

DEATH: LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY



FIE
MUSEUM
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DEATH: LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY

Exhibition Details

Size: 7,500 ft² (700 m²)

Ceiling Height: 12 ft (3.66 m)

Tour: Fall 2023 – Spring 2028

Curators:

Gary Feinman, Ph.D.

MacArthur Curator of Mesoamerican,
Central American, and East Asian
Anthropology, Field Museum

Ryan Williams, Ph.D.

Associate Curator, Department of
Anthropology, Field Museum



Features

- 100 objects and specimens from Anthropology, Zoology, Geology, and Botany collections
- 5 replications, including reconstructions of ancient burials and a whale fall diorama
- 7 media and digital interactive elements
- Exhibition does *not* contain human remains

Contact Information:

travelingexh@fieldmuseum.org



Cultural and biological perspectives hold possible answers to big questions about death and life.

DEATH IS ONLY
THE BEGINNING
LA MUERTE ES
SOLO EL PRINCIPIO

Life goes on after death, and could not without it.

Death affects everyone and everything around us—we will all eventually die. But the way we deal with that fact is deeply personal.

This exhibition explores the big questions we all have about death—and the many answers offered by individuals, communities, and ecosystems around the world.

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EXHIBITION SUMMARY

Consider your own “big questions” about death as you explore natural and cultural responses to life’s inevitable conclusion.

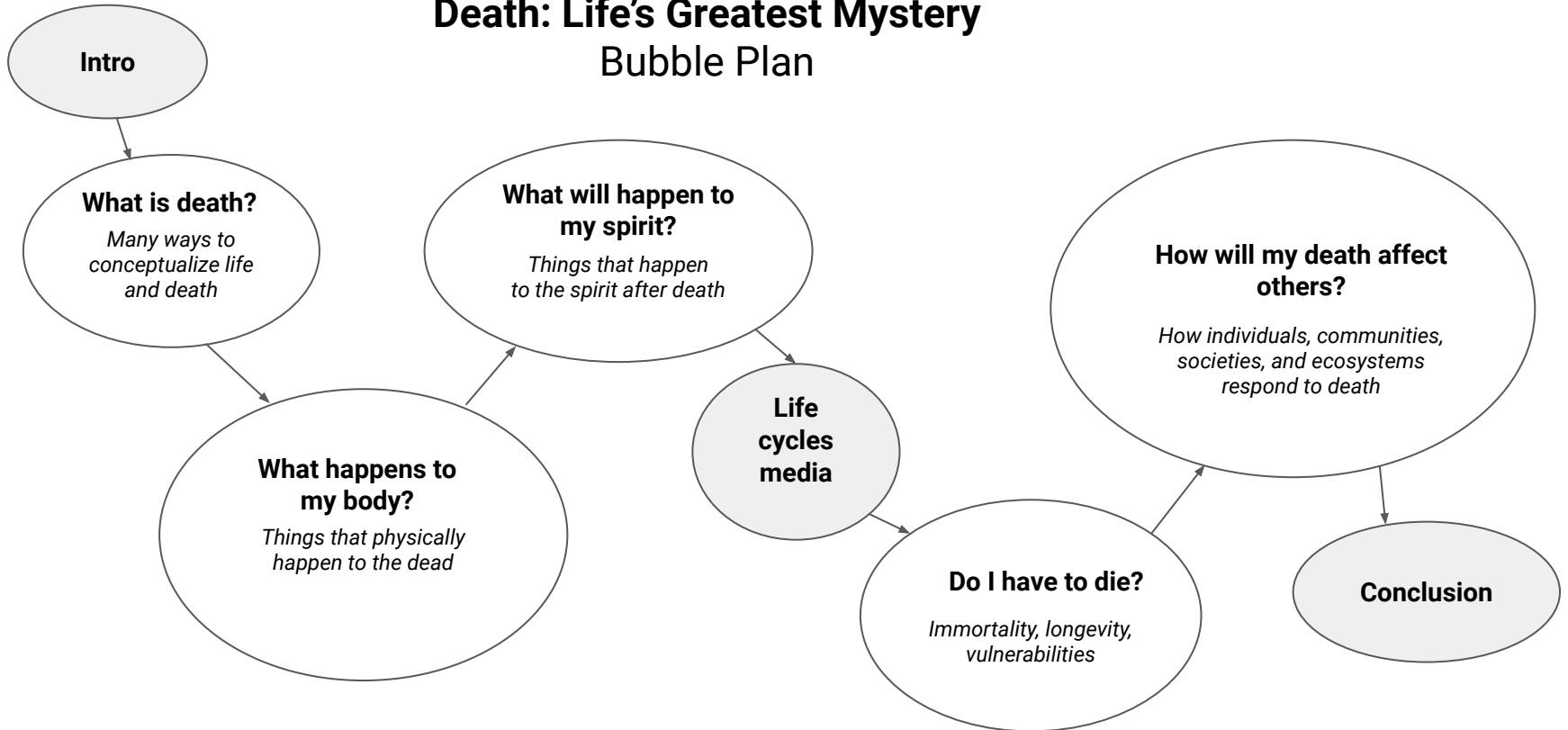
Exhibition Summary

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Through artifacts, specimens, and immersive media experiences, learn how life and death are part of a universal, continuous, and cyclical process. Experience connections between life, death, growth, and decay in an immersive, ever-changing multimedia experience at the heart of the exhibition. See how life goes on after death—and could not without it.

Death: Life's Greatest Mystery

Bubble Plan



Visitor Goals

Sensory/Motor

Visitors will

- Encounter stories organized around the big questions about death we all face
- Feel a sense of harmony and quietude as they visit affective-learning spaces that center and calm visitors between galleries
- Investigate objects from multiple perspectives
- Explore immersive, multi-sensory experiences such as ancient burials, celebrations of ancestors, or the body of a whale on the seafloor
- Be invited to discuss and reflect on death with facilitators or with their visiting group

Affective

Visitors will feel

- Like this is a safe and comfortable space for engaging with difficult or taboo subjects
- That the tone of the exhibition is respectful, but positive, with moments of humor

Cognitive

Visitors will know/learn

- Death is not finite: the matter and meaning of dead individuals carries on after death
- Since everything and everyone eventually dies, dealing with death is universal
- Life, death, growth, and decay are cyclically connected
- Death disrupts social networks, and people meet this challenge with rituals, customs, and traditions that help cope with loss
- It is important to acknowledge and plan for death

Before I die...

Before I die I want to Go to Antarctica

Before I die I want to BE GREAT

Before I die I want to find my dream job

Before I die I want to TRAVEL THE WORLD

Before I die I want to inspire the lives of many

Before I die I want to learn how to speak

I want to be German

show my love
thru words
and actions

Play guitar

LIVE A LONG HAPPY LIFE

FALL IN LOVE

Before I die I want to get married and have a great family

Before I die I want to BE AN IRISHMAN

Before I die I want to MAKE A SKI JUMP

Before I die I want to LOVE WITH NO REGRETS OR ABANDON

Before I die I want to Make A difference

Before I die I want to MEET BRITNEY SPEARS

Before I die I want to SEE THE CUBS WIN A WORLD SERIES!!

Before I die I want to SEE MY KIDS HELP OTHERS IN THE WORLD

Before I die I want to MEET MY NEIGHBORS

Before I die I want to LIVE!

Before I die I want to TRAVEL THE WORLD!

Before I die I want to PLUCK

Before I die I want to BE A BOSS

Before I die I want to BE A DOCTOR

Before I die I want to BE A CYBORG, SO I WON'T DIE

Before I die I want to BE A DOCTOR

Before I die I want to BE A DOCTOR

Before I die I want to BE A DOCTOR

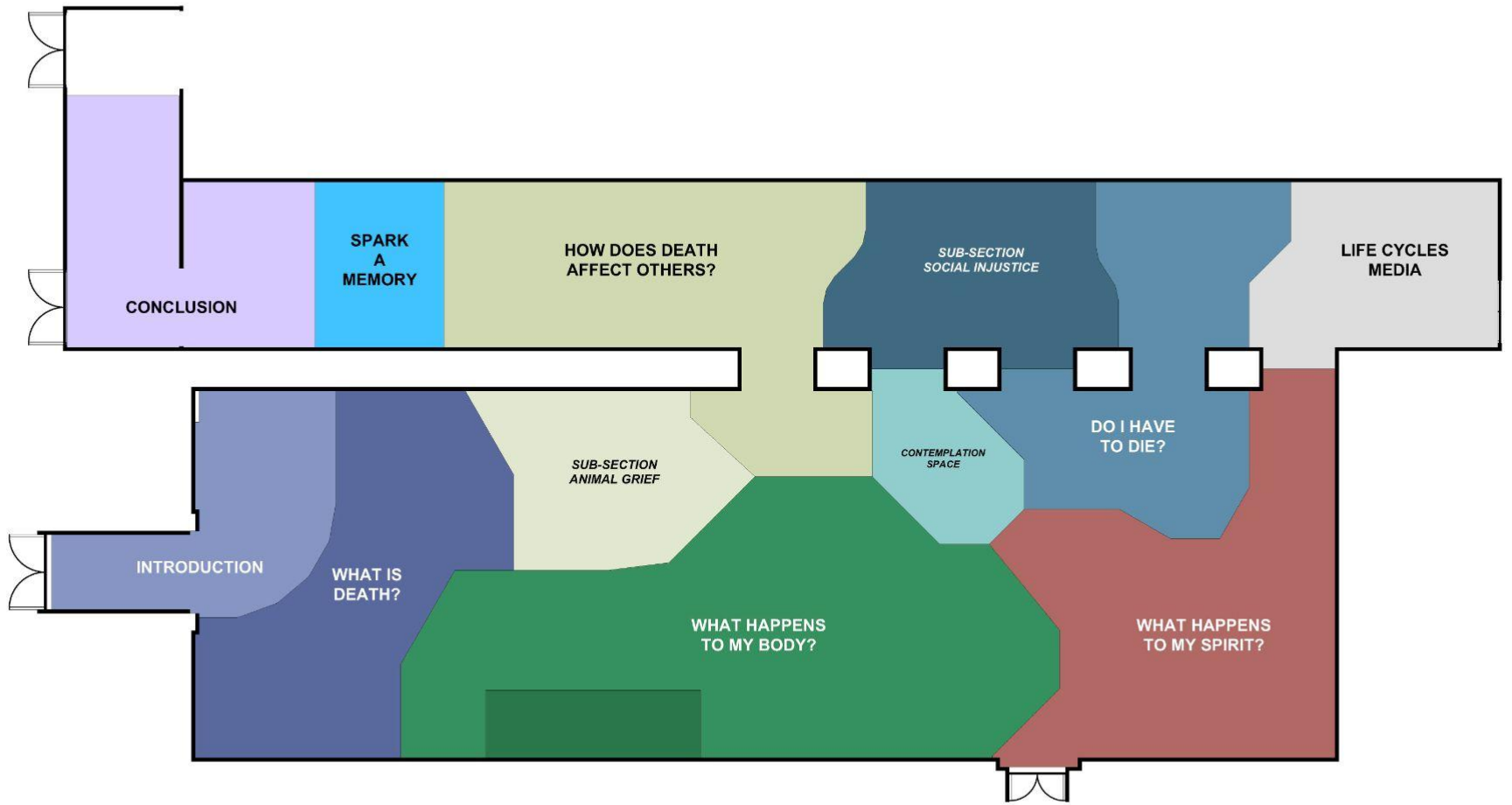
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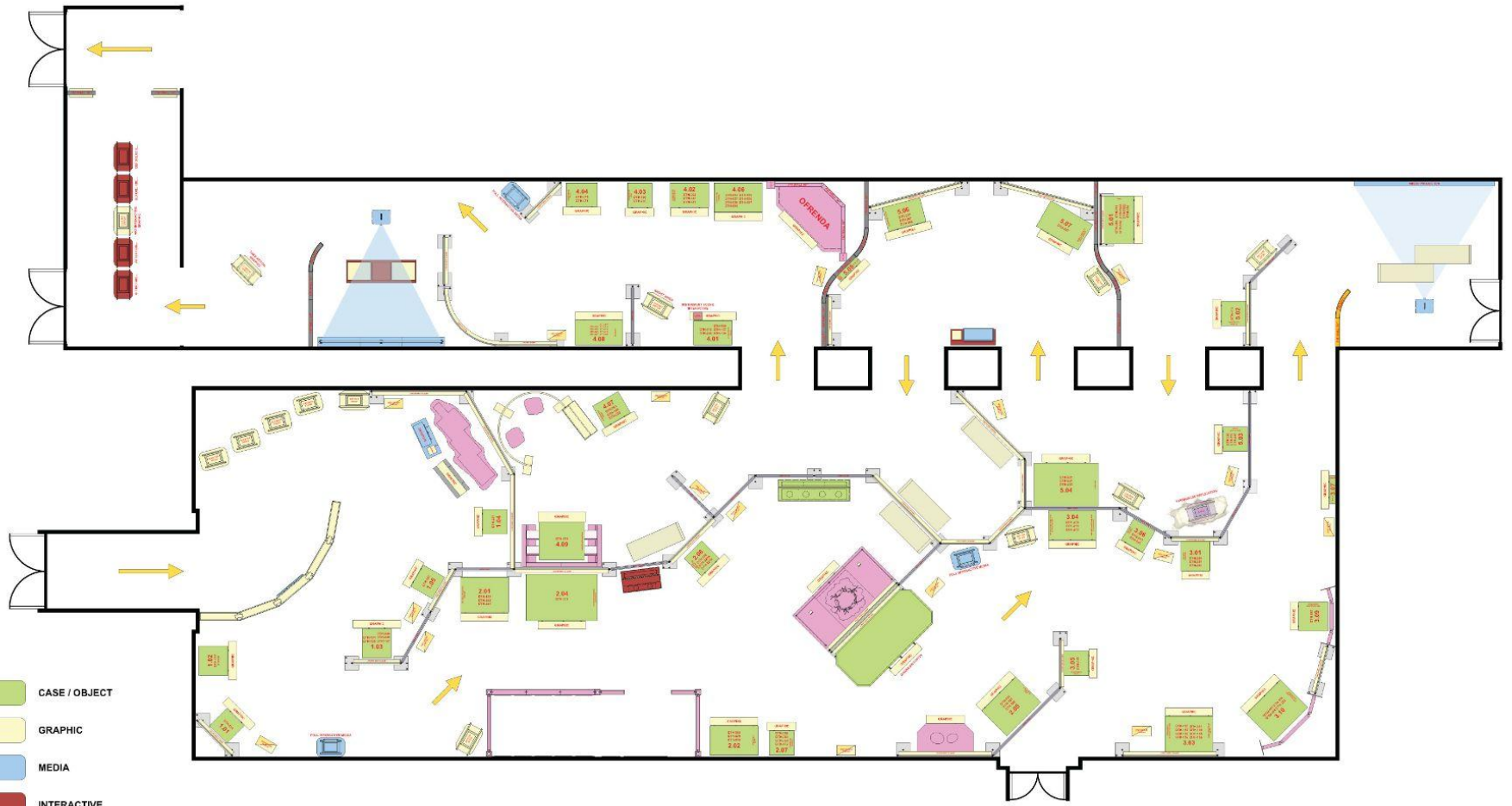
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- CASE / OBJECT
- GRAPHIC
- MEDIA
- INTERACTIVE
- REPLICATION

Introduction



DEATH IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

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WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY BODY?
WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY BODY?

WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY SELF?
WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY SELF?

WHAT IF I DON'T
WANT TO DIE?
WHAT IF I DON'T
WANT TO DIE?

HOW WILL MY DEATH
AFFECT OTHERS?
HOW WILL MY DEATH
AFFECT OTHERS?

WHAT IS DEATH? WHAT IS DEATH?

Physical transformation and preservation

Very short bodies of
text describing the
process of death and
what happens to the
body after death.

Physical



What is death?

WHAT IS DEATH?

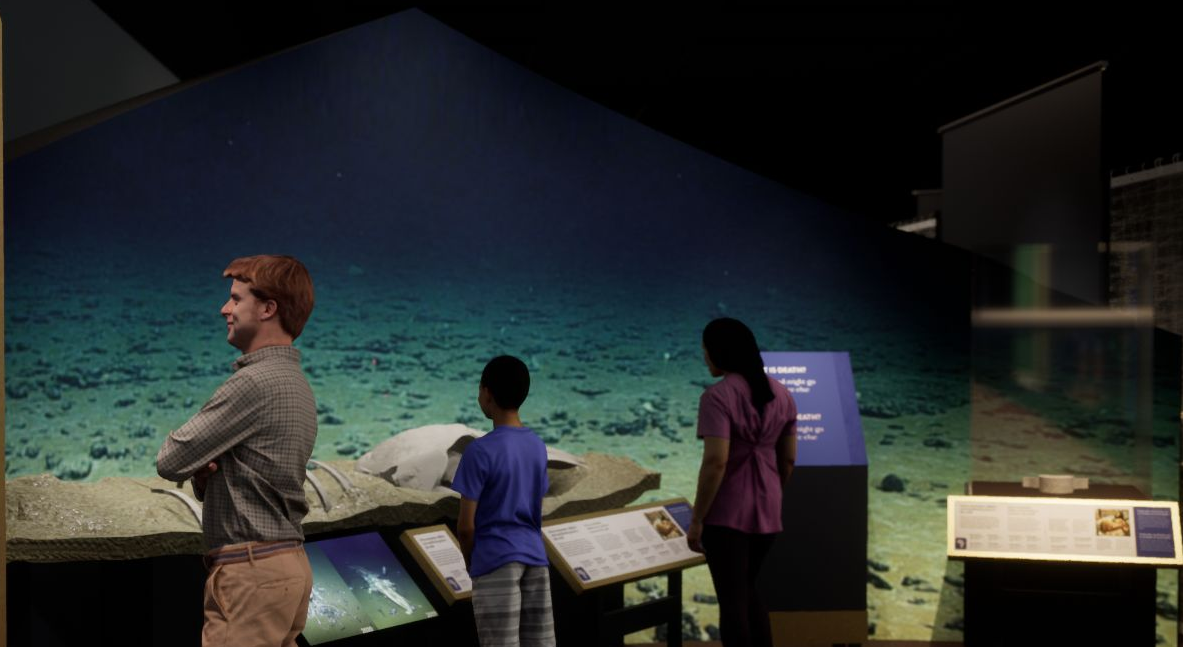
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Physical transformation and preservation

Many dead bodies are transformed—by man-made processes, like cremation, or natural ones, like decomposition (you can see this in the watercolors up ahead). Or, many humans stop this transformation through mummification, embalming, or other preservation methods. And whether preserved or transformed, bodies' final resting places—fossil beds, elaborate coffins, or even diamonds—are as diverse as we are.

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1870-1900
Technology
and
Science

1870-1900
Technology
and
Science

An interactive digital display showing a diagram of human anatomy, possibly related to the respiratory or circulatory system, with various colored sections and labels.



1870-1900
Technology
and
Science



1870-1900
Technology
and
Science



WHAT IS DEATH?
WHAT IS DEATH?



If a flatworm is cut in half and both parts become new worms, did it ever die? If a person's brain stops functioning but their other organs are still working, are they dead? Challenge what you "know" about death.

WHAT IS DEATH?

What is death?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Biological deaths

- Whale fall experience
- Immersive diorama
- Real whale bone from the deep sea
- Video from a ROV visiting a whale fall

Social deaths

- Goat skull shrine prop
- Capacocha figures
- Miniature ceramic vessels

Spiritual deaths

- Adam and Eve blouse panel
- Reclining Buddha

Poll interactive: Death can be many things



What will happen to my body?



Informational text panel with a small image of a dog's head.



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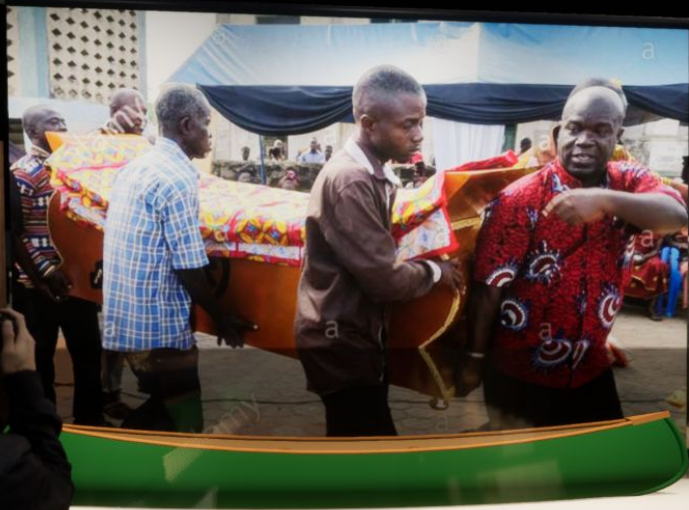
Physical fitness and
protection

Most people are not
in good enough shape
to enjoy the activities
they want to do. It's
important to take
time to exercise and
protect your body.



WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY BODY?
My soul might go
somewhere else

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**WHAT WILL HAPPEN
TO MY BODY?**

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WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY?

Investigate the natural processes and human interventions that transform bodies after death. See a fossil slab that reveals how remains can be preserved over millions of years. Consider a recreated Chancay burial chamber from ancient Peru, and discover the wide range of treatments people today choose for their remains, from green burials to gemstones made from cremains.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY?

What will happen to my body?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Undergo a natural process

Decompose

- Kusozu watercolors (x10)
- Decomposition smell interactive

Reuse

- Black-backed jackal
- American giant millipede
- Stony coral

Fossilize

- *Leptomeryx* bone bed





WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY?

What will happen to my body?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Be transformed

- Cremated chickens
- Green burial display
- Chevra kadisha heirlooms
- Cremains gemstone

Be physically preserved

- Chancay burial reproduction
- Cuchimilco figure
- Canopic jars and animal mummies
- Contemporary embalming tools

Have a resting place

- Ghanaian canoe-shaped coffin

Poll interactive: How do you want to be laid to rest?

What will happen to my spirit?

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY SELF?

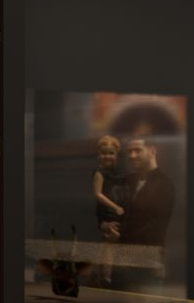
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Text panel with a red header and white text, likely providing information about the exhibit.

Text panel with a white header and black text, likely providing information about the exhibit.





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Adobe Stock



What happens to the spirit after death? Questions about the afterlife have been explored by nearly every culture and religion. View depictions of ghosts and spirits from around the world, inspect miniature objects and figures that were meant for use in the afterlife, and experience a colorful and intricate presentation of a Chinese drama, “Courts of Hell.”

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY SPIRIT?

What will happen to my spirit?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Remain on Earth

- Yurei ghost scroll

Go somewhere else


- Stone girdle
- Egyptian Book of the Dead
- Mummiform shabtis
- Egyptian model house
- "Courts of Hell" masks and figures

Enliven something else

- Statues of Hindu gods
- Haitian ritual flags
- Moche pottery



Do I have to die?



EVERYWHERE BEARS

They're big. They're tough. And they're closer to you than you might think!

As a bear has had been, but with that big brown body, they have a lot of power. They're not just big, they're tough. They're close to you than you might think!

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EXTRACT LIVING



WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO DIE?

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Information

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Do you want to live forever? Learn how people in China and ancient Greece have thought about immortality, and witness how animals prolong their lifespans with wild adaptations—like a lungfish entering suspended animation or a tokay gecko regrowing its tail. An interactive map reveals the inequalities of our society, and that where you live is often the best indicator of how long you'll live.

DO I HAVE TO DIE?

Do I have to die?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Concepts of immortality

- Mars and Venus basin reproduction
- Lingzhi fungus and tray
- Rhino horn cup
- Daoist immortal figure

You should try to be more like animals

- Howler monkey
- Virginia opossum
- Alligator snapping turtle
- Termite queen and workers
- Mayflies
- Giant tardigrade replication
- Starfish, lizard, and lungfish specimens



DO I HAVE TO DIE?

Death is not equal

SECTION ELEMENTS

COVID-19

- Essential workers banner

Violence

- Whip
- Birmingham shotgun shell

Maternal/infant mortality

- Black Mamas Matter onesie

Lifespan interactive



How will my death affect others?

HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?

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Death—and memories of the dead—shape the lives of the living. Encounter the surprising variety of animals that grieve, including elephants and gorillas. Examine a replication of one of the earliest deliberate human burials, and understand how rituals help people cope with loss, individually and collectively. Take in the sights and sounds of a typical Day of the Dead celebration to welcome the return of those who have died, inviting loved ones back into the world of the living.

HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?

How will my death affect others?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Is grief human?

- Cicada killer
- American burying beetle
- *Thrinaxodon* and *Broomistega* fossil burrow cast
- Animal grief atmospheric photos
- Magdalenian woman replication



HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?

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SECTION ELEMENTS

How people respond at different scales

- *Ofrenda* recreation
- Day of the Dead figures
- Oaxacan incense burner and effigy figure
- Colima dog
- Nazca and Wari musical instruments
- Moche drummer figure
- Haida mortuary and memorial poles
- Ibeji figures

How people respond at different scales

- Hopewell artifacts
- Memorial architecture photos

Spark a Memory interactive



**Many of us carry
memories of loved
ones who have passed.**

**Place your hand here to
spark a memory.**

The sound of their laugh
Their special recipe
The color of their eyes
The smell of their hair
Their favorite chair in the living room
The ring they always wore
The walks you used to take together
Their place at the dinner table
That signature dance move
The story they told over and over
The dream they shared

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Conclusion

BEFORE I DIE

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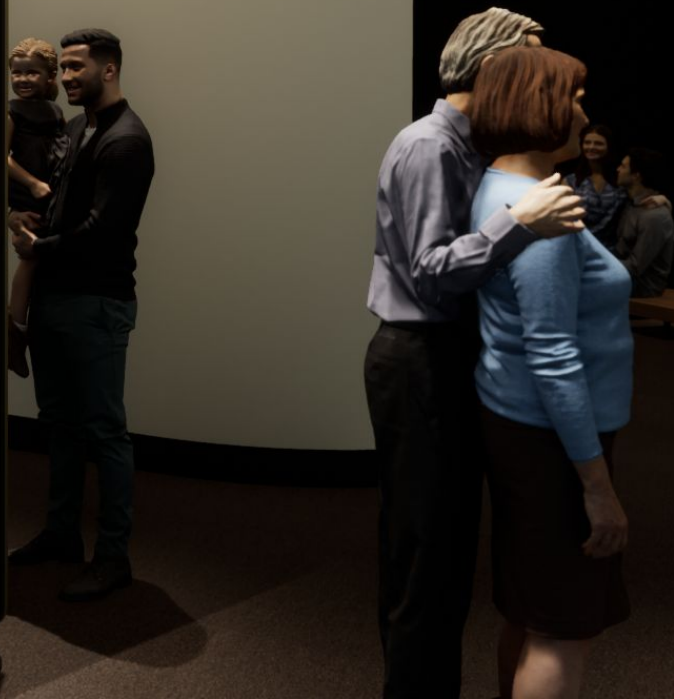
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CONCLUSION

Conclusion

SECTION ELEMENTS

How to prepare for your death

- Prepare an Advance Directive
- Create a Life File
- Consider organ or body donation
- *Before I Die* participatory art
- *After I Die* participatory art



DEATH: LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY

This exhibition was organized by the Field Museum.

Lead support is generously provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Field Museum – Traveling Exhibitions

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