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## Book Review: The Death Project: An Anthology for These Times

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## Book Review

Ted Ayres

***The Death Project: An Anthology for These Times***, edited by Dr. Gretchen Eick and Cora Poage (2021, Blue Cedar Press, 196 pages)

I have for some time appreciated the scholarly work of historian and activist Dr. Gretchen Cassel Eick (her 2001 book, *Dissent in Wichita*, is a true classic). Eick worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC for over a decade as a foreign and military policy lobbyist before earning a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas and becoming a professor of history, retiring from Friends University. She currently lives half the year in Bosnia and Herzegovina teaching English at Dzemal Bijedic University and half the year in Wichita, Kansas, where she teaches and writes books.

It is a rich understatement to note that 2020 was a challenging and difficult year. After talking with life coach and spiritual counselor Cora Poage, who happens to be Dr. Eick's daughter, the two decided to attempt to help people cope in this extraordinary time. So early in 2020, invitations were sent out by Blue Cedar Press asking people to submit pieces they had written about death. Ultimately, 36 people from the United Kingdom, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Australia and across the USA submitted their stories, poems, and memories of grieving friends and family and of surviving war, suicide, racism, declining health, and COVID-19.

In a chapter entitled "Black Lives Matter," former Kansas Senator Donald Betts Jr. writes about growing up with his younger brother Ron and the different paths

they traveled. He also eloquently notes: "When educational services, mentorship programs, job training, and employment are lacking, it opens the door to poverty, depression, violence, drugs, gangs, death and racial profiling." Sadly, when one succeeds, Betts writes, "... even state Senators are racially profiled."

In a chapter entitled "The Process of Dying," Mark McCormick tells the amazing story of Cassie Boone, who stopped her car on I-235 on a Saturday night when she saw a motorcycle piled up on the side of the road and a young man lying on his stomach on a patch of sloping grass. Her efforts to comfort Abram Wesley "Wes" Christopher and respond to his dying wish, "Tell Mom I love her," is an important story about the kindness of strangers in difficult circumstances.

In a chapter entitled "Rituals and Religion," I found a beautiful poem by Judy Keller Hatteberg about the funeral of a veteran where "the only sounds and motions are the swaying prairie grasses and the fluttering cottonwood leaves."

I was immediately intrigued when I initially saw the title of this book. After reading it (multiple times), I would suggest that in spite of its starkly grim title, I found the book to be surprisingly uplifting, hopeful, and a helpful guide to a topic that we all must ultimately address in one fashion or another. In this regard, I was touched by a story by Poage about her grandfather and his struggle with Alzheimer's. She writes, "A few days before my grandfather passed away, he looked at my grandmother and said, 'I don't know who you are, but I sure do Love you.'"

I offer that this is a book worthy of your time and contemplation ... for those you love and those who love you!