Hermeneutic of Trust at the End of Life - Imaginative Experience and Symbolic Communication in Facing Death

Original title / Originaltitel
Hermeneutik des Vertrauens am Lebensende - Imaginatives Erleben und symbolische Kommunikation in Todesnähe

Summary / Zusammenfassung
In the context of today's palliative care policies, clinical pastoral care and spiritual care personnel have to deal with manifold and challenging problems of trust. The specific role that trust in various forms plays in facing death has until now undergone but little research. The project sketched in the following pages intends to fill this gap. The research project with its hermeneutic orientation inquires into the possibilities for enabling and strengthening trust. As a starting point, recent trust research provides the insight that experience of control and ability to trust are complementary, and that trust is often communicated and stabilized in a symbolic and narrative manner. Trust is an important resource for dealing with events and processes one cannot control. As a self-stabilizing surrender of control it makes possible a self-regulation in order to manage the unmanageable.

It is a time-honored insight of occidental philosophy and religion that as death approaches, images and narratives contribute to self-understanding and self-determination and reduce the threat of losing orientation and speech. In Plato's Phaedo Socrates, having been condemned to death, turns to the language of poetry and myth. Symbols and stories are more apt for talking about the "journey" that one is facing in death. According to Plato's Socrates, expressing oneself through such narratives about oneself and one's fate creates trust. Metaphors make communication about dying possible by eliminating death's indeterminacy. They link the present world of experience with the future. They enable one to conceive the inconceivable. The "thanatological production of images" seems to be a basic element in an ars moriendi. Images and stories offer meaning at the edge of life, make the incomprehensible more comprehensible, the unfamiliar more familiar, and give the irrational more shape by pointing to hitherto undiscovered possibilities in situations in which there seem to be no options.

In order to investigate what role trust plays in situations of approaching death and how it is symbolically mediated – in the experience and in the communication of the dying – this hermeneutical project examines both the symbolic communication of dying persons and three distinct yet correlated forms of imaginative experience in the face of death: dreams of dying, dream-like experiences and near-death experiences.

This research project of the Zurich Institute for Hermeneutics and Philosophy of Religion is meant to be a scientific contribution to the task formulated by the Federal Office for Health, namely, that people in their last phase of life are to be supported "in their existential, spiritual and religious needs in their quest for meaning, understanding and assurance in life and in dealing with crises." Beyond this perspective of personal assistance, the study intends to contribute to a better understanding of specific forms of dying experience, i.e. to a hermeneutically oriented phenomenology of dying processes.

The study elaborates a new hermeneutical approach to the symbolic language of the dying. It thus responds to A. Kellehear's call "[that we need] more personal perspectives of what it is like to die from dying persons themselves." In a practical respect the project delivers solidly based knowledge and orientation for the pastoral and spiritual support of dying persons. We expect
especially a deepened understanding of
trust-based coping strategies for approaching death and of the symbolic language of the experience
of dying.

Publications / Publikationen
Informationen unter http://www.hermes.uzh.ch/personen/buehler/publikationen.html

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Trust, dying processes, Fear of death, loss of control, Palliative care, Spiritual care, Pastoral care,
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model of coping, Passivity, LIved allegories

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Other Links to external Webpages / Andere Links zu externen Webseiten
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