DEATH: LIFE’S MYSTERY
(WORKING TITLE)
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

• 100-150 objects and specimens from the Field Museum’s Anthropology, Zoology, Geology, and Botany collections

• 5-6 replications, including reconstructions of ancient burials and a whale fall diorama

• 9 media and digital interactive elements, including a large nexus experience

• Exhibition does not contain human remains

Contact Information:
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Cultural and biological perspectives hold possible answers to big questions about death and life.
Exhibition Summary
Consider your own “big questions” about death as you explore natural and cultural responses to life’s inevitable conclusion.
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 and death, growth and decay in the nexus: an ever-changing multimedia installation at the heart of the exhibition used to choose your path of exploration. See how life goes on after death—and could not without it.
So you’re dead. Now what?

Things that physically happen to the dead

Ways to avoid death

Defining life and death, reasons for death

What is death?

What will happen to my body?

What if I don’t want to die?

What will happen to me?

How will my death affect others?

How individuals, communities, societies, and ecosystems respond to death

Interpretation space

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What will happen to the “soul” after death.

Exhibition Summary
Visitor Goals
### VISITOR GOALS

#### Sensory/Motor
**Visitors will**
- Choose how to navigate the exhibition based on their own “big questions” about death
- Repeatedly return to a central, changing multimedia experience that orients and focuses their journey
- Explore immersive, multi-sensory experiences such as ancient burials, celebrations of ancestors, or the body of a whale on the seafloor
- Investigate objects from multiple perspectives
- 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...
Experience Map

- What will happen to my body?
- What is death?
- What will happen to my "self"?
- What if I don't want to die?
- How will my death affect others?
- Introduction + Tunnel
- Nexus
- Conclusion
DEATH: LIFE'S MYSTERY (WORKING TITLE)
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?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Biological deaths
• Near death experience artwork
• Human hairs

Social deaths
• Goat skull shrine prop
• Capacocha figures
• Miniature ceramic vessels

Spiritual deaths
• Adam and Eve blouse panel
• Reclining Buddha

“Dead or alive?” interactive
What if I don’t want to die?
Do you want to live forever? Learn how people in China, Haiti, 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 tiger salamander 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.
What if I don’t want to die?

SECTION ELEMENTS

You sure about that?
- Vodou object
- Venus/Mars basin

Here are a few things you can try
- Lingzhi tray
- Rhino horn cup
- Daoist immortal figure

Animals are better at not dying than humans
- Starfish, lizard, and lungfish specimens
- Comparative lifespan media
What if I don’t want to die? (continued)

SECTION ELEMENTS

Animals are better at not dying than humans (continued)
- Giant tardigrade replication
- Atlantic quahog, white oak, Greenland shark specimens

Due to structural inequality, some people are more likely to die than others, and it isn’t fair
- COVID mask and pandemic objects
- Rest In Peace t-shirt and BLM shirt
- Life expectancy factors interactive
What will happen to my body?
WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY?

Investigate the natural processes and human interventions that transform bodies after death. See animated projections on a fossil slab that reveal 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 mushroom “death suits” to gemstones made from cremains.
What will happen to my body?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Natural Processes
• Kusozu watercolors (x10)
• Putrescine/cadaverine smell interactive
• Pelican skull
• Drum fish
• Corals
• Pyritized ammonite
• *Leptomeryx* bone bed and projection show
What will happen to my body? (continued)

SECTION ELEMENTS

Interventions
• Cuchimilco figure
• Chancay burial diorama
• Canopic jars
• Animal mummies
• Taxidermy specimens
• Embalming tools
• Cremated chickens
• Mushroom death suit prop
• “Would you rather” interactive
• Ghanaian fantasy coffin prop
• Cremains gemstone
What will happen to my “self”? 
What happens to the “soul” 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 media presentation of a Chinese drama, “The 10 Courts of Hell.”
What will happen to my “self”?

SECTION ELEMENTS

You will go somewhere else
- Stone yoke
- Coptic textile
- Egyptian Book of the Dead
- Egyptian soul house
- Egyptian *Ushabtis*
- Buddhist figures
- Chinese model stove
- Chinese tomb guardian
- Chinese masks
- “Courts of Hell” media
What will happen to my “self”? (continued)

SECTION ELEMENTS

Your spirit hangs out on Earth with no body
- Yurei ghost art
- West African diviner’s implements
- EMF sensor

Your life force becomes and enlivens something else
- Moche pottery
- Hindu representation of reincarnation objects
- Ruatapupuke interactive
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, sounds, and smells of a typical Day of the Dead celebration, and explore a diorama of a whale fall—an ecosystem of unique creatures that forms around the body of a whale on the seafloor.
How will my death affect others?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Natural Processes
- Cicada killer
- Burying beetle
- *Thrinaxodon* and *Broomistega* fossil cast
- Animal grief large atmospheric photos
- Magdalenian woman replication
- Argentine urn
- Haida memorial pole
- Ibeji figures
- Funeral smells interactive
- “How do you want to be memorialized?” Poll interactive
How will my death affect others? (continued)

SECTION ELEMENTS
Communities and societies
• Day of the Dead figures
• Colima dog
• Ofrenda recreation
• Nazca instruments
• Wari ceramic trumpet replica
• Moche drummer
• Instrument sounds interactive
• Papua New Guinea masks
• “Light a candle/leave a memory” interactive
• Hopewell artifacts
• Whale fall scavengers diorama