

Unfinished Business

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

Interview by LYNN GILBERT and GAYLEN MOORE

Connect to Your Life

How Would You Cope? In this selection, a psychiatrist tells about her work with a dying child and the child's family. Think about how you might react if you or a loved one were dying from an incurable illness. Look at the chart shown here, and jot down the phrases that describe what you think your reaction would be. Add any other reactions you think you might have.

Reactions to Dying	
accept it	get angry
avoid thinking about it	learn from it
become depressed	make the most of time left
deny it	try to bargain with God
face it	view it as a horrible thing
fear it	view it as a natural process
fight it	

Build Background

Therapy in Art Adults often think children are too young to understand what dying is. But even though young children may not be able to express in words their understanding of death, there is a way that they can share their inner awareness and their deepest feelings. In this selection, you will read how Elisabeth Kübler-Ross helped three children use drawing as a kind of "symbolic language" to describe their feelings about their dying sister. As you read, notice the drawings accompanying the selection. They were not made by the children Kübler-Ross describes but by the children from another family after their nine-month-old brother Kevin died as the result of a heart defect. The drawings by Sean, Mary Kate, and Kerry Cullen provide an example of the kind of "symbolic language" by which, Kübler-Ross says, even the very young can teach us about life and death.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

bland	procrastinating
concretely	punitive
contaminated	spontaneous
convey	transcend
devastated	uniqueness

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS INTERVIEW An **interview** is an exchange of questions and answers between two people. What you are about to read comes out of an interview with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, conducted by Lynn Gilbert and Gaylen Moore. However, the questions asked by the interviewers have been omitted. The result is a casual, conversational style that gives a vivid impression of this famous psychiatrist. As you read "Unfinished Business," pay attention to the impressions you get of Kübler-Ross as well as to her message about dying.

ACTIVE READING IDENTIFYING THE MAIN IDEA Most nonfiction focuses on a **main idea**—a central idea, message, or opinion that the writer wants to communicate to the reader. Sometimes the main idea is only implied or suggested. Other times it is stated directly. Typically, a main idea is broad and general and is supported by more specific ideas and details.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read "Unfinished Business," jot down some of the author's ideas as you come to them and mark the one that you think is the most general or main idea.

U N F I N I S H E D B U S I N E S S

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS

INTERVIEW BY LYNN GILBERT AND GAYLEN MOORE

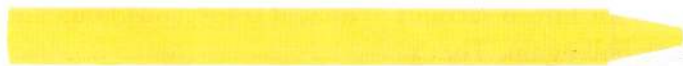
I love to work with dying children. They're just so beautiful.



Nobody knows what pearls they are. They have all the wisdom in



the world. They know that they are dying. They know how and



when they are dying. They teach you all about life if you can hear,



if you can listen to them. They use an incredible symbolic language

to convey to you how much they know. If people would only understand their symbolic language.

One of my girls, I took her home to die, but she couldn't die. She was just lying there week after week after week. And the father couldn't communicate with her. He was a very non-verbal man. The mother was very verbal and a

They know they are going to die, and they share their concepts of life and death and unfinished business in their pictures.

practicing Catholic. Every family member was at a different stage and used his own coping mechanism.¹ That's the time when you have to help always the ones who limp behind because they're going to hurt the most and they're going to have the most unfinished business. We try to help them finish the unfinished business *before* somebody dies, otherwise they have all the grief work afterward.

Grief is the most God-given gift to get in touch with your losses. You shed your tears and then stand up and start again like a child who falls and hurts his knees, cries for fifteen seconds and then jumps up and plays ball again. That's a natural thing. My work is preventive psychiatry, it's to finish as much as possible before death, like we bring flowers to our patients before they die so we don't have to pile them up on the casket afterward. If I love somebody, I tell them "I love you" now, so I can skip the schmaltzy eulogies² afterward.

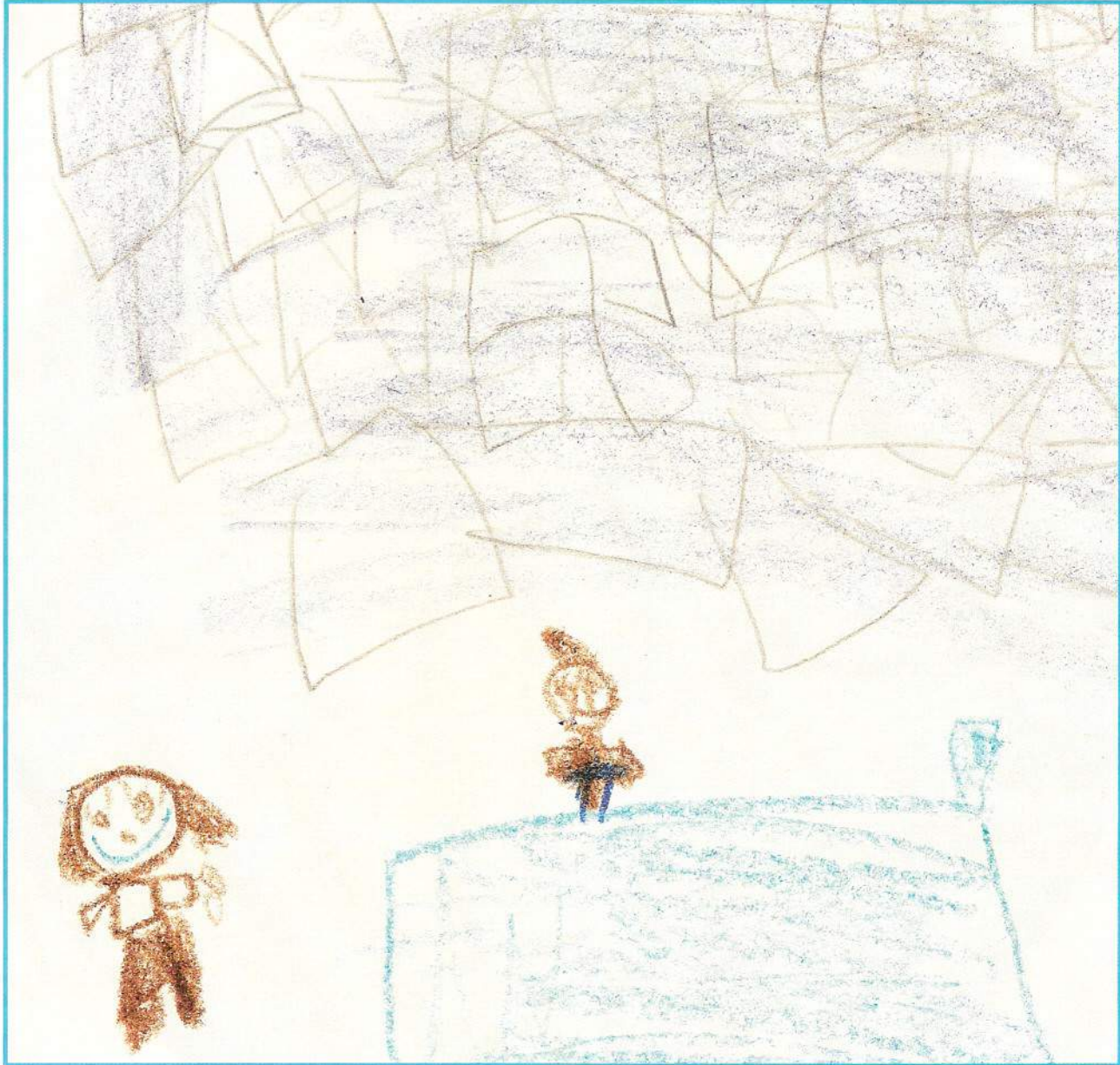
One day I asked the father of this twelve-year

old girl if he would give me permission to talk to the other children, six, ten and eleven years old. He said, "They don't know about it." I said, "Come, your child's arms and legs are like pieces of chalk, and her belly is like she's nine months pregnant, and she's lying there slowly dying in the living room. How can a six-, ten- and eleven-year-old not know?" I said, "All I want is for you to give your permission for me to sit with them without grownups, and I'll ask them to draw me a picture." We used the Susan Bach method. She's a Jungian analyst³ from London who worked in Zurich in my hospital there with children who had brain tumors. She saw that children who had brain tumors, little children, show in their pictures that they know they are going to die, and they share their concepts of life and death and unfinished business in their pictures.

I use this technique daily. In a few minutes I can evaluate the whole family and know who needs the most help and who's O.K. and who's in pain. You don't need hours and hours of psychiatric evaluation, which is just talking and just touches the surface. This is all preconscious⁴ material. It's the same material that you would get if you had ten consecutive dreams, but I can get it at a morgue, at a wake, in a church, in a school, in a motel, in a shack in Alaska in an Eskimo family, with Aborigines in Australia; it costs nothing, it takes five minutes, it transcends language, it's human. All

1. **coping mechanism:** way of thinking or behaving that helps one deal with problems, troubles, or sorrows.
2. **schmaltzy eulogies** (shmäl'tsē yōō'lə-jēz): overly sentimental talk in praise of a dead person.
3. **Jungian** (yōōng'ē-ən) **analyst:** psychiatrist who follows the teachings of Carl Jung (1875–1961), a Swiss psychiatrist.
4. **preconscious:** having to do with memories or feelings that are not part of one's immediate awareness but that can be recalled through conscious effort.

WORDS TO KNOW **convey** (kən-vā') *v.* to make known; communicate
transcend (trän-sēnd') *v.* to pass beyond the limits of; be greater than



Kerry, age 5, drew this picture of herself with Kevin in the bathtub.

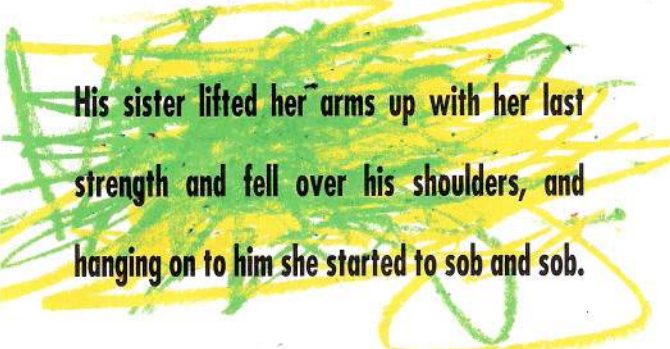


Mary Kate, age 7, shows her sorrow and her love in this collage done on a round lid.

human beings are the same anyway.

So the father finally gave me permission, and I went there at three-thirty when school was out so that the father wouldn't be back, you know, and have second thoughts and give in to his own anxiety. The children were absolutely gorgeous. I locked the dining room with a key so no grownup could interfere, and I said, "Let's have a competition. We're going to draw a picture and we have ten minutes." I limit the time so they don't start thinking, so it's as genuine and authentic and spontaneous as possible. In every picture these children revealed they knew that their sister was dying. I just said, "Use any color and draw a picture."

Anyway, the six-year-old was just gorgeous. His picture was so clear. I talked with him about it in the presence of the others. I said to him, "What your picture is telling is that your sister is dying." He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, if



His sister lifted her arms up with her last strength and fell over his shoulders, and hanging on to him she started to sob and sob.

she's going to die tomorrow, is there anything you haven't done, because this is your last chance to say or do anything you want to do, so that you don't have to worry about it afterwards when it's too late. That's what grownups do, but you don't have to do that." That challenged him. He said, "Yeah, I guess I'm supposed to tell her I love her." I said, "You're already a phoney-baloney at six years old." Children shouldn't be that contaminated.

I said, "I've never seen a six-year-old who goes to a twelve-year-old and says, 'I love you.'" There must have been a lot of things that she did that drove you up the wall, that she was unfair, you know, negative stuff." I said, "You can only really love her when you get rid of all the negative stuff, all the fights that you had, and when you get rid of that, then you love her so much that you don't need to say it, because she'll know it anyway and you'll know it."

He was fidgeting around at the table, and I said, "Come on, you're the youngest"—and the younger, the more honest they are—"get it out, what bugs you?" And he said, "Well, I really would like to tell her to get it over with already. I would like her to drop dead already." And I said, "Yes, naturally," as carefully as I could. And I said, "Why does it bug you that it takes so long?" He said, "I can't slam the doors ever, I can't bring my friends home, and I can't watch television anymore, and it's sickening how long it takes." You know, very natural, honest answers for a six-year-old.

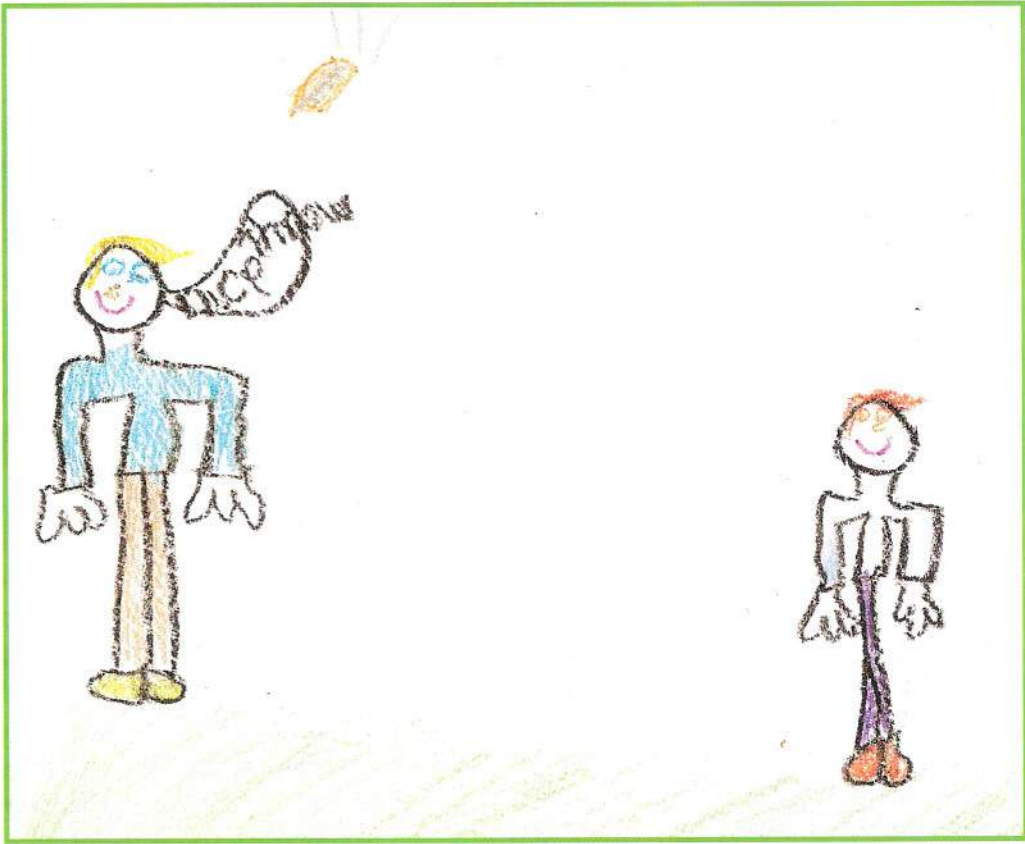
I'm sitting there putting fuel on the fire and encouraging him to talk. The ten- and eleven-year-olds just sat there and stared at him. I said, "I wonder if you're honest enough and have the courage to share that with your sister." He said, "One ought not to do that." I said, "Who says? Do you think it's better to swallow this down, and then after she dies you have all these guilt trips and later on need counseling, or is it better to share it with your sister now and then you can love each other or forgive each other, whatever is necessary? And then you'll really feel super-duper. You will still miss her." They will have grief, you understand, but not grief *work*. He said, "Oh, I would love to be able to do that."

So you have to visualize . . . we go out into this living room where she lies there. And the

WORDS
TO
KNOW

spontaneous (spŏn-tā'nē-əs) *adj.* happening in a free, natural way, without effort or much thought
contaminated (kən-tām'ə-nā'tīd) *adj.* dirtied, polluted, or spoiled by contact with or addition of something **contaminate** *v.*

In this picture, Sean, age 9, imagines playing football with Kevin as an older boy. Sean praises Kevin with the words "nice throw."



six-year-old sits next to her, and I'm behind him, then the ten-year-old is behind me and the eleven-year-old behind her, then the mother came in and at the very end, the father behind her. And the arrangement was very symbolically beautiful. They came in the right chronological order in the courage they had to do that. Then the six-year-old starts procrastinating a little, and I gave him a little nudge in the pants with my foot. Then he blurted it out and said to her, "You know, sometimes it takes so long, sometimes I pray to get it over with."

He was just ready to explain, and something very beautiful happened with that symbolic

language. His sister lifted her arms up with her last strength and fell over his shoulders, and hanging on to him she started to sob and sob and cry, not painful crying but tremendous relief. It was just like floodgates opening. In her sobbing she kept repeating, "Thank God, thank God, thank God. I prayed for the last three days for God to take me already because it really is getting too much now. And every time I finish my prayer, Mom comes in and stands in the doorway and said she spent the whole night sitting up, praying to God to keep me." And she said, "If you help me, then together we can outdo Mom."

WORDS
TO
KNOW

procrastinating (prō-krās'te-nā'tīng) *n.* putting off doing something until later;
delaying **procrastinate** *v.*

Children take everything very concretely. And he was the proudest man in the world, he was just beaming, and they were holding onto each other, crying and laughing. It was one of the most moving moments of house calls, and I've made lots of them. The other siblings naturally were envious that they weren't the ones who had the courage to do that.

About three days later I went back to see not just how she was doing, but how the six-year-old was doing, if he had any second thoughts about it. He was in super shape, he was high. But the girl couldn't die and so I asked the mother, I said, "If you don't mind, I'm just going to ask her straightforward, not in symbolic language, why she can't die, if that's O.K. with you. And I want you to come in and see how I'm doing that so you're never worried that I'm hurting anybody." She had great faith in me.

So I walked into the living room, and I looked at her and I said, "You just can't die, can you?" She said, "No." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because I can't get to heaven." I said, "Who told you that?" She said she was always taught for twelve years that nobody gets to heaven unless you have loved God more than anybody else in the whole world. Then she lifted her arms up and whispered in my ear as if she would try to prevent God from hearing her. She whispered very quietly, "You understand that I love my mommy and daddy better than anybody in the whole world."

That made me very sad that children have to apologize for that. What you then have to do is to set aside your own anger at the people who teach this kind of punitive approach. I said, "We're not going to get into an argument about who is right and who is wrong, because each one believes what they need to believe. I can only work with you and talk with you the way I always have. You and I always talked about

school, and the biggest dream of your life was to be a schoolteacher. The only time I ever saw you devastated was in September when the school buses rolled up and school started after the summer vacation, and your brothers and sisters boarded the school bus, and you looked through this window and you really looked devastated." I said, "I think what happened was that at that moment it began to dawn on you that you will never again go back to your beloved school and you will never become a teacher." I said, "I want to ask only one question. Sometimes your teacher gives very tough assignments to some students." It was in the back of my mind that she was an honor student. I said, "Does she give these assignments to her lousy students? Does she give it to everybody in the class without discrimination, or does she give it to a very few of her hand-picked, chosen students?" Then her face lit up and she said, "Oh, she gives it to very few of us." I said, "Since God is also a teacher, do you think He gave you a tough assignment? Or an assignment he could give to any child?"

What she did then was symbolic language. At first she didn't answer me in words. Ever so slowly she looked down at her belly and her arms which were not thicker than my thumb, and her belly full of cancer. She very slowly looked down her body, and then she looked at me and said, "I don't think God could give a tougher assignment to any child."

She died about two and a half or three days later. My last communication with her was totally nonverbal and to me very beautiful because I knew that it helped her. I thought at that time she was in a coma, and I came then so as not to disturb the family in the last day or two. I stood in the doorway and took another look at her, and she suddenly opened her eyes. She couldn't speak anymore at that

WORDS
TO
KNOW

concretely (kõn-krêt'îē) *adv.* in a real, solid, material way
punitive (pyõõ'nĩ-tĩv) *adj.* punishing or having to do with punishment
devastated (dĕv'e-stā'tĩd) *adj.* destroyed; stunned and overwhelmed **devastate** *v.*

time. And she looked down at her belly and her legs, and she had a big smirk on her face. And I nodded. She knew what I talked about and I knew what she talked about. It was totally nonverbal. It was very beautiful.

I learn always from dying patients. Instead of always looking at the negative, what you see is the uniqueness and strength in every single human being. I have patients who never share, never communicate. They live a very bland life, and anybody who looked at them would say, Is this all there is to it? and then you really get to know those people. There is a beauty in them that very few see. And all you have to do is look.

Dying patients look back at their lives, and they review and evaluate what they would do over again if they had a second chance, and that's very instructive because dying patients throw overboard all the following: they don't have to impress you anymore, they do not have to pretend. They're not interested in material things. They have no secondary gains except to honestly share what life is all about and what lessons they have learned too late. And they pass it on to you, and I pass it on to others so they don't have to wait until they're on their deathbed and say the same thing. Dying patients literally teach you about life. ❖

L I T E R A R Y L I N K

"Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning"

Alice Walker

Looking down into my father's
dead face
for the last time
my mother said without
5 tears, without smiles
without regrets
but with *civility*¹
"Good night, Willie Lee, I'll see you
in the morning."

10 And it was then I knew that the healing
of all our wounds
is forgiveness
that permits a promise
of our return
at the end.

1. **civility**: politeness, especially of a merely formal kind.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

Jot down words and phrases that describe your reactions to this selection. Then discuss your reactions with other classmates.

Comprehension Check

- What is the work that Kübler-Ross does?
- What does she often ask children and families to do, so that she can find out how they feel?
- Why was the 12-year-old girl having trouble dying?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING IDENTIFYING THE MAIN IDEA** Look at what you jotted down in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK** as you read the interview. What would you say is Kübler-Ross's **main idea**? Suggest one or two of her related ideas.

3. Consider the **title**. What do you think Kübler-Ross means by "unfinished business"?

4. What do you think of the approach that Kübler-Ross uses in trying to help the dying girl and her family?

THINK ABOUT

- "You're already a phoney-baloney at six years old."
- "You can only really love her when you get rid of all the negative stuff."
- "I'm just going to ask her straightforward . . . why she can't die."

5. What impressions of Kübler-Ross do you get from reading this **interview**?

6. What do you think people can learn from those who are dying?

Extend Interpretations

7. **Comparing Texts** Consider the death in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." Do you think there is any unfinished business here? Explain.

8. **Connect to Life** Look over the notes you made in the Connect to Your Life activity on page 260. Now that you have read the selection, would you change any of your notes? Explain.


Literary Analysis

INTERVIEW An **interview** is a series of questions and answers between two people. The interviewer usually comes away with notes and often with a tape recording. He or she then may present the questions and answers as they occurred or may shape the information into a **biographical essay** or **profile**. Another approach—the one used here by Gilbert and Moore—is to edit a taped interview, focusing on the best parts of the conversation and allowing the person being interviewed to speak directly to the reader. This format allows the person's personality to emerge clearly.

Paired Activity Since this selection is based not on written but on spoken remarks, it tends to have a looser, more conversational style. Working with a partner, go back through the selection and pick out three passages that sound like conversational speech rather than like a written essay. Read these passages aloud to a larger group, and discuss whether this casual style enhances or detracts from Kübler-Ross's **main idea**.

Writing Options

1. Interview Questions Imagine that you have been asked to do a follow-up interview of Kübler-Ross. Write a list of interview questions that you would ask her.

2. Character Sketch Write a brief profile or character sketch of Kübler-Ross, drawing upon the impressions you gained from reading this interview. Place your sketch in your **Working Portfolio**. 

Activities & Explorations

1. Artistic Rendering For most people, death is the ultimate

uncharted territory. In a sketch or a painting, communicate the impressions of the experience of dying that you gained from reading this selection. ~ ART

2. Video Interviews Interview several people you know well about their attitudes toward dying. Videotape the interviews and, with the subjects' permission, share them in class. Discuss the different reactions that people have to the subject. ~ VIEWING AND REPRESENTING

Art Connection

Sean, Mary Kate, and Kerry Cullen drew their pictures in an

art-therapy program run by Rose Richardson, a licensed clinical social worker. The children express their feelings in a safe environment with others their own age who have experienced similar losses. In Kerry's drawing (p. 263), you'll notice that both Kerry and Kevin are smiling, but dark geometric shapes cover the top part of the picture. How do you interpret this picture? Mary Kate's colorful collage (p. 264) includes stars, hearts, and other shiny decorations. What feelings does this picture communicate to you? In Sean's drawing (p. 266), why do you think Kevin is depicted as an older boy?

Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE A: MEANING CLUES Write the vocabulary word that goes with each clue below.

1. This word describes rivers that industries dump waste products into.
2. Charities need to be supported in this way, as well as with kind thoughts.
3. You don't have to speak or write to do this; body language can do it.
4. Both fines and jail sentences can be described with this word.
5. If this word describes your life, you might feel you need to spice up your life a bit.
6. If you wanted to advise someone against doing this, you might say, "Make hay while the sun shines."
7. Things made on an assembly line or with a cookie cutter do not have this quality.
8. People who have suffered a terrible tragedy may describe their lives with this word.

9. A great work of art will often do this to any verbal attempt to describe the work.
10. If you suddenly want to have a picnic and you throw some sandwiches in a bag and go, your decision is this kind.

EXERCISE B Working with a partner, see how quickly you can communicate each of the vocabulary words by saying things that call that word to mind—but without using synonyms. For example, for bland, you might say, "Mashed potatoes, the color beige, boring movies, baby food . . .," continuing until the correct word is guessed. Note that anything that could help your partner guess the word is allowed—a phrase, a description, an example—anything but a synonym. You might be the clue giver for half of the list and the guesser for the other half.

Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth study of context clues, see page 103.

WORDS
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Grammar in Context: Simple Sentences

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross uses simple, uncomplicated sentences in describing her work with dying children.

I love to work with dying children. They're just so beautiful. . . . They have all the wisdom in the world.

A **simple sentence** contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. It has only one main clause and no subordinate clauses. Using simple, direct sentences can be a very forceful way to signal the importance of ideas and to communicate feelings and thoughts. The use of simple sentences in combination with other types of sentences can produce interesting, rhythmic prose.



Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

1926–

Other Works

On Death and Dying
Death: The Final Stage of Growth
On Children and Death

Early Insights Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is one of the great humanitarians of our time. Raised in an upper-middle-class Swiss family, she decided early in life to become a doctor. Her father opposed this idea, however, so she postponed her medical education and took a position as a domestic servant. At the age of 18, she volunteered to help with war relief. While visiting the concentration camp of Majdanek in Poland, she was struck by pictures of butterflies scratched on the prison walls. She realized that doomed children, nearing their deaths in the gas chamber, must have viewed their spirits as butterflies leaving the cocoons of their bodies. This image of hope amid despair made a deep impression on her.

A Country Doctor Always determined, Kübler-Ross eventually gained her medical degree and worked as a country doctor in Switzerland. After immigrating to New York, she worked in a state

WRITING EXERCISE The following paragraph contains no simple sentences. Decide which ideas in it would be more effective if they stood alone. Then add sentence variety to the paragraph by rewriting it, using simple sentences to express those ideas.

Young children can recognize approaching death, and they can accept the truth and die in peace. Sometimes they can express their feelings more easily than adults can, since children do not rely just on words and they can use symbolic language. The pictures they draw and the colors they use provide insights into their thoughts, and a trained psychologist can use information gathered from pictures to help both the child and family members.

Grammar Handbook The Sentence and Its Parts, p. 1190

mental hospital and achieved remarkable success in helping mentally ill patients who had been labeled hopeless.

Her True Work As a psychiatrist at Billings Hospital of the University of Chicago, Kübler-Ross began a series of seminars in which she interviewed dying patients. These seminars attracted national attention and publicity. Meanwhile, Kübler-Ross continued to help countless people view life and death as “a challenge and not a threat.” She left the University of Chicago in 1969 and began giving workshops all over the world. Her work has inspired the establishment of hospice programs, which support terminally ill patients and their families.

Author Activity

On Telling the Truth A frequent question in dealing with the dying is how much to tell them about their condition. How can honesty best be balanced against hope? Find out what Kübler-Ross's answer is to this question. A good place to look is her classic work, *On Death and Dying*.



LaserLinks: Background for Reading
Psychology Connection