like, “Oh, I just have to live.” Instead of fearing death, I just have to get more excited by actually being alive.

Cole: Yeah. Every time you encounter death in some way, it is an opportunity to choose to live. It really is.

Alie: I have a feeling you're going to be America's favorite thanatologist.

Cole: That's the goal. At least the only purple haired one that I know of.

As she left, Cole handed me a Ziploc bag. In it were five, freshly baked, fucking delicious sugar cookies. She said, “I can't help it, I'm Midwestern!” She also gave me a pen that she had specially printed with type inspired by vintage gravestone fonts. It's just a simple black, clicky-click pen bearing the words, “I don't have time for bullshit.” We parted ways, and I went upstairs to my room. I ate more than one of the cookies, and then I wished this chick lived in California.

To gently stalk Cole Imperi and be her friend, check out her website, HelloCole.com. She's on Instagram as just [@imperi](https://www.instagram.com/coleimperi). She's on Twitter as [@coleimperi](https://twitter.com/coleimperi).

I hope as you listened to this that you walked away with some kind of new appreciation for being not dead. I mean, confront death, plan for it, talk about it, accept it, but don't fear it. It doesn't make our lives any better while we're living them.

Thanks for listening. Thank you to everyone supporting on Patreon. I appreciate every single one of you. You make this self-produced passion of mine a reality. If I had died without doing it, my life would have been dimmer and I would have choked on regret. So thank you for making *Ologies* real. It changes my life on a daily basis.

If you want to rep *Ologies*, OlogiesMerch.com has shirts, and hats, and t-shirts, and now, are you ready for this? PINS! Enamel pins with the first four ologies are up, and they are so incredible. Thanks Shannon Feltus for the design, and Boni Dutch for the merch help. These pins are awesome and they're limited edition, so if you want them, get them sooner rather than later. Just saying.

And now more than ever, ask smart people all the dumb questions you want while you're still romping around on earth as a bucket of freaky stardust.

Next week? I'm honestly not sure which episode it'll be. It might be entomology. It might be cosmos. I'm not sure. Dunno. Stay tuned. It'll be something though.

[*outro music*]

Transcribed by Sam Freese and Deb W.

Links to things we discussed:

[Near Death experiences:](#)

[We are stardust](#)

[Books about wills](#)

[Promession](#)

[Cremation map](#)

[Red state map](#)

[Egg pod](#)

[American Gothic Funeral Director](#)

[Animals Grieving](#)

[British Lawnmower Museum](#)

[David the Gnome Kicks the Bucket](#)

[Alkaline Hydrolysis](#)

[When You Lose Someone You Love](#) by Joanne Fink

[Attending the Dying](#) by Megory Anderson

For comments and inquires on this or other transcripts, please contact OlogiteEmily@gmail.com