

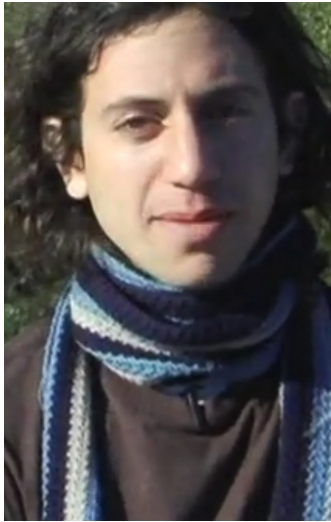


*Stripper Funerals, Fantasy Coffins
and the World's Dumbest Deaths*

**THE DIGITAL
DYING TOP 10**

www.funeralwise.com

JUSTIN NOBEL AND THE DIGITAL DYING BLOG



Justin Nobel, Journalist

Where there is death, there is a very creative human response to death. It inspires culture, art, religion and story. For the past two years, journalist Justin Nobel has written Digital Dying, a blog on *Funeralwise.com* that explores trends in death and the industries it touches. He has covered everything from Taiwanese stripper funerals to the burying of cremated remains on the moon. Justin Nobel also writes about science, culture and travel for publications such as *TIME*, *Audubon*, *Popular Mechanics* and *Meatpaper*. Check out this video interview with Justin <http://blogs.funeralwise.com/dying/about/>

We hope you will enjoy this collection of 10 interesting posts from the Digital Dying archives.

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1. JAPAN'S MUMMY-MONKS RISE AGAIN



Last week, police in Tokyo broke into the home of Sogen Kato. According to local records he was 111, the fifth oldest man on earth. But instead of a wizened old man, they found a skeleton in pajamas lying under a blanket. The body was surrounded by yellowed newspapers, whose date the police said indicate when Kato likely may have died; November, 1978. Grandpa was a very scary man, said one granddaughter, who had visited his room a few months back and said she saw a skull.

Police believe Kato's family hid his death so they could continue to collect his pension checks, a sum that totaled more than nine million yen, or about 100,000 U.S. dollars. But there is another reason that explains why Kato may have ended up the way he did, he was trying to attain sokushinbutsu, a revered state of being in which Buddhist monks cause their own death by limiting themselves to a sparse diet that induces mummification. Throughout history, hundreds of monks have tried to attain sokushinbutsu, but only about two dozen are known to have succeeded. Until the case of Kato, it was assumed that the practice had been extinct for centuries.

Sokushinbutsu was practiced in Yamagata prefecture, in the rural mountains of northern Honshu, Japan's main island. To attain sokushinbutsu required an ultra-rigorous diet. For three years, the monks drank only water and ate only seeds and nuts. They meditated all day long. For another three years they ate just roots and bark and practiced an exercise regimen designed to rid the body of fat. They drank a special tea made from the bark of the Urushi tree, which coats the inside of the body with a lacquer-like substance. The tea caused vomiting and a rapid loss of bodily fluids, but most importantly, made the body too poisonous to be eaten by maggots.

When the monk was ready, he assumed the lotus position, locked himself in a cramped stone tomb and meditated until he died. His only connection to the outside world was an air tube and a bell. Each day he rang the bell; the noise traveled up the air tube and was heard by his disciples above. When the bell stopped ringing, the disciples sealed the tomb. One-thousand days later, they dug up the monk. If the body had rotted, good try, but no sokushinbutsu. Only if the monk had been truly mummified was he given the holy status, then put in the temple for viewing.

Nowadays, sokushinbutsu is illegal, as it is considered a form of suicide, but during periods of famine the practice was encouraged as a way to cope without food. It was thought that if you preserved yourself as a mummy you would be called to see the return of Bodhisattva Maitreya, a sort of Buddhist messiah who it is said will return some 5.67 billion years after the death of Buddha, a time when humans will live to the age of 80,000 and a king called Cakkavatti Sankha will rule the world, a time when oceans will have greatly decreased in size, allowing the Maitreya to walk across them, and a time that will signify the end of the middle time in which humanity currently resides. In Kushinagar, a remote mountainous region in far northern India, near the Nepal border, an international organization known as The Maitreya Project has been raising funds for the last two decades to construct a 500 foot steel statue of the Maitreya Buddha, in honor of his return. The statue is designed to last 1,000 years.

It is believed a Japanese monk named Kukai, a famous calligrapher and engineer who also founded the True Word sect of Buddhism, may have introduced the practice of sokushinbutsu from China, where it was later lost. One of the most famous mummy-monks was Daijuku Bosatsu Shinnyokai-Shonin, born in 1687 in the city of Tsuruoka. He was attracted to the teachings of Buddhism at a very early age and as a young man entered the Buddhist priesthood. Beginning in his twenties, he aspired to become sokushinbutsu. At the age of 96, he put himself on a strict diet of salt and water, which lasted for 42 days. He then drank the poisonous Urushi tea and was buried alive.

Posted by Justin on August 3rd, 2010

2. THE WORLD'S DUMBEST DEATHS, NOW ON TV



The 2010 Darwin Awards are out, given each year to the world's stupidest deaths. A Michigan farmer named James was trying to figure out what was wrong with one of his trucks, which was emanating strange sounds from the undercarriage. He had his friend drive the truck on a highway while he hung underneath to try and determine the problem. Unfortunately, James' clothes got caught on something. By the time the friend finally stopped the vehicle James had been wrapped around the drive shaft.

A 47 year-old North Carolina man awoke to the sound of a telephone ringing beside his bed and reached to grab it but instead grabbed a Smith & Wesson 38 and accidentally blew his brains out. A California man attempting to break into his ex-girlfriend's car by smashing through the windshield with a shotgun accidentally shot himself in the gut and died. And a Toronto lawyer demonstrating the strength of the windows in his firm's downtown skyscraper rapped on the panes with his shoulder only to break through the glass and plunge 24 stories to his death.

Sounds absurd, but these Darwin deaths all actually happened. "Named in honor of Charles Darwin, the Darwin Awards commemorate the remains of those who improve our gene pool by inadvertently removing themselves from it," reads the website. "For obvious reasons, this Award is usually bestowed posthumously."

The awards have been around for years but recently have received something of a television companion. A show on Spike TV called "1000 ways to die" portrays painfully stupid deaths. One recent episode of the show, which airs Tuesdays at midnight, is titled "Pipe Snake" and describes a scantily clad woman named Tina (she wears a leopard print bikini throughout the entire sequence) who breaks up with her rock star boyfriend and throws his stuff into the yard as he watches on in astonishment. Tina carries his pet boa constructor outside, holding it above her head and screaming, but her former man has already driven off.

The snake, frightened of falling, clings tight around Tina's neck, slowly choking her. She impressively fights the snake off and chucks it into the yard but it sneaks back into the house through an air duct and lodges itself in a warm exhaust vent. That night Tina hits the bottle, cranks up the heat and moseys about the house in her bikini. She gets drunk then passes out on the couch, dead. But what killed her was not alcohol. With the snake stuffed in the exhaust vent the home filled with carbon monoxide given off by her gas furnace, putting Tina to sleep, permanently. The show features reenactments, interviews with experts and animated interpretations of the events. There is also playful voiceover narration, the line that describes Tina dying reads: "This time the low rent skank staggered around her ghetto pad, toppled over and died."

The show gravitates toward deaths that involve sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. In an episode entitled "The Final Straw" a woman named Hillary who had acquired temporary stardom on reality TV attends a Hollywood party in a shiny silver top and a short skirt. When a guy at the party cuts lines of cocaine on a glass table and pulls out a rolled dollar bill Hillary whips out her own platinum coke straw. A partygoer snaps a photo of her, which incenses a man she has hired to be her body guard. The body guard punches the picture taker in the face and the man falls backwards and lands on Hillary's head, driving the coke straw into her brain and killing her.

A white-coated surgeon eloquently explains in medical jargon what killed Tina while an animated film shows a digitized skeleton's brain being pierced by a thin projectile and gushing blood from the nose and mouth. "The straw, like a sword, punctured through that thin bony wall of the posterior nasal passage, penetrating into the brain stem, causing immediate hemorrhaging and damage to the central area of our brain stem that controls our heart and our lungs," explains the surgeon. "She died, almost instantaneously."

Posted by Justin on December 7th, 2010

3. AS THE MORBIDLY OBESE DIE, COFFINS CHANGE SHAPE



Walter Hudson was the fourth most obese human in medical history. By age 12, he weighed 200 pounds and by age 33 his waist measured 119 inches (a Guinness World Record) and he weighed 1,197 pounds. His daily diet was as follows: two boxes of sausages, a pound of bacon, 12 eggs, a loaf of bread, four hamburgers, four cheeseburgers, eight portions of fries, three ham steaks, two chickens, four baked potatoes, four sweet potatoes, four heads of broccoli and 36 pints of soda. He made headlines when he got sandwiched in his bathroom and was unable to move, it took nine men to get him out. Hudson died in his sleep at the age of 47, just weeks after he announced plans to be married.

As the world has become wealthier it has become fatter and this creates problems for the afterlife. Morbidly obese corpses often can't fit into mortuary refrigerators or crematory furnaces. Traditional coffins were once tapered and widest at the shoulders, but to accommodate a general increase in body-weight, most present day coffins are cigar-shaped, wide throughout. Some coffins have become so large they can no longer fit inside a hearse or in a standard grave, forcing families to buy two plots in the cemetery. Indiana-based Goliath Casket Co. specializes in oversized coffins; a normal coffin is about 28 inches wide; Goliath's biggest is more than 50 inches wide. Such coffins can be too heavy for pallbearers to carry. If the worst comes to the worst, we will keep the family away and the coffin will be taken in on a truck," a British cemetery manager told a reporter. "It is not the most dignified way out."

But many morbidly obese lose their dignity long before the die. Often, they live sad and troubled lives, and die premature and chilling deaths.

Jose Luis Garza lived in Juarez, Mexico and was always fat. At the beginning of 2008, both his parents died within weeks of each other. Because of this, he said, his overeating became out of control. Manuel Uribe, who has been bedridden since 2001 and is presently the world's fattest man, sent Garza packages with kiwis, grapefruit, pears and a protein supplement in an effort to get him to trim down. Garza didn't lose any weight and by the summer he was having trouble breathing and was struggling to eat. Emergency workers were called in. They had to demolish his bedroom wall to

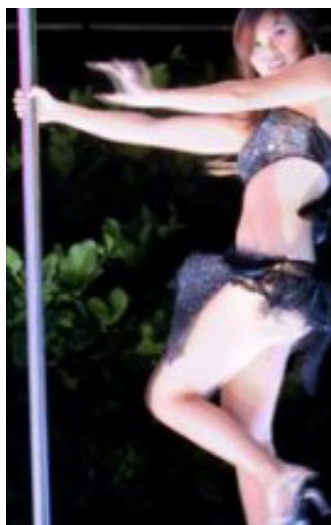
get him out. Garza was placed in the back of a truck and rushed to the hospital, but died en route. He was 47 and weighed 992 pounds. "The family wanted to cremate him but there wasn't an adequate oven for someone his size," a funeral home worker said at the time.

Carol Yager, of Beecher, Michigan, says she developed an eating disorder as a child in response to being sexually abused by a close family member. Her weight ballooned to well over 1,000 pounds. By the early 1990s, bacteria were decomposing her skin, a condition known as cellulitis. She was also having difficulty breathing and had dangerously high blood sugar levels. She could no longer stand or walk because her muscles had atrophied to such a degree that they could not support her. Yager was hospitalized 13 times in two years, according to the local fire chief. Each trip required as many as 20 firefighters from two stations to assist ambulance workers in carrying Yager, in relay fashion, from her home, through the doorway, and outside to the awaiting ambulance. In January of 1993 she was admitted to a medical center and put on a 1,200 calorie a day diet. She lost 521 pounds but upon release gained it all back. Yager had frequent boyfriends though her family questioned the authenticity of some. Her last one, Larry Maxwell, was characterized by her family as "an opportunist who courted media attention for money-making possibilities." In 1994, Yager died of kidney failure. Shortly thereafter, Maxwell married one of her good friends.

Mills Darden, born in North Carolina, in October 1799, is one of history's earliest cases of morbid obesity. He was 7 feet 6 inches and weighed between 1,000 and 1,100 pounds. At his largest, it required more than 13 yards of cloth to make him a coat. He was a farmer and reportedly owned a saloon. His wife Mary was 4 feet 11 inches and weighed 98 pounds. They had several children together. Darden died in 1857 and was buried in a coffin that was eight feet long, thirty-five inches deep and thirty-two inches across.

Posted by Justin on July 1st, 2010

4. INSIDE THE HOT AND NOISY WORLD OF TAIWAN'S STRIPPER FUNERALS



Have you ever been to a funeral where strippers dance on glowing flatbed trucks? Marc Moskowitz has. In fact, he has made a movie about it, called *Dancing for the Dead*. Moskowitz, a University of South Carolina anthropologist, has spent the past two decades researching pop culture in China and Taiwan. Digital Dying spoke with him about just how raunchy Taiwan stripper funerals get, why city folk don't like them and how the trend could come to America.

What does a Taiwan stripper funeral look like?

Women sing and dance as a truck with blinking neon lights follows a funeral procession through the streets. The trucks are called Electric Flower Cars, or EFCs. Vendors sell things alongside and there is some really fabulous singing and a whole range of performances, taking off clothes is just one part. Often there's a host, a middle aged man or woman who tells jokes and interviews performers between events. Usually the strippers wear bikinis, or an outfit like you might see at a nightclub.

But isn't it strange to have naked dancers at a funeral?

There's a concept in Taiwanese culture called *renao*, which refers to the hustle and bustle of an exciting event, the hot and noisy. For it to be successful it has to be *renao*. Even if you go to the mountains or the beach, it is *renao*. Think of a quiet rock concert that would be a failure. Or a quiet amusement park. The EFCs also perform at weddings and religious festivals. Nudity attracts more people and more people make it more hot and noisy. Making the funeral a noisy event means people will talk about it for years. To some extent the more extreme the better.

What's the most extreme thing you've seen at a stripper funeral?

I didn't actually witness full nudity at funerals but on a couple occasions at temple events I did see women going into the audience and giving men lap dances. I saw one woman go into the audience and rub a man's genitals, through the pants. I didn't include these things in the film because I didn't want to get people in trouble. I talked to an American professor who said he saw EFCs in the early 1980s in southern Taiwan and women were shooting water out of their private parts, like a sex act in Thailand.

Why would a family want a stripper funeral for their loved one?

They advertise an individual's economic power, so the number of people you can get at a funeral attests to how important that person was in the community. Or, maybe the old guy liked this kind of thing while alive so it makes a good sendoff. Others told me it was done to impress new ghosts, those who have died recently and like real people enjoy gambling and womanizing. New ghosts are often beat up by old ghosts, who have been dead for centuries and are more likely to obey laws of righteousness and morality. Stripper funerals can be a way to distract older ghosts so new ghosts can get their bearings.

What are the logistics of arranging a stripper funeral?

They're more commonly arranged by friends, not family. Say when a big figure in gangster society dies, some of his gangster brothers might hire several EFCs. Usually, people wait for auspicious days to bury someone. They'll set up funeral tents in front of someone's house and put the coffin in the tent. It will sit there for several days with people keeping vigil. On the day when it's scheduled to travel to the crematorium the EFC comes. In the morning there's a banquet, then the procession begins.

How did the practice come about?

EFCs came along in about 1980 though there probably was a non-motorized form that existed well before that. In the 1980s two important things were going on in Taiwan. The government was nearing the end of its martial law period and becoming more permissive, and it was a time of incredible economic flourishing. Suddenly, people had lots more money than they did before. Taiwan has an incredible religious life, so one of the first places people started demonstrating this wealth was with religious phenomenon like EFCs.

continued...

4. INSIDE THE HOT AND NOISY WORLD OF TAIWAN'S STRIPPER FUNERALS

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Is Taiwan's government really okay with this?

EFCs are legal but since the mid-1980s full nudity has been restricted, though it still happens. On one hand there's a belief in freedom of religion. On the other hand politicians are afraid of having naked people dancing in the street. There are also tensions in Taiwan about issues like freedom of speech and where that ends. You have something that began as a folk practice in rural areas and became more mainstream. Interestingly, the only people who critiqued it were educated male urbanites.

Why are the poor attracted to this but not the rich?

If you're a multimillionaire and you own a company of course a funeral is going to be lavish and bring respect, but there are other ways that person gets respect. In poor areas weddings and funerals are the main events where people can flaunt their symbolic capitol. Urbanites are also more connected to global culture. They wear the same clothes and watch the same television shows as people in Paris or New York. Their knee jerk reaction to EFCs is one of amusement or horror. No one has said this but I think the underlying issue is urbanite Taiwanese think this is an embarrassment in the eyes of the global community. Poor people are more invested in local culture and don't care what people in the US think. Globalization could potentially erase this phenomenon, that would be a pity.

Will stripper funerals ever come to the US?

Sign me up! I don't know about full nudity but I'm a huge fan of the performances. My gut reaction is it's not likely to take off in America but you have to remember there are huge Asian communities in the US. My first book was on abortion ghosts and you think, okay, that's something that's not going to happen in the US, but in fact in places like Washington and Hawaii there are now abortion ghosts. I went to a shopping mall in Charlotte, North Carolina and there was a little altar for a fetus ghost. So, I think anything can happen. But I don't think you'll see it happening in downtown Manhattan anytime soon.

Why not, are we just lame?

The US funeral tradition comes from our American Protestant heritage. The stiff upper lip, the idea that emotions are a bad thing, the puritanical disdain for celebration. America has inherited this idea that events are cold. We see this in everything from funerals to museums. If you go to a museum you have to be quiet and restrained. I suppose this is out of respect for the artists, but this is very much a social construction. There's no reason why museums have to be quiet and restrained. The same goes for funerals.

Do you think the Taiwanese have a better handle on death than we do?

In Taiwan, the dead and the living can coexist. During ghost month the gates of the underworld open and ghosts come up. There are parades and people burn incense and put out food. But I'm not sure there's a way to handle death well. It's dramatic for everyone, though I think Americans are exceptionally removed from the process. America suffers from this bowling alone phenomenon. In Taiwan, communities are much stronger. Everyone is connected to everyone else in some way. Death is something you're more aware of walking down the street in Taiwan, but I don't think people are any more emotionally ready for the event. In the end, there's no way for us to confront these emotions in a well-balanced way.

Posted by Justin on July 26th, 2011

5. MT. EVEREST, THE WORLD'S HIGHEST CEMETERY KEEPS GROWING



Peter Kinloch, a 28 year old IT specialist, had just summited Mt. Everest and was descending the mountain when he began to go blind. He lost coordination and collapsed. A trio of Nepalese Sherpas spent 12 hours trying to resuscitate him with amphetamines and oxygen but by 2 a.m., bad weather was approaching and the group was still 28,000 feet high on the mountain. They were forced to abandon his body. Months later, Peter's friend Rodney, attempting an Everest summit of his own, spotted it. "I instantly knew it was Peter," said Rodney. "You could see his face. It was like he was lying on his back taking a rest."

The body was on a dangerous ledge about 1,000 feet below the summit. Unable to reach his friend's remains, Rodney paid his respects and left him there, yet another corpse, one of more than 200 entombed on earth's highest mountain. Steep terrain, hazardous weather, lack of oxygen and the difficulty involved in packing out 200 extra pounds make it nearly impossible to get a body off the mountain. Many people remain in the same position as when they died, almost perfectly preserved because of the cold. For climbers en route to the top, corpses have become part of the scenery.

A website featuring photos of the Everest dead shows a body from 1996 in a red parka, purple snow pants and fluorescent green boots, in the lee of a rock wall with powdery snow drifted across his torso. Such a landmark is this body that it has been given a nickname, green boots. Another man lies half buried in a scree pile, with his climbing ropes still across his shoulders and his clothing ripped open across his back, revealing his pale white skin to the elements. One body is nothing but a skeleton in a sherbet colored parka, with the head cocked to the side and the teeth intact. It seems to be grinning.

Cleanups have become more common, though most have stayed below 26,000 feet, the start of the notorious "death zone", where there is one-third as much oxygen as there is at sea level and brain damage and death can set in in a matter of hours. Peter Kinloch died in the death zone. Last spring, a team of Nepali climbers headed there with special bags to collect bodies. Their aim was to retrieve five, lower them down the snowfield and carry them across

the glaciers to base camp. One was the body of a Swiss climber who died on the mountain in 2008. His family consented to him being brought down by the Sherpas and cremated. But not all families want their loved ones removed from the mountain. It's "where he'd like to have stayed," said the wife of Rob Hall, one of eight climbers to die in a blizzard near the top of Everest in the spring of 1996, a disaster that became the basis of the best-selling book *Into Thin Air*. The Sherpas don't necessarily agree bodies should be left there forever. "The mountain is also a source of water," said one.

The most famous body to be taken off Everest is also one of the first ones to be left there, George Mallory, an English mountaineer who disappeared with his climbing partner Andrew Irvine high on the northeast ridge, just a few hundred meters from the summit, in 1924. He would have been the first climber to conquer the mountain. The pair set out from base camp on June 4, it is assumed they died four days later, on June 8th, or perhaps, June 9th. Mallory's funeral was held at St. Paul's Cathedral, in London, and attended by the British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald as well as King George V and the Royal family. His body had not yet been found.

Several expeditions went looking, hoping not just for corpse closure but also to end the heated debate over whether or not Mallory reached the summit. A Chinese climber named Wang Hung-bao apparently stumbled across a dead Englishman at 26,570 feet in 1975. Based on this info, in 1986, the Mt. Everest North Face Research Expedition went looking for Mallory but were waylaid by heavy snows. In 1999, the Mallory and Irvine Research Expedition resumed the search, accompanied by Nova and BBC film crews. On May 1 they found a body and checked a name tag still readable on the clothing, it read "G. Mallory".

But the debate over whether him and Irvine made it to the summit continues. "I would love them to have got there," said climber Sir Chris Bonington, who first summited Everest in 1975. "Whether they did or not, I think that is something one just cannot know."

Posted by Justin on August 13th, 201

6. BURY ME IN A UTERUS, OR A FERRARI



Pastor Williams Ofori-Attah's Sunday sermon struck a chord his countrymen are all too familiar with, lavish funerary spending.

"Children of the dead must not be compelled to do things which their resources cannot meet," said Ofori-Attah, according to a Ghana News Agency article.

"How can the people of a nation, which is fighting to reduce poverty, continue to dissipate valuable resources on funerals," the preacher asked.

Ofori-Attah is a leader in the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, a West African country whose Ga people spend half a year's salary on some funerals. Rites include a procession of gyrating mourners that knock on the doors of both friends and enemies of the deceased, whom are transported in fantasy coffins, handcraft caskets that can take the shape of anything from a passenger jet to a uterus.

"These are not just quirky contemporary art pieces," says Christine Mullen Kreamer, a curator at the National Museum of African Art, in Washington D.C., "they fit very clearly into a longer tradition of funerary practices."

Celebratory and stylish send offs pervade the African continent but the Ga, who craft their wares in open-air shops in Teshie-Nungua, a suburb of the capitol city of Accra, have taken their handiwork global.

Special coffin orders include a Nokia mobile phone and a full-sized Ferrari by an art gallery in Moscow, a Teddy Bear by a Dutch web company, the Empire State Building by a New York journalist and a half-sized Subaru Impreza by Top Gear, a British auto show. Other shapes that have drawn attention: a carrot, a pineapple, okra, a pile of cloth, a machine gun barrel, a handsaw, a carpenter's vice, a gas truck, a beer bottle and a cigarette. Coffins can be associated with vocation, but also a vice, or a wish. "Someone buried in a KLM airplane coffin does not mean that person was a pilot, or has ever even flown," says Kreamer, "but may mean the person has always wanted to travel."

The most well-known fantasy coffin carpenter is Kane Quaye, who introduced them to the world at a 1989 exhibition in Paris called "Magiciens de la Terre" (Magicians of the Earth). Kreamer co-authored a 1994 book on Quaye called "A Life Well Lived: Fantasy Coffins of Kane Quay". His coffins have been exhibited at galleries from Moscow to New York, 12 are in a permanent exhibit at the National Museum of Funeral History, in Houston, Texas.

But not all Ghanaians agree with fantasy coffins. "The dimension which contemporary Ghanaian funerals have assumed over the last decade gives a great cause for concern if not worry," notes one Ghanaian newspaper columnist. In a 2007 article that accuses politicians of perpetrating unsound funeral customs. "Consciously or unconsciously," notes the columnist, "we seem to measure the efficiency of a minister or Member of Parliament by the number of funerals he attends every weekend!"

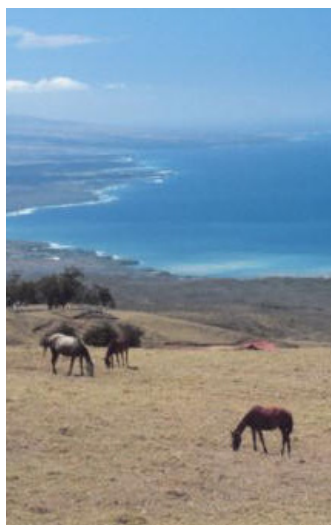
And for the church the practice can be excessive too. "Imagine going through a town of people and everyone singing, clapping, drumming, doing who knows what, like a big Mardi Gras parade," said Kreamer. "That doesn't necessarily fit with the staid celebration or prayerful event that one might adopt with a more organized Western Christian practice."

But funeral flair lies closer to home than we might think. Just this week a *New York Times* article noted that, given the tough economic times, funeral directors are offering customers more specialized funerary services, such as sports-themed urns, hearses towed by Harley-Davidsons (for bikers), and funeral guides that come with wildflower seeds (for gardeners).

Ironically, when Quaye passed away in 1992, he chose not to be buried in a fantasy coffin. Instead, his children etched into the side of a normal wooden casket the simple tools of their father's trade, a saw, a plane, a level.

Posted by Justin on April 22nd, 2009

7. GORILLAS, PARROTS AND HORSES COMMIT SUICIDE TOO



An 8 year-old lowland gorilla named Muchana was found dead in his sleeping quarters at the St. Louis Zoo, last Spring. He had pulled apart his climbing rope and become entangled. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) claimed negligence, pointing out that the zoo had been fined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the connection with the death of two polar bears in 2007. Some reports suggested that Muchana may have committed suicide. Native American beliefs accommodate such an outcome, but what about Western ones?

"It has been asserted that 'mere brutes' never commit suicide," reads an article in *The Popular Science Monthly*, from 1878. "This is a wanton, it might be said an impudent, assumption."

Birds, reptiles and other caged animals can persistently refuse food; isn't that suicide, the article argues.

More clear-cut animal suicides exist too. The article continues: "There are many instances among domestic animals, proving that life-weariness and the determination to end miseries in a sudden manner are not confined to the human race."

The article presents the case of the dog of Mr. George Hone, of Frindsbury, in England: "The dog had been suspected of having given indications of approaching hydrophobia, and was accordingly shunned and kept as much as possible from the house. This treatment appeared to cause him much annoyance, and for some days he was observed to be moody and morose. On Thursday morning he proceeded to an intimate acquaintance of his master's at Upnar, on reaching the residence of whom, he set up a piteous cry on finding that he could not obtain admittance. After waiting at the house some little time, he was seen to go toward the river close by, when he deliberately walked down the bank, and after turning round and giving a kind of farewell howl, walked into the stream, where he kept his head under water, and in a minute or two rolled over dead."

Then there is the case of a "very wealthy gentleman's" horse: "A few nights ago a poor creature, worn to skin and bone, put an end to his existence in a very extraordinary manner. His pedigree is unknown, as he was quite a stranger. A very worthy gentleman here met him in a public market, and thinking that he could find

an employment for him, put him to work, but it was soon discovered that work was not his forte; in fact, he would do anything save work and go errands. His great delight was to roam about the fields and do mischief. People passing him used to ejaculate, 'Ugh, you ugly brute' when they saw the scowl which was continuously on his face. His master tried to win him by kindness. The kindness was lost upon him. He next tried the whip, then the cudgel, but all in vain. Work he would not. And as a last resort the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar of old was tried. He was turned out, 'but house or hault,' to eat grass with the oxen. With hungry belly and broken heart he wended his lonely way down by the Moor's Shore, passed Luckyscaup, turned the Moor's Point, and still held on his lonely way, regardless of the wondering gaze of the Pool fishermen. At length he arrived at a point opposite the wreck of the *Dalhousie*, where he stood still; and while the curiosity of the fishermen was wound to the highest pitch as to what was to follow, he, neighing loudly and tossing his old tail, rushed madly into the briny deep, got beyond his depth, held his head under water, and soon ceased to be. The fishermen conveyed the truth, although strange and startling, tidings to the respected owner, that his horse had committed suicide."

One of the strangest cases of animal suicide involves a bird. A 1901 *New York Times* article, reports the story of one Henry F. Mattjetscheck, of Hackensack, New Jersey. Mr. Mattjetscheck's parrot was "a fine talker", loved by his household and often allowed to roam far from his cage. But when the family got a pet dog, the bird was no longer the center of attention.

One afternoon, the family went out: "When the family returned it is asserted the house was filled with gas, and the trouble was located in the kitchen, where the parrot had pecked a hole through the rubber tubing leading to the gas range and allowed the gas to escape. The bird was found lying dead beside the hole he tore in the piping; Mr. Mattjetscheck asserts that it intentionally inhaled the gas to end its life."

Posted by Justin on September 29th, 2009

8. MOB FUNERALS: GOLD COFFINS, PIMPED-OUT RIDES AND MAYHEM, FROM BROOKLYN TO TRINIDAD



With a heavy police presence and a bevy of gawking onlookers, a golden coffin was carried through the streets of Montreal's Little Italy neighborhood earlier this week. Inside was the body of 42 year-old Nick Rizzuto, gunned down in broad daylight while standing beside a black Mercedes. His father Vito, considered Canada's most powerful mafia boss, is presently in a Colorado prison on racketeering charges related to three mob murders.

For Montreal, it was a noteworthy funerary event, but as crime family funerals go, the funeral procession was uneventful and the end for Nick was swift and unexpected. Mob deaths can be much worse. Salvatore Maranzano, a Sicilian-born New York mobster known as the "boss of bosses" was shot and stabbed to death in September 1931 in his Park Avenue office by four thugs posing to be detectives, a murder arranged by Salvatore "Lucky" Luciano. Carmine "Cigar" Galante, acting boss of the Bonanno crime family in the late 1970s was showered with bullets in an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn with a cigar in his mouth, having just polished off a plate of spaghetti. And then there is the unlucky end of Frankie Yale.

The Italian-American was first arrested on suspicion of homicide while still a teenager and eventually became boss of the notorious White Hand gang, which murdered its way to the top of the Brooklyn crime syndicate. Yale survived a hail of bullets ordered upon him by Bill "Wild Bill" Lovett but when Al Capone caught him hijacking his Chicago-bound booze trucks he ordered a hit Yale couldn't evade. While racing down New Utrecht Avenue in his brand new Lincoln coupe four gunmen in a Buick tore Yale and his vehicle apart with Tommy Guns.

His funeral was the most ostentatious in mob history. Mourners filled more than one hundred Cadillac limousines; nearly two-dozen additional cars were required just to carry all the flowers. Thousands lined the streets of Brooklyn for the procession, which featured a \$15,000 silver casket. One woman bolted from the crowd and spit on the gleaming coffin; Yale's thugs had murdered her husband while in bed some years earlier. Adding to the hoopla, two different women showed up claiming to be Yale's wife.

Over-the-top crime funerals aren't exclusive to mafia families. The 2008 funeral of Mark "Papa" Guardado, the 46 year-old president of the San Francisco chapter of the Hells Angels who was shot dead after a barroom brawl drew more than 2,000 Angels. They came from as far away as Australia and Germany. "We don't get along with the press," said one biker to a reporter. "And if you stick a camera in someone's face, you're asking for trouble."

Mourners led what local police claimed was the largest motorcycle procession in the history of the Bay Area, from Daly City to the Cypress Lawn Cemetery, in Colma, making a detour through San Francisco to cruise down Dolores Street, not far from where Guardado was killed. Some bikers were involved a minor collision en route.

Gangster funerary mayhem occurs outside the United States too. A pastor in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago posted the following comment on the website of the nation's local newspaper: "Over the past 15 years these eyes of mine have been privy to what can best be described as a very disturbing trend...When a notorious gangster is slain in this country, he is usually forgotten as members of the public rejoice that the only good gangster is a dead one. But what we forget is that these gangsters have fellow gangster friends and family members who attend their funerals en masse, resulting in what can only be described as total mayhem, mass hysteria, and wild uncontrollable behavior in the hallowed grounds of the cemetery.

At the burial site the scene is one of loud bravado and cartel music blaring from speakers mounted in pimped-out rides, incessant flowing and consumption of alcohol, marijuana smoking, loud cursing and swearing of revenge on the police and rival gangsters who deprived them of the company of their slain 'homie.' It is extremely unfair to other grieving mourners who must stand by helplessly and watch as these elements literally take over the cemetery with their nonsense. Mourners from other funerals are also put at risk since these gangsters never go anywhere without 'packing heat' (wearing guns) around their waists. These gangster funerals are a haven for criminals (wanted and unwanted), usual suspects, and men for whom there are outstanding warrants."

Posted by Justin on January 9th, 2010

9. WORLD'S LONGEST FUNERAL, ON A CRAMPED CARGO SHIP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC



The rumble of a ship's engine is pierced by a human wail. A topless woman in a skirt woven from hibiscus fiber crawls across a deck strewn with baggage and begins weeping over a simple wood coffin that has been wrapped in a blue tarp and decorated with flowery wreaths. Other women join and a tearful song emerges, sung in a local dialect called Woleaian. The melody contains ear-splitting shrieks, pleasant moans and long undulating wails; it continues for over an hour.

I am on a ship traveling through the atolls of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), an isolated island nation on the western edge of the Pacific. The ship, the *Caroline Voyager* is primarily a cargo ship and the few available cabins have gone to health officials who are aboard to deliver H1N1 vaccinations to the islanders. The several hundred passengers, mostly islanders themselves, home-bound, are camped in whatever crannies they can find. People sleep in hammocks hung in the rigging and under tarps tied to the rails. They lie wedged in narrow companionways and atop the heaps of coconuts that fill practically every inch of deck space. Or, like me, they sleep on a wood platform under a large green tent in the center of the ship, amidst a litter of luggage, bins of food and the coffin.

A dozen men carried it aboard in Colonia, the largest town in Yap—one of four states in FSM—and where our journey began. I am told that the young man inside had a drinking problem and died of liver failure. His body is headed for Satawal, a low-lying atoll and the most remote island in Yap state. The trip will take a patience-wearying two weeks, but is the only way to reach his home island.

The main island of Yap has a large hospital, several schools, the state's government offices and a small tourism industry. Atoll inhabitants come to main Yap for temporary work or treatment at the hospital but often end up staying. Some even raise their own families there, in newly constructed communities built specifically for them. But atoll inhabitants can't own land on main Yap, and as of yet, there is no cemetery for them. When they die their bodies are held in the morgue until the next ship out.

An ancient trade system known as sawei separated the atoll inhabitants from the people of main Yap. Sawei was a system in which atoll people periodically voyaged to main Yap to pay tribute to chiefs and exchange goods. They brought woven loincloths, twine and belts of scarce shells and received turmeric, bamboo and pots. They stayed with local chiefs on main Yap, who provided lodging, but required them to work their estates and wear specific clothing. They were barred from political power and couldn't own land. Today the restrictions have loosened considerably, but it still may be some time until atoll people get their own cemetery on main Yap, locals officials tell me.

Which means journeys like the one I am on now, filled with funerary singing, will continue. As the *Voyager* cuts through large chaotic Pacific swells, the women have stopped wailing and are now humming a soft hymn-like song. They are no longer weeping and children have joined them. The group continues into the night, its backdrop the hum of the engine and the endless lull of the Pacific.

Posted by Justin on November 26th, 2009

10. INSIDE DEATH ROW WITH WERNER HERZOG'S NEW FILM, AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



Imagine, you're rotting in jail with an execution date looming, what are you thinking? Werner Herzog's new documentary film, *Into the Abyss*, which premiered Friday at the Toronto Film Festival, tackles this question. Digital Dying recently spoke with Harry Schleiff, a New York City based video producer who worked on the film about the surprisingly poetic language of death row inmates, how time slows in the moments before death and just what it means to be a death row groupie.

[Describe the film, is it a political statement on the death penalty?](#)

The film follows the case of Michael Perry and Jason Burkett, two 19 year olds who basically stole a car and ended up killing three people over it, a totally mindless crime. Herzog interviewed Michael Perry something like ten days before he was to be executed. He tried as hard as he could to avoid making a film explicitly about the death penalty that made some sort of statement. It's more a look into the individual situations of these people, because when you start to look into these death penalty cases absurd details surface. Herzog is interested in questions like, how does knowing when and how you're going to die affect an individual? How does knowing that change time? We interviewed a number of other death row prisoners, footage which will appear in a TV series to be released at a later date.

[How is the mind affected by a death sentence?](#)

I'll give you the example of Hank Skinner, who was in prison for killing two people and had been given an execution date. He was taken out of his cell and driven a bunch of miles chained up in the back of van with two guards who were ordered to shoot to kill if there was a problem. Skinner explains this in detail to Herzog. He's a very elegant speaker. He talks about the last trees he saw, and seeing a young girl with her mother pull up in the car behind them. She points at him, and he wonders if the girl knows he's on his way to be executed. He talks about the last meal, which is prepared by other prisoners. Usually people only eat a little bit because they're so nervous. Skinner said time slowed down an incredible amount and became not really a progression of moments as we think of it

as, but like one freezing moment. He became unaware of what time and day it was. Just before he was to be killed Skinner called his lawyer and his lawyer said, 'You have incredible timing, it turns out they're going to give you a stay'. He broke down and started crying. Then he ate all his food.

[How did these "poets" feel about the lives that they took?](#)

Burkett explains the crime as Perry having much more to do with it, and that he didn't actually kill anyone. For Perry it was vice versa. That sort of blaming the other is common. There's also a certain bravado at work here, the guys acting all gangster. Like with a man named Joseph Garcia. He got in a fight over a girl and got knocked down then chased the man down and stabbed him to death. Mostly just very stupid mistakes made by very young kids. There was one person who admitted his crime outright, this quintessentially psychopathic kind of guy who committed a horrible murder in Florida.

[What are death row groupies?](#)

Many women begin relationships with death row inmates. There's a woman in the film named Mellysa Thompson who was an advocate against death row and ended up becoming involved in the Perry-Burkett case. First she met Perry, who told her, 'Whatever you do, don't meet Burkett.' Of course, she goes and meets Burkett and ends up falling in love with him. She is educated and pretty smart but she ends up marrying this guy. She explains this whole situation of when she realized they were in love; a rainbow came from inside the prison to outside. Through some sort of covert operation she got some of his semen and was artificially inseminated and is now pregnant with his child. She is not necessarily a groupie though because she believes he's innocent and is fighting for him to be freed. Groupies are infatuated with death row men because of the allure that they have killed and that they are now condemned. For example, Scott Peterson, the San Diego man convicted of murdering his wife, has a huge following and apparently gets thousands of naked pictures sent to him.

continued...

10. INSIDE DEATH ROW WITH WERNER HERZOG'S NEW FILM, AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

...continued

What was the physical space of death row like?

The walls of the visitation rooms were painted in hushed bleak tones. We were interviewing through bullet proof glass in most cases, or mesh wire. People scratch their names and messages in the glass. We went to a cemetery about a mile and a half out from the prison where they bury death row inmates in unmarked graves. Other prisoners dig the graves. You're buried by your number. A lot of these people don't have family members to bury them. The execution chamber has like four or five rooms, each with different names, there's a long hallway some people call the green mile. At the end of it there's a shower and a room where the inmates spend their final moments. There is a bible on the table and inmates can request certain things. We interviewed a captain of the tie-down team. He said the craziest request was when a prisoner told him, 'I would love to smoke a doobie right now.' The guy was like, 'Sorry, no can do.'

Was hanging around death row haunting?

I'm 22 and saw a kid who must have been my age or younger, he looked South American. We made eye contact, it was very bizarre, thinking that it could be you on the other side of the glass. There's a very thin separation between human beings on some level, and you end up thinking, how big would the change have to be for me to be in there and him to be outside. The most terrifying thing for me is that it's our closest attempt at a systematized way to kill someone. I think it's even more terrifying than some of the more archaic ways of execution, like say being stoned to death. To be put down an assembly line where everything from the design of the cell to the design of your chamber is part of the process. Herzog claims it was one the more intense filmmaking experiences of his life, and when this guy says he has an intense experience I think he can really mean it because he has done a lot of things. He told me that while editing he usually works from 9 to 5 but with this film he could only edit for five hours a day because the footage was so intense. And he started smoking cigarettes again.

Posted by Justin on September 14th, 2011