DEATH: LIFE’S GREATEST MYSTERY
Exhibition Details

Size: 7,500 ft² (700 m²)

Ceiling Height: 12 ft (3.66 m)

Tour: Fall 2023 – Fall 2028

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

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Field Museum
DEATH: LIFE’S GREATEST MYSTERY

Features

• 100 objects and specimens from Anthropology, Zoology, Geology, and Botany collections
• 5 replications, including reconstructions of a whale fall diorama and ancient burials
• 6 digital and sensory interactive elements
• Exhibition does not contain human remains
Cultural and biological perspectives hold possible answers to big questions about death and life.
Consider your own “big questions” about death as you explore natural and cultural responses to life’s inevitable conclusion.
Exhibition Summary
Through artifacts, specimens, interactives, and immersive media experiences, discover amazing animal adaptations for survival and learn how various cultures commemorate life. Reflect on death as part of the cycle of life, and leave with a profound new understanding of life’s most universal experience.
Death: Life’s Greatest Mystery

Intro

What is death?
Many ways to conceptualize life and death

What will happen to my body?
Things that physically happen to the dead

What will happen to my spirit?
Things that happen to the spirit after death

Life cycles media

Do I have to die?
Immortality, longevity, vulnerabilities

How will my death affect others?
How individuals, communities, societies, and ecosystems respond to death

Conclusion
Visitor Goals
**EXHIBITION SUMMARY**

**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 I want to

Make a difference

Before I die I want to

Eat an entire pie

eat the world cuisine.

Before I die I want to

TRAVEL THE WHOLE WORLD

Before I die I want to

COMPLETE MY BUCKETLISTS.

Before I die I want to

change someone's life for the better
Introduction
What will happen to my body?
¿Qué le pasará a mi cuerpo?

What will happen to my spirit?
¿Qué le pasará a mi espíritu?

Do I have to die?
¿Tengo que morir?

How will my death affect others?
¿Cómo afectará mi muerte a los demás?

What is death?
¿Qué es la muerte?
What is death?
"I go to seek a Great Perhaps."
- François Rabelais

"To die will be an awfully big adventure."
- L.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"Morir será la mas grande de todas las aventuras."
- L.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"Death is only the beginning."
- L.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"La muerte es apenas el comienzo."
- L.M. Barrie, Peter Pan
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?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Biological deaths
- Whale fall replica
- 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: Dead or Alive?
What will happen to my body?
What do dead bodies smell like?
¿A qué huele los cadáveres?

Decaying human bodies give off a unique set of scents, caused when bacteria—which usually occupy our skin, gut, and even the air around us—begin breaking down tissues.

Los cuerpos en descomposición despiden distintos olores que se originan cuando las bacterias—que viven en la piel, los intestinos y el aire—empiezan a descomponer el tejido muerto.

Please smell... if you're sure you want to.
Huele... solo si estás seguro.
ALL ABOUT CREMATION, AS TOLD BY CHICKENS
TODO SOBRE LA CREMACIÓN, SEGÚN LOS POLLOS

Cremation
This is a choice after traditional cremation, a process of high temperatures, condensates on metal trays or containers, a PhD in mortuary science, or a procedure where the body is broken down into smaller pieces. It's the least expensive method but doesn't allow you to have a services that are personalized.

Alkaline Hydrolysis
This is a choice after alkaline hydrolysis, a method of decomposing the body into smaller pieces. It's a method that was developed in the 1940s in the US and is currently used in the UK. It's a more environmentally friendly method, but it's not as popular as traditional methods.

Promession
This is an alternative to traditional cremation, a method of decomposing the body into smaller pieces. It's a method that was developed in the 1990s in the UK and is currently used in the US. It's a more environmentally friendly method, but it's not as popular as traditional methods.

Cremains Diamond
This is a choice after cremation, a method of decomposing the body into smaller pieces. It's a method that was developed in the 2000s in the UK and is currently used in the US. It's a more environmentally friendly method, but it's not as popular as traditional methods.
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?

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?

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?
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, “The Courts of Hell.”
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?
No one really knows why they are alive until they know what they’d die for.

-Nicolaas Tesla

Ado I have to die?

Throughout time, both humans and animals have had impressive strategies for lengthening their lifespans. But, sooner or later, we all reach the end of our time on Earth. For most animals, lifespan is a product of evolution or immediate circumstances—but for humans, when we die is much more to do with whose lives our society values most.

Desde tiempos antiguos, tanto los humanos como los animales han desarrollado estrategias impresionantes para alargar su tiempo de vida. Pero, de todas formas, todos llegamos al fin de nuestro tiempo en la Tierra. Para la mayoría de las especies, su tiempo de vida es producto de la evolución o circunstancias inmediatas, pero para los humanos, cuándo morimos es mucho más una cuestión de cómo han valorado nuestras vidas la sociedad.
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.
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
How will my death affect others?
HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?
¿CÓMO VA A AFECTAR MI MUERTE A LOS DEMÁS?

When we die, we live on in the memories of people who have known us. A death can challenge or disrupt relationships, but it can also bring people together. It's a process, a reminder, of the fragility of life, the end of our time on Earth, and how it influences the lives of individuals, communities, and sometimes entire societies.

Cuando muermos, vivimos en los recuerdos de las personas que nos conocen. Una muerte puede desafiar o alterar relaciones, pero también puede traer juntos a las personas. Es un proceso, un recordatorio, de la fragilidad de la vida, el fin de nuestro tiempo en la Tierra, y cómo influye en la vida de las personas, las comunidades, y a veces, en toda la sociedad.
Death—and memories of the dead—shape the lives of the living. Meet the surprising variety of animals that grieve. Examine a replication of one of the earliest deliberate human burials, and understand how rituals help people cope with loss, individually and collectively. Encounter a Day of the Dead ofrenda, where loved ones are welcomed back into the world of the living. “Spark a Memory” of a loved one who has passed and share what you would like to do before you die...or after.
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?

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

HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?
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
Before I Die...

- Wave at children
- Get a pet dog
- Live forever
- Make sure my (hearts) getugs
- Write a book
- Run a marathon
- Learn how to drive
- Learn Korean
- Visit my (grand)parents
- Live with purpose
- Build a family
- Learn how to code
- Be a famous person
- Save the world
- Die peacefully
- Love!
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