

RESEÑAS

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

«FACING DEATH»

Fecha de estreno: enero de 2003

Director: Stefan Haupt

Guión: Stefan Haupt

Cinematografía: Patrick Lindenmaier

Facing Death is a 2002 Swiss film by Stefan Haupt (98 minutes). The film presents the remarkable life of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the study of death and the terminally ill. This documentary includes interviews with Elisabeth, her sisters (Erika and Eva), her friends and colleagues, as well as extensive archive material. Elisabeth, born in Zurich in 1926, was a triplet. She studied medicine against her parents' wishes and moved to the United States in 1958 after marrying her husband, Manny. She claimed that she was able to understand people without identity because, as a triplet, she felt she had no identity.

By 1969 she had achieved international fame through her work with dying and terminally ill patients and her many books. Kübler-Ross was famous for her theory of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance. This theory was adopted for some years by a large number of professionals

as an important starting point to understanding dying patients. Listening to the dying and their narratives was the foundation of this theory. She thought it was really important to help patients and their families to pass through these 5 stages. However, her theory was also criticized by other scholars and practitioners as being incomplete and lacking empirical validation. She also tried to explain the importance of accepting ourselves and solving pending issues in order to be able to leave this world peacefully. She argued that doctors should be trained to manage dying patients and that before caring for dying patients they should have worked on their own emotions and thoughts in the face of death. She claimed that we could learn from those who were dying, that death was acceptable because it was a transition to another life, and that in learning not to fear death we really learned not to fear life.

In the 70s, she started doing workshops, world tours and group psychotherapy. She built a centre called 'Shanti Nilaya' («the peace house») where she collected dying experiences with adults and children. At this point in her life, Kübler-Ross's interest turned to near-death experiences and more esoteric and mystical subjects relating to life after death, and many people lost interest in her work, because it seemed more based on faith than science.

During this time she got divorced, as her family suffered the strain of her focus on her career. The film shows happy times when her children were young, but they are not mentioned in the documentary after she became famous. This may reflect that she was often absent from home.

After the 'Shanti Nilaya' centre closed, she retired to a farm in Virginia, a healing centre, where she continued with her work and tried to open a controversial hospice for children with AIDS. Her house in Virginia was burned down, possibly by locals who objected to her hospice. After that time, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross suffered a series of strokes and retired to live in her house in Phoenix, Arizona.

This Swiss film tries to answer the question of how Kübler-Ross faced her own death, even though the film was released

two years before she died. During the filming, she appears as a fragile and dependent elderly woman retired to die in her Arizona ranch, who looks severely disabled and lonely. At the end of the film, she is described by a journalist as: «the woman that cared for so many dying people, who couldn't manage her own death».

This film is a wonderful way to understand who and what she was, and might help viewers understand the impact she had on the 20th century culture related to death and dying patients. Kübler-Ross was a pioneer in the study of death and someone that argued that consciousness survives the end of the physical body. Thousands of families were helped by her to accept the death of their beloved ones and she is a reference that has done much to do away with the taboos related to dying and to drawing attention to the treatment of the terminally ill.

In conclusion, this powerful documentary is highly recommended and an excellent and valuable film for anyone working with dying and terminally ill patients.

Alicia BORRÀS SANTOS
Profesora colaboradora Escuela
Universitaria de Enfermería
Gimbernat
alicia.borras@eug.es