

Can changing our views on death improve how we live our lives?

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Daniel Hinshaw presenting. Credit: University of Notre Dame

Life is not possible without death and yet, modern medicine has waged an unending war against death. Now, a Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study (NDIAS) residential fellow is exploring how the concept of kenosis might create a common ground for personal growth, mutual understanding, civil discourse and productive policymaking in today's diverse and polarized society.

Daniel Hinshaw, M.D., professor emeritus of surgery and consultant in palliative medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School, has joined the NDIAS for the 2018-2019 cohort to discuss kenosis in his upcoming book. In Classical Greek, "kenosis" meant "depletion" or "emptying," and in Christian theology, the term was used to describe the voluntary self-emptying of God in becoming a human being in the person of Jesus Christ.

"With the recent shift to the non-communicable diseases of aging as the major sources of morbidity and mortality world-wide, it is the first time in human history when, for the majority of people, death will come through the aging process, which is essentially a process of kenosis, first on a physical level but also extending to the psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of the person," said Hinshaw. "The kenosis of aging is in a very real sense the 'choreographer' of the suffering experienced by human beings confronted by their mortality. Elements common to the kenotic process of aging include progressive functional decline, diminished autonomy, and the increasing likelihood over time of developing one or more of the diseases of aging (e.g., cancer, heart disease, diabetes, or dementia), all of which are associated with enormous healthcare costs that are spiraling out of control."

Hinshaw says that rather than being a source of despair, a voluntary embrace of kenosis, and thus our mortality, can become a tutor or mentor that guides each of us to reconsider our priorities.

"If we really accepted the limitations inherent to our mortality, how would this affect our decisions not only on a personal level but also on a societal and political level? This is what I am tackling at the NDIAS," said Hinshaw. "Addressing this one fundamental and common aspect of our humanity that transcends every category of demographics may provide people a mirror to see themselves honestly and to perceive their neighbor in a new light."

Hinshaw proposes to explore the broad implications of kenosis beyond its impact on personal reflection and spiritual growth to also include the potential transformation of priorities in healthcare, biomedical research, education, ethics, politics, culture, the arts, as well as stewardship of the earth and its resources. For example, he argues that if people began to accept their inevitable kenosis, they might take more personal responsibility for their health. With this more realistic understanding, Hinshaw believes there is the potential to improve healthcare through greater use of preventive medicine and increased health education from an early age, which could ultimately lead to better health as well as a reduction in costs as the use of expensive rescue strategies in the advanced stages of disease would decline.

Further, he worries that although documents such as the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution focus almost exclusively on the individual's right to pursue happiness, such a philosophy, if not balanced by a concern for the other, could make "monsters of us all." However, reflection on the unavoidable nature of suffering and death, with the kenosis of aging as a reminder, is a commonality everyone shares and may guide a more altruistic form of human exchange in all aspects of life.

Throughout Hinshaw's stay at the NDIAS, he also plans to explore the deeper existential opportunities presented to those who make use of their kenosis to redefine their lives.

"Notre Dame has an environment that encompasses an ethos where ideas like this can be explored, which is why the NDIAS and their fellowship program was such an appealing opportunity for me to create this book," said Hinshaw. "The Institute also provides important support and perspectives that will be essential to the development and writing process throughout my semester-long stay."

Hinshaw previously authored two books titled *Suffering and the Nature of Healing* and [Touch and the Healing of the World](#). To learn more about Hinshaw and his fellowship at the NDIAS, please visit <https://ndias.nd.edu/fellows/hinshaw-daniel-b/>.

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