Funeral Customs

“What man shall live and not see death?” Psalms 89:49

Death, though an inevitability in the lives of everyone born, is a taboo topic for most. Phrases like ‘passed on,’ or ‘gave up the ghost’ are used to delicately indicate the state of non-corporeality that everyone will eventually experience.

Those who are left behind by death must learn to move on from the loss. During such times, cultural traditions and religious practices become more important than ever, leading those who may avoid any sort of religious or highly illogical cultural practice to return to childhood beliefs just for a day. (FA 01 582)

Superstitions are a form of cultural tradition that brings comfort in the unknown. Control over natural death is impossible. Without turning to murder or euthanasia, a feeling of control over situations that are greater than any one person can only be obtained by superstitious practices. Superstitions can be applied to staving off death, like in Columbia, where babies’ fingernails are never cut before the first birthday to protect the infant from early death. (FA 01 635) They can be used to ensure entrance into a chosen afterlife, like in Kentucky where bodies are buried facing west to prepare for the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of men. (FA 01 5)

How death and burial are ritualized is very different for each creed and culture. While sadness is nearly universal, methods of disposing of body vary from burial to cremation to ritualistic scattering of body parts for scavenging birds. Mourning may last for a week or a few years, and may include many or few participants. (FA 01 5)

A funeral may be intended to bring comfort to the living or ensure a place in the afterlife for the deceased. Often, the most heinous of criminals are denied their proper burial rites. The significance of this is that their crime is so bad, that not only must they be punished in life, but they are denied entrance to the afterlife as well. Perhaps this is the worst thing that a society can think of to do to those who misbehave. Either way, every person who dies must be carefully considered and dealt with in a culturally appropriate way.

Death and Burial Lore; Collected From East Texas and Western Louisiana (FA 01 5)

Early twentieth century Texans were not as concerned about death as their twenty-first century counterparts sometimes are. They didn’t have things like funeral homes, and few of the dying were rushed to the hospital. Instead, people died quietly in their own homes, and then neighbor women
came over to wash and dress the body while the men assembled a coffin. Bodies were buried the same day to prevent any odor from besmirching the memory of the dead.

The amount of ceremony accompanying the actual burial depended on the wealth or popularity of the deceased, ranging from the unceremoniously buried to those who had a tent over the grave and eulogies and sermons spoken over them. Good people were buried in pine wood, if it was available. Bad people were buried in chinguapin wood, a kind that crackles and pops when burned. Most were also buried with their heads facing west so that when they rose they were facing east and the second coming. A few people were buried north/south facing if they were cross-ways to people all their lives.

Though their actual burial practices were practical, superstition still existed. Dreaming of marriage was considered to be a sign of impending doom, as well as unexplained ringing of the ears. Many farmers believed that if a rooster crowed three times before they got out of bed, someone would die. This probably helped people get out of bed on time. A few gamblers also expressed belief that if the first card dealt in a game was the Ace of Spades; someone at the table was bound to die. To prevent this happenstance, the dealer would often put the first card at the bottom of the deck.

Hearing three knocks at the door twice may indicate a death in the future, and a death in the family will cause all the clocks to stop. When someone dies, it is important to watch them over night to make sure they are actually dead. Flowers for the graves can be picked from the fields in the event that there is no flower shop. Wives wear black to funerals, and are expected to mourn from one to two years. For everyone else, the mourning period depends more on the time of the year, because during harvest time, no one has time to mourn.

Several people have discussed a belief in omens of death. For one young boy, seeing fireballs rolling across the road preceded his neighbor’s death. For another, a white horse ran across his path the night before his father’s death. Others saw shooting stars the night before a death. On their death bed, it is possible to tell when a person is very close to death by their amount of delirium. If they are calling out the name of one already dead, or talking to visions of the past, they are very close.

When a person dies, their body must be carefully handled to prevent it from stiffening in a disturbing way. If they die with their eyes open, quarters will be placed on their eyelids, and a cloth might be tied around their head to keep their jaw closed. Cats were never allowed near the bodies of the deceased. Partially this is due to the belief that cats will eat dead bodies if they are left alone with them. One woman said that this probably was not true, because her grandmother had many cats, and
when she died her body lie intact in her home for several days alone with the cats before anyone realized she was dead.

**Death Rites: A Functional Analysis (FA 01 582)**

**Navajo (FA 01 582)**

One young man who grew up on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico revealed that when he had been growing up there were no strong cultural beliefs about death. No belief in any kind of after life or benevolent gods permeated the displaced culture. Instead, the people living on that reservation believed that only evil things awaited them in death, and were quick to bury the dead along with their belongings.

Any belongings that did not make it into the grave with their owner were burned to avoid inviting evil spirits. The young man expressed a sense of sadness and hopelessness that he had felt when someone died, because no one could tell him what happens to people when they die.

**Samoan (FA 01 582)**

A Western Samoan youth spoke of funerals where religion was not the most important factor. Everyone on the island had the same sort of ceremony, regardless of their religion. First they would tell the radio announcer of the death so that everyone on the island would hear the news. Then, a funeral would be held in the best room of the house, with people sitting at a distance prescribed by their relationship to the deceased.

Everyone attending the funeral would present a gift to the family, usually a few fine woven mats, depending on the relationship. The family of a chief received three thousand mats after his death. In exchange, the family provides food for all the guests, and often gives back some of the mats. The mats are a sign of love, but the family usually has little need for the amount they could accumulate after a funeral.

**Cameroonian (FA 01 582)**

In a certain village in Cameroon, Africa, it is tradition to bury a body as soon as possible. The closest family members and any people who are suspected to have something to do with the death are invited to speak and swear over the body that they did not have any hand in the death. Then they throw the first handfuls of dirt over the coffin.
After the burial, family and friends gather in the dead person’s house. It is shameful to be mourned in a parent’s house, so it is a very important step in a person’s life to acquire independent lodging. Immediate family members of the deceased are required to wear black for a year of mourning, which they are only allowed to take off at a celebration exactly a year after the death.

At such time, daughters of the deceased dance for the entertainment of the guest, and sons form a band with similarly aged boys from the village and acquire gunpowder to explode in celebration.

**The Beliefs of Death (FA 01 635)**

*Legends of Death (FA 01 635)*

There was once a card player in ancient Greece who met a man and agreed to have him for dinner. He told his wife to prepare dinner for three people, but when the man showed up, he brought with him twelve others. The card player protested the addition, but the man merely blessed the food and it managed to feed them all. After spending an enjoyable evening with the family, the man revealed himself as the Christ, and asked the card player what he could do for him to thank him for his hospitality.

“Let me always win at cards, for it is my work, and when I die, take me into Heaven.” Said the card player, and made his deal. He spent the rest of his life winning at cards, and when he reached the end, instructed his wife to secret his cards into his coffin with him. This directive came in handy when he traveled the road to heaven, because it wound through hell, and the devil called him inside to play cards. The devil agreed to let him take a damned soul with him if he won if he would agree to stay in hell if he lost. He won, and the devil asked to play again, convinced that just one more game would make the card player his. In the end, the card player had twelve lost souls with him as he made his way to heaven.

At the pearly gates, Christ said that he had admitted only the card player, not thirteen people, but the card player begged his pardon and said “You also said that you would come to my house by yourself, but you brought twelve more for me to feed.” And they were all received into heaven.

*Jamaican Spirits  (FA 01 635)*

In Jamaica, a popular belief is that the spirit of the deceased sticks around for nine days after death. For nine days, the ghost rises and haunts its loved ones, returning to the house as a shadow over all
he possessed in life. On the ninth night, the family prepares entertainment for the dead one so that he will return peacefully to the grave.

*Mexican Omens (FA 01 635)*

Some who live in Mexico believe that death does not come as a surprise. Some kind of birds will always announce an impending death, usually owls. Occasionally this belief will cause children who have had a negative experience with death to dislike birds.

After their death, the family of the deceased will say many prayers to expedite the soul past demons into heaven. Deaths are announced by the bells of the church, and bodies are buried within twenty-four hours, along with their belongings, especially their clothing, and occasionally a cross of lime to help them decompose. Their burial will be accompanied by many candles, flowers, and music. All dead ancestors are celebrated each year on All Soul’s Day.

*Prayers against Death (FA 01 635)*

One young girl was raised in the home of a Baptist preacher. Many would come to pray for the souls of the dying, giving her the mistaken impression that death could be staved off by much praying. She learned that this was not true when her brother died at a very young age.

At that point, she heard superstitions from the neighbors and became convinced that she was going to die. Her neighbors said that if a person dies with their eyes open, or fails to stiffen within a few hours of death it means that a close family member will be next. They also warned that if a person calls out a name before their death, that person will be next to die. She did not die at that time in her life, but she was scared for quite a while.

*Omens in a Dream (FA 01 635)*

Another girl, from Texas, told of a little saying that her grandmother used to tell her.

A dream of death is a sign of birth.

A dream of birth is a sign of marriage.

A dream of marriage is a sign of death.

To dream of the dead is to hear from the living.
A dream of one dead is a sign that the one dreamed of wishes you to pray for him/her.

Dream superstitions are rather mean because most humans cannot control their dreams. A group of older men told a young girl in Indiana that dreaming of teeth falling out was a sign of impending death, just as she was at the age where her actual teeth were falling out. She was so concerned about her teeth that she feared she would dream about them and die.

*Columbian Dogs (FA 01 635)*

In Columbia dogs are omens of death. Dogs howling under the window are a symbol of impending doom for one of the inhabitants. If the dog is howling in the yard, it means that the first person who comes to the door will die very soon. Dogs can see spirits, so they can tell when someone has died, and they can see all the ghosts that hang around after death.

*Baby Fingernails (FA 01 635)*

Babies are rather delicate little beings, and frequently die in the first year of their infancy. In attempt to counteract that, superstition about them has risen up in many forms. One odd form regards babies’ fingernails as a protection of sorts. A baby’s fingernails, according to some, should never be cut before the child’s first birthday. Mirrors are also considered a danger to infants, but an easily avoided one.

*Kentucky Graveyards (FA 01 635)*

In the mountains of Kentucky, there is much graveyard lore. It is considered bad luck to step over a grave, or leave a graveyard during a funeral before the body is completely buried. To protect themselves from the haunting spirit of the deceased, it is common to put a lock of hair into a hole in a tree. This gives the spirit a legitimate place to haunt, though if the lock is ever removed, the person who did so will incur the wrath of the ghost.

Pictures are often directly associated with souls, so it is only natural that the picture of a dead loved one will fade with their departure from the mortal coil. Portraits in the room where a corpse is laid should be turned around, to prevent another death from occurring on the wings of the first one.

*The LDS Funeral as Performance Event (FA 01 992)*
An LDS funeral focuses less on mourning than many other funerals. With the LDS belief in the afterlife, there is less fear for the people attending to the death of a loved one. Instead, a funeral is seen as a chance to teach the gospel, and pleasantly reminisce about the life of a loved one. Stories about their life are often humorous and wholly positive, to reassure the family that their loved one will go to the right place.

The funeral is held in a church, opened with a prayer and a eulogy, and then devolves into many musical numbers, mostly hymns, and talks that speak as much about the gospel as the do the person being celebrated. Humor is a large part of those talks, breaking through the somber atmosphere to turn the mind of the mourners towards happy memories.

The person who died must remembered as the best version of themselves. Their virtues are extolled in great detail, to give hope to the family, while their vices are carefully not mentioned unless in jest.

The plan of salvation is often gone over with a bit more of a personal importance attached to it. The belief that the deceased is now in the spirit world, either serving and teaching, or being taught the gospel by other concerned parties is a comfort, as well as the promise that if those who miss them do everything they can to get to the celestial kingdom, they will be able to see their loved one again.

**Religious Supernatural Experiences Associated With Death (FA 01 1041)**

*Spiritual Visitation (FA 01 1041)*

One belief of the Latter-day Saints is that spirits can return to minister after their death, but before they are resurrected they cannot touch anyone. One women, as she approached death, was comforted by the presence of her deceased husband, guarding the end of her bed. She reached out to him each time he came, and felt sad when he refused to take her hand until she was reminded that he could not touch her until he was resurrected.

Another young man was devastated by the death of his brother. The two were close, and after he became an only child, the living brother began to sleep with loud music playing to drive away the sadness. On night, feeling the music was ridiculously loud, the boy’s mother turned his music off. In the morning, he expressed gratitude because his brother had come to visit him in the night, revealing that he had tried to come before but was driven off by the loud music.
Several people who were mourning excessively spoke of a visitation by their dead loved one who came to reassure them that they were happy, and to beg them not to cry anymore. Many also spoke of those who were on the edge of death and saw angels coming to get them.

*Dreams (FA 01 1041)*

One girl had prophetic dreams that helped her prepare for her mother’s death. In the dreams, she would see her mother or another family member being laid to rest in a casket. She had the dream over and over again until her mother actually died. At the point, she felt ready to handle the loss. Another man never revealed how he knew, but he warned his daughter that he would not be around during Christmas to give her mother a present, so he bought it ahead of time and left it safely with his daughter.

*Dressing for Eternity: Burial Customs for Deceased Youth (FA 01 1419)*

*Dressing Children for Heaven (FA 01 1419)*

The last garments a person is dressed in summarize the type of person they were. That is why parents are especially careful with how they dress their children for burial. Unlike those who die of old age, young people lack the extensive amount of life that people can remember them by. They must make some kind of impression on those they are leaving behind.

Infants, taken before they even had the chance to really live, are dressed by Christian parents in white. This represents their purity and innocence. For stillborn children, it can be difficult finding clothes small enough, but they are still carefully dressed in white. Those who lived long enough to be blessed are often clothed in their frilly blessing outfits. They have tiny little coffins, often also painted white.

For young children, who had a bit of a chance to live, white is no longer the choice of burial garments. Instead, parents might choose their nicest church clothes, or an outfit that they really loved. Most young boys are buried in suits, or the closest equivalent, though a few are dressed more casually by loving parents who want to give comfort in their last actions.

*Toys (FA 01 1419)*

Despite not actually believing that spirits can take objects with them into heaven, many parents and close relatives leave little things in the coffins of their children. Pictures of family, favored stuffed
toys, and in one case, a glow worm, accompany the young children into the ground. The boy who was buried with his glow worm had feared the dark all through his childhood, so his mother bought him a toy worm that had a face that lit up when the toy was cuddled. She had no desire for her son’s body to be left alone in the dark, so she included the toy to light his way into the afterlife.

**Burial Lore: Tradition to the End (FA 01 1447)**

*The Casket (FA 01 1447)*

Old fashioned American coffins were shaped like the humans who dwelt inside. Wide at the shoulders and narrow at the feet, they had a lid that was nailed on top after the dead was placed on their cushion inside. In modern America, caskets are all one length, with a hinged lid that can open either all the way, or just on the top half.

In states where wood is a major industry, most caskets are wooden, but a few states like Pennsylvania and West Virginia have enough of a steel industry that steel caskets are an option.

*The Music (FA 01 1447)*

The song “Amazing Grace” is traditional at Christian funerals, especially when played on the bagpipes. Many people who otherwise ignore their cultural heritage request bagpipes to be played at their funerals. Another hymn that is commonly used at funerals is “God Be with You Till We Meet Again.”

Churches do not allow modern “rock and roll” music to be played inside, so a few younger people have made a tradition of playing the deceased’s favorite music by the graveside instead of the church. Music is an important emotional outlet for people, and a person’s favorite type of music can be a stark reminder of who they were as a person.

*The Flowers (FA 01 1447)*

Some people give flowers to all the pallbearers to wear. Those flowers are removed after the casket is placed in its grave, and they are thrown in afterwards as a sign of respect. American funerals include many floral arrangements, often roses or carnations, though mostly just the favorites of the one whose respects are being paid. A large floral arrangement is traditionally laid on top of the casket after the lid is closed.
Near the graveside, it is common to pull flowers out of the decorative arrangements and give them to people attending the funeral to throw in after the casket. Some of the flowers are left to decorate the gravestone after it is put in, and the rest are either given to the family or to other members of the church to be used in big functions occurring around the same time.

A newer practice has been to release helium balloons at the graveside. Some do it symbolically to represent the spirit rising to heaven.