

## MOURNING

Impermanent truly are compounded things,  
by nature arising and passing away.  
If they arise and are extinguished,  
their eradication brings happiness.

*Buddhist prayer*

For centuries, religious rituals have helped the faithful through the difficult process of saying goodbye to the loved ones they have lost to death. Priests and community members offer their prayers and support to the mourners.

These rituals lost their meaning in the last quarter of the 20th century as our Western society moved away from religion. Mourning itself often gets lost in all the arrangements. Are we afraid to face death? Is there still a place for mourning?

This exhibition dares to address the taboo subject of mourning by looking at certain secular rites from the five major religious traditions in the world: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. We cannot examine all the practices surrounding mourning, which are numerous, varied and complex, so we are focusing on the three major stages of mourning—saying goodbye to those who are dying, letting go of them and commemorating them—as well as the related religious practices. We hope this will lead you to think about your own relationship with death—and perhaps life as well.

Funeral customs have been part of human culture since the very beginning; the first archeological remains date back to the Paleolithic era. They have survived through the ages and been shaped by cultures, beliefs and periods.

In many cultures, mourners place beside the body or on top of it objects intended to help the deceased on his voyage to the beyond. An ancient custom consists in placing a coin on the dead person's mouth so, according to a Greek myth, he can give an offering (obolus) to Charon, who ferries the lost souls of the newly deceased in his boat to the world of the dead. This custom continued for several centuries in Europe.

## The last breath

In the last moments of life, the dying person's relatives are present, and possibly a priest as well. When death arrives, the prayers of the faithful rise and light the way.

The hours following death are focused on their relationship with the deceased: they keep watch over the body, recall his life. The rituals of preparing the body and the prayers at the wake or visitation mark these heartbreaking moments, helping the mourners say goodbye to their loved ones.

## The soul as a pearl

In the Jewish culture, when death arrives, the relatives of the deceased recite the profession of faith of Israel: Hear, Israel, the Lord is our god, the Lord is One. The body, the former container of the soul, is washed according to a specific ritual by designated persons. It is traditionally wrapped in a white linen or cotton shroud. No one is permitted to see the dead person's face again. A candle is placed near the head as a reminder that "the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27).

A tallit is a prayer shawl worn by Jewish men. When the owner dies, one of the fringes (tzitzit) is cut off before the shawl is wrapped around the body. It is the only covering accepted in the coffin.

When a Jew dies outside of Israel, it is customary to place a bag of earth from the Holy Land in his coffin.

## The soul surrounded

A Catholic priest administers the Eucharist (in the form of a viaticum) along with the anointing of the sick to a person who is dying: it is part of the last rites that recall the death and resurrection of Jesus, the son of God. The body is then prepared and dressed in the person's finest clothes. It is generally placed on display for one to three days, usually in an open coffin. Community members and friends come to meditate and pray before the body and support the departed's relatives. At regular intervals during the wake, those present recite one or more rosaries.

In the past, the priest administered the Extreme Unction to a dying Catholic, an unction practised with holy oil, accompanied by a prayer and the laying

on of hands. Since the Vatican Council II, the term Anointing the Sick is used for physical and spiritual healing, which gives the sacrament a less definitive character.

Orthodox Christians place an icon of Christ or a cross between the crossed hands of the deceased.

Catholics place a rosary between the clasped hands of the dead body.

## **A calm moment**

For Buddhists, death is part of the cycle of life. The dying person's last moments inspire his rebirth. In order for the dying person to leave the world in peace, the loved ones at his side do not express their pain. In the Tibetan tradition, the corpse cannot be touched for three and a half days to avoid interfering with the process in which the conscience leaves the body. Monks and nuns take turns reading the Bardo Thödol (Tibetan Book of the Dead), to accompany the conscience of the departed person in the transition to its rebirth.

To keep the body company throughout the rituals surrounding death, the deceased's relatives and monks recite prayers and mantras, which are words or phrases used in meditation. Prayers are chosen according to the school of Buddhism that the community belongs to.

## **Faith reaffirmed**

When a Muslim is dying, he or she must recite the Shahadah, or profession of faith: There is no god but God and Mohammed is the messenger of God. If the person is not capable of reciting the Shahadah, a relative may do so in his place, holding up his index finger. According to tradition, the body is washed following a very specific codified ritual and wrapped in a white, unknotted linen or cotton shroud. The head is turned to face Mecca. The departed person's relatives come to pay their respects, but do not touch the body, except the face in certain cultures.

The relatives of a dying Muslim recite the Koran and pray.

## **The body left behind**

To evoke death, a Hindu is not considered to give up his soul, but rather to

abandon his body. Whenever possible, he travels to the Ganges, the sacred river, to die with his feet in its purifying waters. According to custom, the body is wrapped in a shroud and covered in flowers. Relatives may touch the body, but must wash before returning to their daily occupations since a dead body is considered impure. Life and death succeed each other in the Hindu cycle of reincarnation.

## **Farewell**

Whether we believe in reincarnation or the resurrection of the dead, the ceremony of farewell to the deceased is a tangible way of saying goodbye in keeping with our religious beliefs. The family, friends and community members gather around the priest for this emotionally charged event. It is time for the final farewell, time to let go of the deceased once and for all.

### **The path of mourning**

In a procession, relatives and friends accompany the deceased to the place where his body will disappear. Traditionally, only Muslim men follow the cortege. On a wooden stretcher for Hindus, in a sedan chair for Buddhists or in a hearse for Christians and Jews, the body makes its last voyage on Earth. In all religions, a priest accompanies the procession with his prayers.

Since the early 19th century in Quebec, the bodies of dead Catholics have been taken to the church in a black hearse (in the case of adults) or a white one (in the case of children). The first motorized hearses replaced horse-drawn vehicles in the 1920s.

### **Offerings and sharing**

Catholics place bouquets of flowers and wreaths around the remains. It is not customary for Muslims to offer flowers. Nor are they given in the Jewish tradition; donations are made in memory of the deceased instead. Hindus surround their dead with flowers, offer food to the deities and give alms to the poor. Buddhists also give to the less fortunate. However, there is one universal practice among the five major religions of the world: a shared meal after the farewell ceremony.

### **Funeral dirge**

There is a place for music and song at a funeral. Many sacred musical works have been inspired by death. Songs and laments express the pain

of separation as well as hope for what comes in the beyond. In the funeral procession and during the religious ceremony, music and singing bring the mourners together moving to the same rhythm, according to the culture. In the streets of New Orleans, you can even hear strains of jazz during processions.

## Farewell ceremony

Funerals vary from culture to culture, but generally include singing, prayers and offerings in tribute to the deceased in the presence of a priest.

The Catholic funeral ritual is fairly elaborate: it evokes hope for the resurrection of Christ and incorporates in a liturgical celebration prayers and testimonials about the life of the deceased. In the Protestant tradition, the body is generally taken from the visitation site to the cemetery; the religious ceremony takes place afterwards and consists of prayers of thanksgiving and messages of consolation for the bereaved.

Jews opt for a simple, unostentatious funeral: prayers, psalms and eulogies. There is no ceremony at the synagogue before the burial. Among Muslims, a ritual brings together family and friends to say goodbye to the deceased and recite excerpts from the Koran. At Hindu funerals, family and friends gather at the cremation site. The ceremony includes offerings to the gods and a reading of sacred texts. Three days later, the family goes to collect the deceased's ashes. Buddhists gather for several days for funerals. Particular care is taken to choose the date on which to dispose of the body in order to surround the soul with the best possible influences to help with its rebirth.

There are a number of Chinese funeral customs that differ according to the time period and region. They are generally very codified. The ceremony allows the living to express their grief and the dead to mourn the life they are leaving. Thus, the Chinese customarily offer gifts to those who are leaving for this long voyage to the land of the shadows.

A Chinese funeral involves the following:

1. Visitors pay their respects while musicians play. The body lies behind a curtain. The shroud is prepared on the right.
2. Prayers are said to Buddha for the soul of the departed.
3. Service of praise for the deceased. The family is dressed in mourning, which for the Chinese is the colour white.

4. The bridge, a symbol of the gateway to another life.
5. Funeral rite performed by bonzes (Buddhist priests or monks).
6. The home is sent to the deceased in the other world through the bonzes' prayers.
7. Procession to bury the deceased.
8. Funeral chairs carrying the soul tablet (representing the deceased's soul), accompanied by musicians.
9. While bonzes play instruments, food is offered to the deceased, and the cortege of family and friends in mourning.
10. The coffin is preceded by the sons. The cult of ancestors is very important in China.
11. The deceased's family sit in mourning chairs.

For a Catholic funeral ceremony in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, the windows of the church were covered with hangings, and statues and altars were also covered.

In Roman Catholic liturgy, a priest wore black during services for the dead from the Council of Trent in the 16th century onwards. However, since Vatican II (1962–1965), priests have worn purple, which is the colour of preparation and penance.

Catholics cover the coffin in a black mortuary cloth. Orthodox Christians use a gold cloth.

## **Incense**

It is common at funerals in many cultures and religions to burn incense as a mark of respect for the baptized body of the deceased by Catholics, or to establish a link between the living and the dead in other traditions, such as in the Chinese Buddhist ceremony.

Buddhism has many different funeral rites depending on the family's culture and traditions. In Thailand, elaborate funerals bear witness to the attachment to the deceased. In Vietnam, the prosperity of the deceased's descendents is influenced by the location of the grave, which must point to a water source.

## **Period of mourning**

Following a death, it is customary for the deceased's relatives to go into mourning for a period ranging from a few days to a few months, depending on the culture.

For Catholics, the first year after the death of a loved one is generally a period of "full mourning." Family members and friends have masses said in memory of the deceased.

In the Jewish community, mourning lasts a year, the time required to buy back the deceased's faults through prayers and good deeds. Strict rules govern the actions of mourners in the first week, the first month and the first year.

Traditionally, the period of condolences lasts for seven days in Islam. On the 40th day, family and friends come together to share a meal and read the Koran in tribute to the deceased. As of that day, the women can also go to the cemetery.

In the 49 days following a death, which is the time the deceased's conscience takes to be reborn in a new entity according to Buddhists, they perform rituals every 7 days: prayers, offerings to spiritual masters and at the shrines of the deities, and almsgiving to the poor in the deceased's name.

For 10 days, Hindus prepare rice balls to be offered to the atman (soul) of the deceased and recite prayers. On the 11th day, the atman is believed to have left the body. A public ceremony marks this moment, and prayers and gifts are dedicated to the deceased.

To announce a death in earlier times, Quebecers placed black (or white, in the case of a child) crepe on the door of their house. The body lay on display at home up until the end of the 1940s. The room where the person died was also decorated.

Catholic widowers traditionally dress in black with a white and black shirt. Those who do not have the means can wear a black armband and black crepe on their hats.

People who are in mourning wear certain clothes as a mark of their bereavement. Black and white are the main colours worn to express mourning in various cultures around the world.

In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Catholic widows wore black to show they were in mourning: a hat in black crepe and jewellery of the same colour. They also wore a thick weeping veil covering the face for 12 to 18 months.

For funerals in Japan, women close to the deceased wear a black formal kimono (mofuku) and an obi (belt) of the same colour. At memorial ceremonies, they can wear a grey obi or a dark purple kimono with a black obi. This kimono bears the family's five coats of arms (mon), which gives it its formal character.

## Once the deceased's body has gone, all that remains are memories

### Burial

Christians

Jews

Muslims

The oldest way of disposing of the body. Mourners bury the remains in the ground in a consecrated ceremony according to a specific, codified ritual. The body is placed in a coffin, although some traditions prescribe burial directly in the ground. For Jews, the burial is done with reference to Genesis 3: "For you are dust and to dust you shall return." The body must be buried within 24 hours of death, as in the Islamic tradition. In the last three decades of the 20th century, cremation began to gain favour among Christians and some liberal Jews.

### Water, burial site

Hindus

Hindus place some dead bodies into the water instead of cremating them: those of children, lepers and wandering monks. The ashes of cremated Hindus are scattered into the water, particularly the Ganges, the sacred Indian river that purifies and frees the souls of the dead placed in it.

### Cremation

Hindus

Buddhists

The Hindu ritual of cremation is a sacrifice offered to the god of fire to nourish it and purify the body of the deceased. The funeral pyre is usually lit by the eldest son, to the sound of mourning chants. For Tibetan Buddhists, the funeral pyre also purifies all the impurities of the person who has died.

In Bali, some families have to bury the body until they have saved enough money for the costly cremation ceremony. This can sometimes take years, particularly since the ritual has to be held on a specific date set in advance.

During the traditional burial ceremony, the remains of the bodies, wrapped in white shrouds, are placed on a tower. A procession accompanied by musicians is formed and walks to the cremation site. There, the families place the remains of the dead on dragon-horses arranged around the pyre, which is then lit. The ceremony lasts about an hour.

## **Sky burial**

Tibetan Buddhists

Tibetan Buddhists believe that three and a half days after death, the conscience has finally left the body, which becomes an empty shell. For centuries, Tibetans practised sky burials, where the body was left to the birds. During a ceremony, designated officiating priests (ragyapa) gave the dismembered parts of the body to birds of prey to eat. For Tibetans, this is the ultimate demonstration of non-attachment to the body. Today, most Tibetan Buddhists have the remains of the dead cremated.

## **In living memory**

The departed are not forgotten. Different religious rites serve as commemorative events at set times of the year, in cemeteries, within the family and in communities. Secular practices and religious rites prescribed by sacred texts exist side by side. Some ceremonies are even odes to life, in memory of those who have passed on and as a comfort to those left behind.

Buddhists invoke the Japanese Bodhisattva Jizo to protect children or to help dead children, the stillborn and aborted fetuses. Jizo takes many forms in painting and sculpture. He can be found at necropolises, temples and cemeteries. People pray to him, especially on the Day of the Dead. The red bonnets and bibs that are sometimes seen on Jizo statues have been placed there by mothers who have lost a child.

## Commemorative sites

A cemetery is the ultimate commemorative site for Christians, Jews and Muslims. It often resembles a park, making it ideal for walking and contemplation. It can also be a heritage space where chapters in the history of life are revealed. Christians place a funeral monument on the grave after the burial. Jews and Muslims wait for a year before erecting a tombstone. Buddhists go to stupas, which are places of prayer and commemoration. They are cone-shaped structures containing relics, sacred images and statues. At home, Buddhists also have a shrine to ancestors beside the household shrine to Buddha. For Hindus, the Ganges River is sacred and whenever possible, families spread the ashes of their dead, particularly in the holy city of Varanasi.

Christian funeral monuments reflect the deceased's social standing, ranging from a simple wooden cross to a sumptuous and highly decorated mausoleum; 19th-century obelisks; wooden, marble or sculpted stone grave markers; and ornamental wrought iron crosses. Their ornamentation, like their placement, bear witness to a community's beliefs, tastes and practices and, with their inscriptions, reveal its social history.

Crosses are prevalent in Catholic and Anglican cemeteries in Quebec. In Protestant cemeteries in Quebec, especially in the 19th century, a lamb was a common symbol on funeral monuments, most often those of children, to represent innocence and purity. Protestant monuments generally have little ornamentation, mainly garlands of decorative flowers or clasped hands. Catholic cemeteries have many more symbols, including wheat, vines, the Virgin Mary, Christ and crosses.

The figure of an angel is the most representative and the most common funerary statue in the Christian religion. The angel keeps watch over, accompanies and guides the deceased's soul.

Angels are also very important to Muslims, even if there are no images of them. The angel of death is called Azrael; and two angels, Munkar and Nakir, test the faith of the dead in their graves.

## A feast for the dead

The prime time for commemorating the dead is, without a doubt, the first anniversary of their passing, which is celebrated in all religious traditions.

Jews and Muslims prepare a ceremony at the cemetery to unveil the tombstone. Catholics attend a memorial mass. Buddhists invite monks to celebrate the rebirth of the deceased's soul. Hindus invite Brahmans to share a family meal as part of the Shraaddha ceremony, a sacred duty to the dead that is repeated every year afterwards.

For Christians, All Souls' Day, which falls on November 2, the day after All Saints' Day, is a specific collective celebration to commemorate the dead. A visit to the cemetery is required, according to the custom established by the Abbot of Cluny, France, in the 11th century.

In Mexico, the Day of the Dead is a particularly lively tradition that takes place on November 1 and 2. Families go to the Catholic cemetery with musical instruments, refreshments, brightly coloured decorations and caricatured representations of death. Skeletons and skulls are found all over town. Far from gloomy, this tradition is quite festive. People are not afraid of death: they mock it.

On November 1, Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead by honouring the angelitos (little angels), that is, children who have died. Families make or buy candies shaped like coffins, skulls and skeletons, and bone-shaped pastries. The next day, the Day of the Dead, is spent honouring deceased adults.

Skulls (calaveras in Spanish) are a very important symbol of the Day of the Dead in Mexico. They can be found on the small shrines erected in houses for this holiday. They are an offering to the deceased, who, on the Day of the Dead, comes back to wander among the living. They are made of sugar or chocolate and decorated with icing sugar, coloured paper or even objects glued to them. Calaveras are also placed on the graves of the deceased by their families for them to eat.

### **Private mementoes**

Keep something of the deceased with you. Christians carry photographs, cards or a few locks of hair as a memento.

Certain Buddhists save some of the ashes of the dead. They mix them with clay used to make sacred figurines called tsa tsas. They are blessed and consecrated in the deceased's name to ensure favourable conditions in a future life.

Funeral tsa tsas are clay votive objects, often in the shape of a stupa. Unlike other tsa tsas depicting deities, they are not kept at home, but rather placed in a stupa or at a holy site. Offerings to funeral tsa tsas bestow favour on both the deceased and the person who brings them.

When a Catholic breaks a religious law (commits a sin), he or she can obtain a full or partial pardon (an indulgence) under certain circumstances or by performing certain acts, such as praying. In 1896, the Archbishop of the city of Quebec granted through a crucifix 100 days of indulgence to the people who kissed it as part of their devotions. In the 19th century, there was a great deal of devotion for souls in purgatory, the place where the souls of the dead atone for their sins before entering heaven. Catholics prayed extensively for these “lost” souls so they would find their place beside God, but also to intercede on behalf of the living. The faithful had masses celebrated for them and dedicated prayers to them.

## In memoriam

Death is surprising, overwhelming, heartbreaking. In today’s Western society, each person mourns in his or her own way. Death is dealt with now at funeral homes, where we each choose the rites that suit us from among traditional customs and new secular ones, or those inspired by different religions and cultures. Each of us tries to find some meaning in this painful separation. We also want to pay tribute to the life of the loved ones we have just lost. Is there still room today to commemorate those who have left us? Is death part of life?

## Christian

“Jesus said unto her, I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live; and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

*John 11: 25–26*

## Muslim

“Does not man see that it is we who created him from sperm? Yet behold he stands forth as an open adversary. And he makes comparisons for us, and forgets his own creation: he says, Who can give life to bones and decomposed ones? Say, He will give them life who created them for the first time. For he is well versed in every kind of creation. The same who produces for you fire out of the green tree, when behold you kindle therewith your own fires. Is

not he who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like of it? Yes, indeed for he is the creator supreme, of skill and knowledge infinite. Truly, when he intends a thing, his command is, Be, and it is. So glory to him in whose hands is the dominion of all things: and to him will you be all brought back."

*Koran, Surah 36 (excerpt)*

## **Jew**

"May His great name be exalted and sanctified in the world which He created according to his will. May He establish His kingdom and may His salvation blossom and His anointed be near during your lifetime and during your days and during the lifetimes of all the House of Israel, speedily and very soon! And say Amen! May His great name be blessed for ever, and to all eternity! Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honoured, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, and blessed be He, above and beyond all the blessings, hymns, praises and consolations that are uttered in the World! And say, Amen!"

*The Kadish*

## **Bouddhism**

"O now, when the Bardo of the Moment of Death upon me is dawning! Abandoning attraction and craving, and weakness for all worldly things, May I be undistracted in the space of the enlightening teachings, May I be able to transfuse myself into the heavenly space of the Unborn: The hour hath come to part with this body composed of flesh and blood; May I know the body to be impermanent and illusory."

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

"This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds.  
To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance.  
A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky.  
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain."

*Buddha*

## **Hindouism**

"As a man casts off his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones, so does the soul cast off its worn-out bodies and enter new ones."

*Bhagavad-Gita, 2:22*