

Death: Life's Greatest Mystery



Exhibition Overview

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

For many living beings on this planet, death is the greatest mystery of them all. The ways we experience it, celebrate life, and wonder about what’s next are part of what makes us human—yet the subject of death is often pushed aside. 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.



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 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 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.”



Do I have to die?

Do you want to live forever? Learn how people in China and Ancient Rome have thought about immortality, and witness how animals prolong their lifespans with wild adaptations—like a lungfish entering suspended animation or a gecko regrowing its tail. Come face-to-face with nature’s most incredible survivor, the tardigrade—at 4,000 times actual size.



How will my death affect others?

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.

Exhibition Specifications

Size

7,500 ft2 (700 m2)

Ceiling height

12 ft (3.66 m)

Security

Exhibition requires a limited-access, lockable space with security staff during public hours

Shipping

One-way, inbound, paid by host venue

Languages

All text in English and Spanish; language may be converted by host venues

Rental fee

Please inquire

Features

- 100 objects and specimens from the Field Museum's Anthropology, Zoology, and Geology collections
- 5 replications, including reconstructions of a whale fall diorama and ancient burials
- 6 media and digital interactive elements
- Projectors, speakers, electronics, cabling, and AV technical support
- Companion book available for sale: *Beyond Death: Beliefs, Practice, and Material Expression* (paperback, 160 pages, 66 images)
- Exhibition does not contain human remains

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