

Burial Customs


HOW DEATH IS VIEWED AND HANDLED
THROUGHOUT HISTORY AND DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Introduction

- Death has always been both celebrated and feared
- As early as 60,000 BCE, humans buried their dead with ritual and ceremony
- Evidence even earlier suggests that Neanderthals buried their dead with flowers, much as we do today
- Many burial rites developed as a way to protect the living from the evil spirit thought to have caused the death
- "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" (Poem by American Alan Seeger, 1888 - 1916)

Artistic Rendering of Prehistoric Burial
(Note the Flowers and the Body in Fetal Position)



What Is Death?

- Our understanding of death has changed over the years, influenced by religion, science, medicine, and the law
- State laws usually define what “dead” is, not death
- Death is generally defined as the absence or end of life; the total and permanent cessation of all vital functions of an organism
- Others define death as not the end but the beginning of something new: A portal into a new world or afterlife, making death a mystery to this day

Can Google Solve Death?

(Time Cover, Sep. 2013)



What Happens to a Dead Body?

- Decomposition: The breakdown or decay of the human body
- In time, a corpse dries out and only the bones remain
- Embalming and burial in a metal airtight casket delays the process but does not prevent the body from decaying
- In time, even the bones disappear

Disposition of Dead Bodies (Less Common Ways)

- Whole body donation for medical science and education
- Space: Shooting ashes into space via rocket/ satellite
- Frozen: Cryogenics to preserve body and/ or head
- Aquatic/ Water: Burial at sea, lakes, or rivers
- Aerial: Placing body on a raised surface or trees
- Sky Burial: Placing the body on a mountain or high area

Disposition of Bodies (More Common Ways)

- Burial: In the ground in pits, graves, caves, even under flooring
- Surface Burial: Cover body with rocks or branches
- Sepulcher Burial: Placing the body in an above ground container, such as a special tomb, mausoleum, lodge, or canoe
- Cremation: Burning the body and burying or scattering the ashes

Indonesia – Where the Dead Are part of Life
(the Torajans are Christian, but Ancestor Worship Important)



Cremation

- Cremation is the use of high temperature burning to reduce the body to basic chemical compounds, minerals, and bone.
- Usually done in crematoriums. These are industrial furnaces able to generate temperatures of 1400-2500 degrees F. (Iron melts at 2800 degrees F.)
- Cremation common for thousands of years; becoming more popular today

Cremation (2)

- Today, Japan has highest rate of cremation in world
- In India and Nepal, open air cremations are common; usually done on a large pile of wood, called the pyre or funeral pyre
- Today in America, at least 25% of dispositions are cremations, with the West Coast leading the way and the deep South last in cremations
- Remains (ashes) can be disposed of in many ways: Burial in a cemetery or private grounds; they can be scattered where legal; kept at home in urns; other

A Main Cremation Site in India – 150 a Day



Cremation (3)

- Strange story of singer/songwriter Gram Parsons who died of drug overdose at age 26 in 1973 in Joshua Tree National Park, Calif., a place he loved:
- His stepfather had the body ready to ship to Louisiana (possibly for financial gain) but Gram's friends stole the body from LAX, took it to Joshua Tree and cremated it in his favorite spot
- At that time in Calif., there was no law against stealing a dead body and/or cremating it, so the friends got off with a fine
- Now, there are laws against these actions in Calif.

Cremation (4)

Photo of Gram Parsons superimposed on spot where he was cremated



Cremation (5)

- Today, in general, the following groups do not approve of cremation:
- Jews
- Muslims
- Greek Orthodox Christians
- Southern Baptists (??)
- Until the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church also disapproved of cremation and some Catholics have lingering concerns today

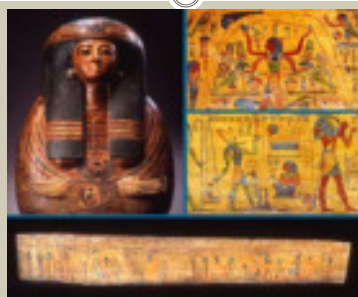
Burial

- This is still the most common method of disposition
- Burial can be in ground or above ground in a tomb, with below ground most common
- As early as 1400 B.C.E, bodies were placed in ceramic vessels and simple coffins
- The body in early days was often placed in the fetal position

Embalming

- **Most modern whole body burials use embalming**
- **Embalming is the process of preserving a corpse, typically for viewing at a funeral**
- **It has a long history, with Ancient Egypt perfecting the process with the famous mummies**
- **In some areas of the world, a natural process preserves the corpse, such as in China's western deserts and in some of South America's deserts**

Ancient Egypt



Cemeteries

- Churchyards were typically used for burial in the Middle Ages
- As they became full, large pits in public areas were dug where bodies were buried in large numbers, creating unhealthy conditions & terrible stench
- The public demand for reform led to the creation of the first modern cemetery in Paris, France
- Pere Lachaise opened in Paris in 1804. More than one million persons are buried there and it is now a popular tourist destination

Jim Morrison's Grave in Paris



Colma, California

- The City of Colma was founded by cemetery owners & some residents as a *necropolis* (City of the Dead) in 1924 to free up valuable land in San Francisco
- Under two square miles with fewer than 2000 living residents, it has 1.5 million persons buried there; 75% of the city land is cemeteries
- City motto: "It's Great to be Alive in Colma."
- Notables buried there: Wyatt Earp; Joe DiMaggio; William Randolph Hearst and many others

Ancient Traditions of Death

- Ancient Egypt was obsessed with death, believing the fate of the soul was tied to the fate of the body
- Ancient Greeks feared death and the gloomy underworld
- Ancient Celts didn't fear death and felt there was little to separate the spiritual and earthly worlds, especially in late October. This belief, plus certain rituals they did to keep ghosts at bay, have influenced our modern Halloween

Ancient Traditions of Death (2)

- Native Americans vary in their beliefs but see death as a part of the natural cycle of life; no fear of death
- Australian Aborigines do not see death as natural but as an evil intrusion by their enemies
- Chinese attitudes influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which accept death as natural

Western Attitudes towards Death in Middle Ages

- In early Middle Ages, life was short & hard. Death accepted, even welcomed. Community more important than one individual. Less mourning
- Later, individualism & family more important. Death became more significant, with angels & demons thought to battle for the soul of the dying
- Last moments became urgent: A time to justify one's life; wills, penitence, and endowments often became part of the death scene

Modern Attitudes Towards Death

- Around 1700, more focus on loss of loved ones with the development of more elaborate ceremonies
- Today, science has prolonged life and taken much of the mystery out of dying (though not death)
- Hospice movement helped de-mystify and deinstitutionalize death
- Religion is sometimes less important than before

Native American Funerals

- Native Americans practiced every type of disposition that we've discussed, from in-ground burial to water and aerial burials
- Great burial mounds can still be seen in Ohio Valley
- Construction sites sometimes dig up ancient burial grounds, which can create controversy
- Funerals rites vary according to Tribe or Nation but mourning chants common to most; embalming rare

Early American Funerals

- Knowing life was short, many planned own funerals, stockpiling lumber, called "cooling boards", for their coffins
- Church bells announced deaths, but considered poor taste to attend uninvited
- By late 1800s, formal black bordered invitations were used to announce funerals
- Women washed and wrapped the body; men built coffin and dug grave
- Wakes or viewing held in home; a festive gathering with lots of food and drink followed


Modern American Funerals

- Hallmarks : Embalmed body; cosmetic touches; open casket; last viewing; reception after
- Many variations, of course. There may be a religious component. Many include celebrations of life with photos & videos showing the life of the deceased
- Online memorials becoming more popular
- Cremations becoming more popular

Drive Through Funeral Homes

- Some funeral homes offer drive-thru viewings of the deceased; people can pay their respects without getting out of their cars; casket propped up at an angle
- Robert Adams Funeral Home in Compton, CA has been providing the service for over 40 years (Can see video on You-Tube)
- In Chicago, a funeral home has taken the idea high tech with cameras and sound system; visitors see the deceased on a TV screen; can sign e-guest book while in their car

Drive-Thru Funeral Home, Compton, CA



Green or Natural Funerals

- Refers to burials that do not embalm and, if possible, do not use a casket, allowing the body to quickly decompose in a return to nature
- Burials usually at a woodsy cemetery, with at most a flat marker to denote the grave site
- Only a few such cemeteries in USA; in CA, there is Forever Fernwood, opened in 2004 in Marin County

A Burial of Note

- Sandra West (1939-1977), a wealthy socialite and Texas oil heiress, died in Beverly Hills CA of drugs
- She specified in her will that she wanted to be buried in her 1964 Blue Ferrari with the car pointing down, and her dressed in a lacy negligee
- Her brother got \$2 million if he complied; \$10K if he did not; he was slow to comply, therefore:
- The court appointed the LA County Public Administrator to help ensure her wishes were carried out. Staff flew out to San Antonio to oversee the burial

Photo of Sandra West and Her Ferrari



African-American Funerals: Slave Era

- Slaves merged African customs & Christian practices
- Personal items were placed on graves; coins placed in casket to pay fare to underworld
- African belief that the underworld lay beneath a river may have led to practice of placing sea shells on graves in parts of South; also the sea is seen as the cradle of life and like rivers, we all return to the sea
- Funeral seen as a celebration of deceased's life and a release from a life of woe and a rare chance for a community get-together (could only hold at night).

Modern African-American Funerals

- African-Americans have traditions that draw from many cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Although varied, some modern aspects are common:
- A wake with music & hymns; often a "Homecoming" or "Going-Home", "Home-going"; celebration
- Often seen as a reunion with Jesus & deceased family
- A shared meal (repast) among the bereaved after wake & funeral
- Burials typical; fewer cremations
- Music important, often by choir or family members

New Orleans Jazz Funeral (Store Front Advertising on Left and Actual Funeral Parade)



Jewish-American Funerals

- Body treated with respect; autopsies & embalming prohibited; viewing corpse is disrespectful
- Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox practices vary
- No funerals on Saturday (Sabbath) or Holy Days
- Take place ASAP, usually within 24 hours & often entirely at graveside
- Rabbi starts service by cutting black ribbon to symbolize cutting ties to loved ones and life
- Flowers usually not appropriate; charitable donations in lieu of are OK
- First anniversary marked by unveiling of tombstone in a special ceremony

Mexican/Mexican American Funerals

- Mexican culture embraces death as a part of life, combining Indian and Catholic beliefs
- In Mexico, embalming is rare and burials quick after a wake, often done with a prayer service
- In USA, embalming more common, allowing more time between the viewing/ prayer service & burial
- Typically, there is a viewing with a rosary at night, a funeral mass (Requiem) the next morning and burial later that day, sometimes with a Mariachi band at graveside

Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos)



Muslim/Muslim American Funerals

- Death is an act of God; accepted & not questioned
- No cremation or embalming; burial within 24 hours
- Body washed & wrapped in white shroud; men wash men; women wash women
- Body is carried to Mosque by male relatives where Iman presides with religious readings
- Women may attend funeral service but not graveside
- Overall, service is quick, simple, & subdued; flowers may or may not be appropriate; ask family

Asian/Asian American Funerals

- Asian funerals are known for their length, beauty, intricacy, and unwavering displays of respect
- In East Asian cultures, the living look to their ancestors for help & guidance. Their funerals reflect this respect; filial piety important
- Confucianism is moral foundation for social behavior. It is largely a secular philosophy with influences of Buddhism & Taoism; propriety & protocol important; especially influential in China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam
- In USA, many traditions simplified & assimilated

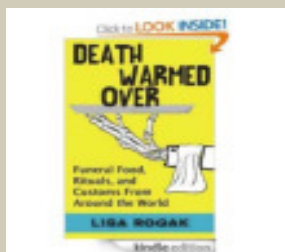
East Indian/Hindu Funerals

- At death, mantra is chanted, Holy Ganges water or milk dripped into mouth; Holy ash put on forehead
- Cremation done ASAP; usually within 72 hours
- In India, cremation done on pyre; crematorium USA
- White is color of mourning
- In USA, ashes typically disposed of in ocean as it's impractical to travel to the Ganges River
- Memorial ceremony on 12th day after death is important gathering of family

Funerals and Food

- The practice of feasting after a funeral is as old as funerals themselves; dating to at least ancient Egypt & Rome
- The meal is both cathartic and comforting
- Translation of Jewish custom: "Meal of Consolation" prepared for mourners by their community, summarizes the general reason for these gatherings
- Different groups and geographic areas have their own comfort foods

Funerals and Food (2)



Funerals and Music

- Music at funerals is common to most cultures; in some, seen as a way to ward off evil spirits
- Can be a chant by a Buddhist monk or bagpipes or a choir or recorded CD of pop music
- Music once somber; now often upbeat, reflecting tastes of deceased & celebration of life theme
- Music usually accompanies the commemorative video common at many of today's services
- Many CDs or streaming collections available online for the service; just type "funeral music"

Funerals and Flowers

- Flowers have been part of burial customs since prehistoric times, probably to mask smell of decay
- They now symbolize the life cycle and temporary beauty of life; universal expression of sympathy
- Generally used in all cultures, except some Jewish and Muslim traditions
- In some cultures, certain flowers have special meaning; white is color of funeral flowers used in many cultures

Famous Last Words

- Beethoven, who was deaf (d. 1827): "I shall hear in heaven!"
- George B. Shaw: (d. 1950) " Well, it will be a new experience anyway."
- Queen Victoria (d.1901) whose beloved husband died 40 years earlier: "Oh, that peace may come, Bertie!"
- Voltaire (d. 1778) as the lamp by his bed flickered: "What? The flames already?"
- Steve Jobs (d. 2011) "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

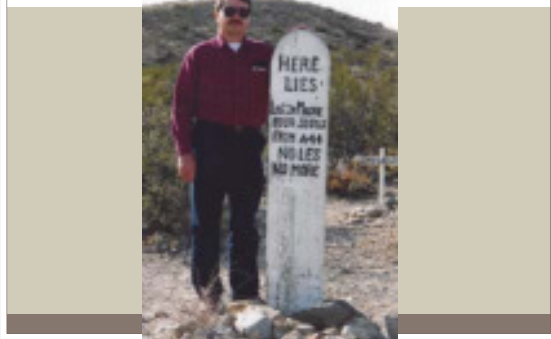
Famous Epitaph



Etched in Stone: Interesting Epitaphs

- "Poorly lived/and Poorly Died/Poorly Buried/and No One Cried" (Massachusetts)
- "Since I was So Soon Done For/I Wonder What I Was Begun For" (Connecticut)
- "Here Lies My Wife, a Sad Slattern and Shrew/ If I Said I Regretted Her, I should Lie Too" (England)
- "She Lived With Her Husband Fifty Years/ And Died in the Confident Hope of a Better Life" (Vermont)

Boot Hill, Tombstone, Arizona
(Chris Fierro in 1990s next to famous epitaph from 1800s)



Time Expired



Resources

- Books: Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial by Penny Colman; R.I.P.: The Complete Book Of Death and Dying by Constance Jones
- Many websites: Wikipedia; Funeralwise.com; and several sites devoted to particular cultures or religions; jernsfuneralchapel.net/ethnic is a good single source for comprehensive ethnic overview
- Many ceremonies and practices are shown as photos and videos on the internet
