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Loud Sermons in the Press: The Reporting of Death in Early Massachusetts Newspapers

Stephen C. Messer

Death is a topic which fascinates and frightens many human beings. The physical end of life fascinates us because of its awesome unknowns, and it frightens us because each time we witness death we face our own inevitable demise. These characteristics indicate that attitudes toward death impact life, and this relationship makes the study of how people respond to death a significant issue for historical scrutiny. In the last fifteen years, there have been two major studies of death in colonial Massachusetts: David Stannard's *The Puritan Way of Death* and Gordon E. Geddes' *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England*. Although these scholars reach contradictory conclusions about the effects death had on Puritans, with Stannard emphasizing fear and despair and Geddes focusing on peaceful preparation, both studies suffer from a reliance on a narrow range of evidence. Both rely primarily on diaries, sermons, and gravestones, and as a result simplify the complexity of human responses to death.¹ Individuals interact with dying on a variety of levels, including the personal (reactions to one's own impending death), social (reactions to the deaths of others), institutional (reactions to death in the family, church, and workplace), legal (laws and judicial rulings dealing with death-related topics), and cultural (literary and artistic

1. David Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death (New York, 1977); Gordon E. Geddes, Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981).

depictions of death). This article attempts to expand the basis for evaluating responses to death in colonial Massachusetts, by examining a neglected cultural source, the newspaper.²

The intention of this study is to examine what Massachusetts newspapers published prior to 1730 reveal about attitudes and responses to death. As might be expected of papers published when Puritanism was still a very significant influence, death-related topics appeared often, although not always in the form one would anticipate. These references fall into the following four categories: reports of circumstances surrounding both unexpected and expected deaths, mortality reports and details on epidemics, advertisements dealing with subjects related to dying, and general literature discussing death. Examination of the responses to dying in these reports provides a collective cultural approach to studying attitudes toward death in early Massachusetts. Taken together, they portray a society which was fascinated, and perhaps even obsessed, with the details of death, but which generally expressed this attraction within conventional religious bounds.

The most common death-related story was a description of the immediate circumstances surrounding the death of a particular individual. The attention given to the details of both expected and unexpected deaths points to the continued importance of the medieval European preoccupation with "dying well."³ Stories reporting unexpected deaths emphasized the necessity of always being ready to die. Notices focussing on expected death depicted models for readers to follow in preparing for their own demise.

Sudden accidental death was an important component of mortality in early Massachusetts, and stories covering these

2. The first regular weekly newspaper in the British mainland colonies was published in Boston in 1704, and by 1730, three other papers had been printed in the Bay Colony. An intensive reading of the Boston News Letter, the Boston Gazette, and the New England Courant forms the basis of this article. For a summary of journalistic activity in the colonial period, see Charles S. Brigham, History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820 (2 vols., Worcester, 1947).

3. For a discussion of the medieval view of dying well, see Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death (New York, 1981), parts I and II. For discussions of the Puritan context of dying well, see Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death, pp. 20-22; and Geddes, Welcome Joy, pp. 11, 37, 60-61, 76.

occurrences make up a significant portion of the death notices appearing in the papers. Many of these stories concerned drowning victims and mentioned only the type of activity involved and whether the body had been recovered. However, one notice that went into considerably more detail described the drowning deaths of George Worthylake, his wife, daughter, servant, slave, and a family friend.⁴ The fact that this family perished while on their way to church in Boston apparently merited a longer notice, as an example of faithful observance of the Sabbath.

Fatalities from lightning bolts often received graphic coverage. One such report noted that Mrs. Jane Treat was killed around noon on May 30, 1704, while reading her Bible. The account added that she died instantly, "without knowing anything of the Pangs of Death; her Body was much wounded, not torn but burnt, and spotted one side of her from the Crown to the Sole of her foot" In a similarly detailed approach, the report of lightning striking and killing a man in Rhode Island noted that his brains splattered out, the lightning marked the walls, and the room contained "a very strong smell of Brimstone."⁵

Other varieties of sudden death received the same detailed coverage. One report of a shark attack in the West Indies added that the victim's head and shoulders were found in the fish when it was caught. The description of a young boy's death at the hands of hostile Indians noted the mutilation of his hands, head, and "private parts." One totally unrelated but intriguing notice revealed further attention to detail, when it reported that a lady from Ipswich who was "accounted a Crazy Person" died from falling off a horse she was riding while dressed in male clothes.⁶

 4. For reports of drowning deaths, see Boston News Letter, July 10, 1704, p. 2; April 16, 1705, p. 2; January 12, 1713, p. 2; November 24, 1718, p. 2; August 14, 1721, p.

4. The Worthylake tragedy was reported on November 10, 1718, p. 2.

5. *Ibid.*, June 12, 1704, p. 2, and October 27, 1707, p. 2.

6. *Ibid.*, June 19, 1721, p. 2; October 3, 1723, p. 2; July 14, 1726, p. 2; August 12, 1725, p. 2; and October 12, 1727, p. 2. Other accidental deaths receiving detailed coverage in the Boston News Letter include two instances of falling into wells, a sailor falling from a mast, three children being buried alive along a river bank, and two individuals being crushed to death. See January 22, 1705, p. 2; July 20, 1727, p. 2; June 4, 1724, p. 2; October 30, 1721, p. 2; August 15, 1720, p. 2; November 12, 1705, p. 2.

In addition to describing the immediate details of death, many reports of accidental and unexpected tragedies emphasized the broader significance of the circumstances surrounding these events. The major thrust of this extended coverage was discussion of the edifying and unedifying characteristics of these quick exits into eternity. The most obvious edifying activity to be engaged in at the time of death was religious in nature. When Jonathan Tyng of Woburn died suddenly in 1724, for instance, his death notice placed great emphasis on the fact that he passed away during a prayer in the afternoon church service. The account continued:

Thus this excellent, pious, and worthy Man died in the Mount with GOD and went from the place and work of Prayer with the Church on Earth, to the place and work of Praise with the General Assembly and Church of the first-born in Heaven above.⁷

When Reverend Gardner of Lancaster was mistakenly shot by his own militia force in 1704, his obituary emphasized his final words, when he told those around them to comfort his wife by "telling her he was going to Glory [and] advising her to follow him." This report concluded by noting that Gardner died "with a composed Christian frame of Spirit."⁸ Many other reports followed these examples by giving attention to the fact that deceased individuals had died while in church or while making a religious statement.⁹ Such a coincidence was the ultimate form of "dying well," because one was in the middle of a spiritual activity when death suddenly occurred.

As important as an edifying last scene was to the Puritans, unedifying exits received equal attention. The key focus was depicting certain deaths as punishments for wrongdoing and therefore as warnings *not* to imitate the wicked. This approach is evident in the report of the death of a sailor named Anthony Holeing. Shortly after refusing to obey an order, Holeing "was

7. Boston Gazette, January 27, 1724, p. 2.

8. Boston News Letter, November 20, 1704, p. 2.

9. *Ibid.*, March 17, 1712, p. 2; and March 5, 1722, p. 2.

suddenly taken with an extream pain athwart his Breast; the anguish whereof made him wish that God would stop his breath, & so died suddenly; 'Tis said he used formerly to be taken with those pains." The report added that "he was a person much addicted to Prophaness and Intemperance" One writer employed a similar message in reporting a Sunday ice-skating incident in New York, when "Hundreds of their Youth went presumptuously upon the Ice" and were stranded when a block separated. Most of the skaters were rescued, but one died. The report concluded: "However it may be a fair warning to them and all others not so prophanely to abuse the Lord's Day, in turning it into a Day of Sport and Diversion as these did."¹⁰

Suicide was one form of unedifying death that received special attention. Although many reports of self-murder are surprisingly restrained, considering the Puritan abhorrence of this act, most emphasized some reason for this totally unacceptable exit. When John Tabor of Rhode Island attempted to kill himself by slitting his throat in three places, he was described as "being whimsical and out of his Senses." A letter written by a London man who killed himself was reprinted, with its message urging his children to live a good life and not to follow his example. Finally, a black man who committed suicide by cutting the back of his neck and his windpipe "was buried with a stake drove through him in the Common."¹¹ His fate was a clear warning of the disgrace to be expected by anyone who attempted suicide.

In a general sense, the writers of death notices frequently used their medium as a means of explicitly warning the living to prepare for their demise. This focus was the journalistic echo of the often used tombstone theme: "As I am, you soon shall be."¹² Writers with both the *Boston News Letter* and the *Boston Gazette* acknowledged this approach when they described the sudden death

10. *Ibid.*, December 3, 1705, p. 2; and February 12, 1722, p. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, March 3, 1726, p. 2; August 22, 1728, p. 2; *New England Courant*, June 8, 1724, p. 2; *Boston News Letter*, June 23, 1718, p. 2; *Boston Gazette*, August 9, 1725, p. 1; *Boston News Letter*, March 19, 1722, p. 2.

12. For a summary of Puritan gravestone art, see Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and its Symbols, 1650-1815* (Middletown, Conn., 1966); Dickran and Ann Tashjian, *Memorials for Children of Change: The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* (Middletown, Conn., 1974).

of Harvard President John Levett in 1724 as "a loud Sermon" on the fact that individuals should always be prepared for death, because its coming was often unexpected. When reporting the edifying death of Jonathan Tyng recounted earlier, one writer summarized its occurrence with the sentence: "We were entertained with a very loud *Memento Mori*."¹³ These sudden ends were thus consciously portrayed as reminders to ready oneself for the so-often unanticipated arrival of death.

Notices depicting deaths that were expected or predictable continued to emphasize examples for the living, but the tone of these notices was markedly different from those discussed above. Because these descriptions focussed on what can be classified as "acceptable" deaths, there was much less sensationalism and emotion present. The crucial difference is that these individuals were portrayed as positive examples to imitate, rather than as prematurely snuffed out lives teaching the lessons that death could happen at any moment, or that it could come as a punishment for sin.

As one might expect, the key focus of these notices was on the exemplary characteristics of the deceased. One notable aspect occurred when an aged saint had full mental capacity until the end. When Samuel Penhollow of Portsmouth died at the age of sixty-two, his obituary emphasized that "His Reason continued with him to the last." The death announcement of Dr. Bennet of Rawley, age 104, was even more specific, when it noted that "his Understanding, Memory and Senses [were] good to the last, and [he] never shed a Tooth."¹⁴

However, deceased individuals were usually praised for more than a clear head and a full set of teeth. Readers routinely read about lives that they, the living, should imitate. Women were most often praised for being religious and supportive helpmates for their husbands. Rebeckah Dudley's death notice, for example, emphasized her connection to both a prominent husband and father, and then added: "By the Grace of God she knew how to be Abased and how to Abound. That which She was eminent for above many, was her Humility, Meekness, and Poverty of Spirit."

 13. Boston News Letter, May 14, 1724, p. 2; Boston Gazette, May 11, 1724, p. 2; Boston News Letter, January 23, 1724, p. 2.

14. Boston News Letter, December 8, 1726, p. 1; and February 16, 1719, p. 2.

Ann Bradstreet's death announcement was extraordinary in that it praised her "rare Endowments of mind, and . . . most agreeable Conversation." But these intellectual qualities were listed at the end of a passage which dwelt at length on her male relations and her personal religious beliefs.¹⁵

Praise for males highlighted religious activity, learning, industry, and honesty. Like many other ministers, Reverend Samuel Belcher of Ipswich received extended praise for his preaching, as it was written that nothing was

more accurate and Entertaining than his Ordinary Sermons; Like a well instructed Scribe in the Kingdom of God (as he was) he always brought forth things New and Old, Profitable and Pleasant.¹⁶

Thomas Brattle, magistrate and treasurer of Harvard College, was held up as an example of scholarship: "In the Republick of Learning he was justly Celebrated and Esteem'd for his great skill and attainments in the Mathematicks." Captain John Gore's obituary praised him as a learned and righteous sea captain, and stressed that his life should be an example to all sailors. All of this praise focussed on the good deeds done by the deceased, and on the desirability of imitating his or her life to whatever extent possible. Obviously not all readers could write captivating sermons or be skillful at mathematics, but they, like the congregation at the funeral of Major Thomas Fenner, could heed "an Exhortation to them, to eschew Vice and be Imitators of those good Qualifications that shined in him."¹⁷

Descriptions of last activities and extensive praise of deceased individuals focussed on positive features, and this tone

15. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1722, p. 2; and April 27, 1713, p. 2.

16. *Ibid.*, March 22, 1714, p. 2.

17. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1713, p. 2; December, 26, 1720, p. 2; and March 31, 1718, p. 2. Although the vast majority of the extended death notices followed the pattern cited above, the announcement for Nathaniel Glover of Dorchester emphasized a recent dispute over the ownership of land. This type of notice was an exception, in that it reported a negative aspect of a prominent person's life. See the Boston Gazette, June 13, 1726, p. 2.

continued with the last characteristic, which newspapers routinely emphasized. Because readers had repeatedly heard that they could not take their worldly accomplishments with them after death, there was a fascination with the legacies left to the living. The most frequently cited of these legacies concerned the descendants left behind. Death notices often gave the specific number of them (with a high of 163), and additional details such as the number who were still alive and if a member of the fourth generation was old enough to have children of his or her own. The death announcement of Elizabeth Gilman followed the usual format by noting that she had numerous descendants, but embellished when it added that their number was sufficient to staff two military companies with officers, men, and a minister.¹⁸ The second type of legacy, money left for the poor or some other charitable purpose, received much less attention than did the number or names of descendants. However, the announcements that did emphasize charitable gifts were quick to praise them, as "worthy of imitation."¹⁹

The death notices appearing in the Massachusetts newspapers of this period support the contention that Puritanism was still a significant force during the early eighteenth century. Religious ideals and activities dominate these reports, with the most common being encouragement to prepare for death. This theme appeared in both negative and positive ways. The negative manifestation occurred in the warnings to be always ready that were found in accounts of sudden or accidental deaths. The positive presentation centered around praising deceased individuals whose deaths were expected, and therefore more acceptable. The message was to imitate the dead individual's positive qualities in preparing for one's own end.

A second characteristic of these death notices was their attention to detail. Whether it was a description of a person's brains being splattered about, the precise moment when death

18. Boston News Letter, January 26, 1713, p. 2; August 25, 1712, p. 2; October 23, 1721, p. 2; June 17, 1717, p. 2; June 24, 1706, p. 4; Boston Gazette, December 6, 1725, p. 4; March 27, 1727, p. 2. The Gilman account appeared in the Boston News Letter, September 21, 1719, p. 4.

19. Boston News Letter, November 24, 1718, p. 2; November 4, 1717, p. 2; November 18, 1717, p. 2; Boston Gazette, January 24, 1726, p. 2.

occurred during a church service, the exact number of hours a person was sick before succumbing, the manner in which someone committed suicide, or the specific number of descendants, these details were popular fare.²⁰

This fascination with the details of death continued with the frequent and regular publication of mortality statistics in the Boston newspapers. Yearly burial reports were published from 1704 through 1728. These accounts included breakdowns of burials by month and by elements of the population (the most frequent categories were white and Indian/Negro), comments on the effects of epidemics, and figures on the increase or decrease in deaths compared to the previous year.²¹ It is clear that these statistics are heavily biased by under-reporting, but the significant fact is that the authorities made an attempt to compile these figures and that people had access to them through the newspapers.²² In keeping with the warning orientation previously discussed, these statistics were occasionally put to non-demographic use. Twice writers urged their readers to contemplate the serious messages conveyed by these figures.²³ In one of these instances, the following notation appeared with the burial chart:

20. A modern example of this fascination with the details of death occurred while this article was being written. One of the continuing public issues surrounding the Challenger space tragedy was interest in the last moments of the crew. See "Three Terrifying Minutes?" in Time Magazine, August 11, 1986, p. 55.
21. Boston News Letter, July 3, 1704, p. 2; March 26, 1705, p. 2; March 18, 1706, p. 2; March 10, 1707, p. 2; March 29, 1708, p. 2; March 28, 1709, p. 2; March 26, 1711, p. 2; March 17, 1712, p. 2; March 16, 1713, p. 2; March 15, 1714, p. 2; March 7, 1715, p. 2; March 12, 1716, p. 2; March 11, 1717, p. 2; March 10, 1718, p. 2; March 9, 1719, p. 4; March 14, 1720, p. 2; March 12, 1722, p. 2; March 7, 1723, p. 2; March 5, 1724, p. 2; March 4, 1725, p. 2; March 10, 1726, p. 2; March 9, 1727, p. 2; March 7, 1728, p. 2; Boston Gazette, March 20, 1721, p. 4; March 19, 1722, p. 2; March 11, 1723, p. 2; March 9, 1724, p. 2; March 8, 1725, p. 2; March 14, 1726, p. 2; March 13, 1727, p. 2; New England Courant, March 26, 1722, p. 2; March 11, 1723, p. 2.
22. Daniel Scott Smith, "The Demographic History of Colonial New England," Journal of Economic History, vol. 32 (1972): 171; Robert V. Wells, Uncle Sam's Family: Issues in and Perspectives on American Demographic History (Albany, N.Y., 1985), pp.70-71.
23. Boston News Letter, March 10, 1707, p. 2; Boston Gazette, March 20, 1721, p. 4.

The Survivors of any Consideration will understand how to make their profitable *Reflections* both Political and *Religious*, upon a Bill of this Importance laid before them.²⁴

Two other writers used the published mortality figures to argue that white servants were more beneficial to the colony than were black slaves.²⁵

A second form of statistical reporting on mortality rates appeared on an irregular basis, but still provides a significant commentary on Massachusetts' attitudes toward death. When fatal epidemics occurred in Boston, the newspapers reported their presence and went so far as to pinpoint the areas within the city which had serious outbreaks. During times of high mortality, these notices usually gave the number of people who had contracted the disease, the number who had died, and the number who had recovered. On several occasions a racial breakdown was included.²⁶ These reports were also used to dispel rumors that an epidemic was growing, when in fact it was on the decline.²⁷ In addition, this interest in epidemics extended to publishing similar news from other towns and villages ranging from Newbury, Massachusetts to Nice, France.²⁸

The willingness to publicize the statistics of death is significant for two reasons. First, there was no attempt to hide the results of epidemics in Massachusetts. Reporting these fatal outbreaks thus became an accepted part of life. Secondly, this

24. Boston News Letter, March 10, 1707, p. 2.

25. *Ibid.*, June 10, 1706, p. 4; March 10, 1718, p. 2.

26. *Ibid.*, May 29, 1721, p. 2; June 5, 1721, p. 2; July 31, 1721, p. 2; September 25, 1721, p. 2; October 9, 1721, p. 2; February 26, 1722, p. 2; Boston Gazette, May 29, 1721, p. 2; October 9, 1721, p. 4; New England Courant, January 22, 1722, p. 4; February 26, 1722, p. 2.

27. Boston News Letter, April 16, 1722, p. 4; New England Courant, April 16, 1722, p. 2; May 21, 1722, p. 2.

28. Boston News Letter, May 7, 1705, p. 2; January 21, 1712, p. 2; March 3, 1712, p. 2; March 31, 1712, p. 2; June 7, 1714, p. 2; June 26, 1721, p. 2; May 9, 1723, p. 2; May 12, 1726, p. 1; June 8, 1727, p. 2; June 22, 1727, p. 2; November 3, 1729, p. 2; New England Courant, December 18, 1721, p. 4; January 1, 1722, p. 2.

approach indicates the beginning of a demographic consciousness and an expanding level of population analysis. It is no coincidence that Massachusetts currently has the best set of historical vital records in the United States.²⁹

Death intruded into Massachusetts newspapers in several ways in addition to the two major categories already discussed. The commercial notices at the end of each edition included numerous reminders of dying, and advertisements for published funeral sermons were the most common expression of this emphasis. Apparently this literature was popular reading, since several of these sermons went through more than one edition.³⁰ These ads made it clear that these sermons were published with a purpose, to encourage people to contemplate the significance of their lives, and to prepare for their own deaths. This goal was supported by titles such as *A Sermon on the Uncertainty of Life: The Service of God Recommended to the Choice of Young People; A Wonderful Example of Early Piety; Invisibles, Realities, Demonstrated in the Holy Life and Triumphant Death of Mr. John Janeway; The Great Concern: Or a Serious Warning to a Timely & Thorough Preparation for Death; A Token for Children, being an Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children; and Practical Religion Exemplified in the Lives of Mrs. Mary Terry and Mrs. Crissold.*³¹ Other publications focused on the dead heroes of a battle with the Indians, the sin of suicide, the rising mortality due to an

29. Although modern demographers cringe at the omissions in these reports (the most critical one being a breakdown by age and sex), the use of categories such as race and month of burial, the thought given to the population at risk by excluding citizens of Boston who died elsewhere, and the crude attempts to calculate a death rate, were all steps forward. For summary of historical vital records in the United States, see Henry S. Shryock and Jacob S. Siegel, *The Methods and Materials of Demography* (4th ed., Washington, D.C., 1980), pp. 28-30. For comments on the vital records of Massachusetts, see Maris A. Vinovskis, "Mortality Rates and Trends in Massachusetts Before 1860," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 32 (1972): 184.

30. *Boston News Letter*, June 3, 1725, p. 2; July 15, 1725, p. 2; February 23, 1723, p. 2. On the publication of funeral sermons, see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul* (New York, 1986), pp. 122, 161-62; Geddes, *Welcome Joy*, p. 161.

31. *Boston News Letter*, February 23, 1727, p. 2; October 20, 1726, p. 2; August 31, 1719, p. 2; July 29, 1706, p. 2; August 19, 1706, p. 2; January 26, 1713, p. 2.

epidemic, and the dying speeches of 128 Indian converts from Martha's Vineyard.³² These notices reinforced the religious orientation found in the death notices, as even the back pages of these newspapers encouraged people to prepare for their demise.

Death also appeared as a topic of the general literary offerings in these early colonial newspapers. These efforts took two forms: serious death-related poetry in the *Boston News Letter* and *Boston Gazette*, and the prose and poetic satire of the *New England Courant*. Serious death poetry emphasized the traditional Christian messages of preparing for death and tempering grief with the hope that the deceased was now in heaven. The following selection exemplifies the call for preparation:

Be thus employ'd, no more wild mazes tread,
And soon thou'lt see the Prospect without dread,
Wile DEATH appear, but rather like a Friend,
From a vain empty World to bid Thee move,
And lead the way to the bright Realms above.³³

The funeral elegy for a Mrs. Burnett concluded by raising the second theme:

Now weep for *Burnett* more, the Good, the Just,
Or Mourn her Relicks, mouldering in the Dust,
But Change our Note, and our Subject rise
And sing Triumphant *Burnett* in the Skies.³⁴

It is with the satire of the *New England Courant* that a new tone entered the coverage of death in Massachusetts newspapers. Of course, during its short and troubled existence the *Courant* gave Massachusetts a totally different approach to life.³⁵ The editors attacked traditional Puritan funeral sermons, declaring

32. *Ibid.*, June 24, 1725, p. 2; March 19, 1724, p. 2; February 25, 1712, p. 2; October 12, 1727, p. 2; January 13, 1726, p. 2.

33. *Boston Gazette*, January 22, 1728, p. 2.

34. *Ibid.*, January 15, 1728, p. 1.

35. For a summary of the career of the *Courant*, see Frank L. Mott, *American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960* (3rd ed., New York, 1962), pp. 16-21.

that it was all too common to portray "A God like a Devil, or Lawyer like Saint," and "by which it plainly appears, that it is Wealth and not Virtue, Gold and not Grace, that will embalm a Man's Memory after he is dead." This mockery continued with a criticism of funeral poetry. Benjamin Franklin, as "Silence Dogood," wrote the following recipe for composing a New England funeral elegy: make it focus on a sudden death, describe the person in the most glowing terms, even if one has to "borrow" those terms from the lives of other individuals, include the person's last pious expressions, and throw in a bit of Latin at the end. Anagrams also received a scathing Dogood critique, culminating in one for an imaginary "Amos Throopus," whose name was transposed to "Thou Poor Ass."³⁶

The mocking of the *Courant* was clearly different from the other newspapers' treatment of death, but it is significant for its changing message. What is less clear, however, is whether this satire was acceptable to the reading public, and what the Franklins would substitute for the traditional approach they ridiculed. The reporting of deaths by the *Courant* tended to be much more subdued and strictly factual, without interpretation. People died, their deaths were noted, and that was that. Perhaps the *Courant's* approach indicated a modern view of dying, long before that view was accepted.

Death was *the* crucial juncture for Massachusetts Puritans; it ended earthly life and put one's hopes for salvation to the test before an omnipotent judge. With the exception of the satire of the *Courant*, the newspapers examined for this study reflected the serious and religious approach. A religious focus pervades this material, with its emphasis on preparation for dying, coverage of activities that were religious in nature, presentation of deceased saints and reprobates as examples, and inclusion of advertisements for sermons which dealt with this subject.

In keeping with the critical nature of the dying experience, the editors of these newspapers did not avoid informing readers of the mortality in their midst. To the contrary, they demonstrated a fascination with the specific details of death. Whether it was an explicit description of how someone died, or an in-depth examination of the effects of an epidemic,

36. *New England Courant*, June 22, 1724, p. 1; September 3, 1772, pp. 1-2; June 25, 1722, pp. 1-2; November 12, 1722, p. 1.

people graphically witnessed evidence of the frailty of human life. One can argue that this approach, while at times shocking, is much more healthy than the modern trend toward avoiding any discussion of death and sanitizing those details which are unavoidable.³⁷ In short, the material from these newspapers complements the approaches evident in Puritan diaries and funeral sermons. There was no attempt to hide from death and its consequences; dying was presented as a positive event if the individuals were prepared to face it, and these newspapers delivered "loud sermons" with the examples of deceased saints and sinners, in order to motivate their readers toward this goal.

The evidence from newspapers would seem to support Geddes' thesis of Puritan responses to death which emphasized the strong possibility of peaceful death, rather than Stannard's description of individuals facing death with fear and despair. However, more work with the wide variety of evidence dealing with death remains to be done before a definitive interpretation of responses to death in colonial Massachusetts can be developed.

37. For an insightful analysis of this modern denial of death, see Aries, The Hour of Our Death, pp. 559-601.