

THE FIVE EMOTIONAL STATES OF DYING IN
ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD
(excerpt)*

By

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One of the pleasures of studying the humanities is observing how a culture's arts mirror trends in the social sciences. In the fall of 1965, four theology students at the Chicago Theological Seminary approached Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist, for assistance in a research project. "Their class was to write a paper on a crisis in human life," she wrote, "and the four students considered death as the biggest crisis people had to face" (Kubler-Ross, 21). Dr. Kubler-Ross proposed conducting interviews among a broad sample of terminally ill patients, and in 1969, she published *On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families*. In her book, Kubler-Ross identified five emotional states the terminally ill commonly experience—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—although she made it clear that these states occur in a variety of patterns, sometimes coinciding with one another, sometimes recurring, and sometimes not occurring at all (Kubler-Ross, xiv, 250). Coincidentally, two years before the publication of *On Death & Dying*, Tom Stoppard opened his play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*—a play in which the title characters throughout their ill-fated journey first set forth in *Hamlet*, manifest the emotional states that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified in her groundbreaking work.

*A full, unedited copy of this work is available for purchase! Please click on [Store](#).

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