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Death Is Having a Moment

Fueled by social networking, the growing “death movement” is a reaction against the sanitization of death that has persisted in American culture since the 1800s.

ERIKA HAYASAKI | OCT 25 2013, 9:15 AM ET

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The crowd at the Bootleg Theater in Los Angeles during the Death Salon cabaret. (Elli Papayanopoulos)

Last Friday night, onstage at a Los Angeles venue known for featuring indie bands, a goateed historian in a vintage purple corduroy suit and silver silk shirt beguiled a room packed with artists, writers, scholars, morticians, and other curious observers, with his research into bejeweled skeletons from the Roman Catacombs.

The topic of the night was death, but not in a horror-filled, Halloweeny way. The gathering drew an intellectually hip and increasingly death-conscious crowd of mostly 20 and 30-somethings, who had waited in a long line outside of the Bootleg Theater to get in. They sipped bottles of La Fin Du Monde and plastic cups of Populist beer from the Eagle Rock Brewery, and perused copies of the Lapham’s Quarterly death [issue](#) between cabaret acts, which included a soulful shaggy-haired death gospel singer, a writer of death and obscure history, and a funeral director.

The weekend-long [Death Salon](#) also featured presentations on decomposable [garments](#) for the grave, discussions on feminism and the funeral industry, and a

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Saturday night death soiree in Silverlake with “funerary treats,” like cupcakes topped with edible tombstones. The event was part of a recent surge of people trying to demystify death through social and educational gatherings, one that is spreading across the U.S. and beyond with death [dinners](#), death [cafes](#) (talking death over tea and cake), and waitlisted death-related [classes](#) on college campuses.

“You have this critical mass of interest. Death is fascinating,” said 29-year-old Caitlin Doughty, who has been called a [hipster mortician](#), but prefers “macabre nerd.” A Death Salon organizer and host of the YouTube series, “[Ask a Mortician](#),” Doughty is enthused that the broader public is finally beginning to appreciate death as she does. “What if all of a sudden being involved with your own mortality is cool?”

"Often people are afraid to bring death up at all, but celebrating and talking about it in an open dialogue can be healthy."

Forty years ago, the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker claimed that fear of our own mortality was the fundamental motivator behind all human behavior. But could popularizing death through social settings help it become less scary for the rest of us? Some scholars think so, since prolonged exposure to death in comfortable environments, where dying is viewed as an essential part of living, has shown decreases in death anxiety.

“What’s interesting about people flocking to these parties is that a lot of people want to have those conversations in a private arena,” said Laura Harrawood, a professor of counseling at McKendree University, who has studied death anxiety. “Often people are afraid to bring death up at all,” she said, but “celebrating and talking about it in an open dialogue can be healthy.”

On stage at the Death Salon’s Friday night cabaret, a medical historian wearing a corset and fitted pencil skirt spoke of seeing her first cadaver. Lindsey Fitzharris recalled how a pathologist handed her the heart and kidney, and she fell into the detachment of the dissection. “Everything was on display,” she said. “All the muscles, and all of the tendons. Then my eyes fell on her hands. On her fingertips was a red fiery nail polish. I will remember that until the day I die.”

“This is even cooler than I thought it would be,” said Savannah Dooley, a 28-year-old television writer who professed to have no particular obsession with death. She stumbled upon the Death Salon on Facebook and decided to bring a date. “For someone not comfortable with death, this makes it accessible.”

* * *

Fueled by social networking and the Internet, the growing “death movement” is a reaction against the sanitization of death that has persisted in American culture since the 1800s, with the rise of embalming bodies to make them look lifelike, or having loved ones die in hospice or in hospitals instead of at home, said Megan Rosenbloom, head of metadata and content for the Norris Medical Library of the University of Southern California, and Death Salon organizer.

“Too often people experience the untimely death of a loved one and are thrown into their own existential tailspin,” Rosenbloom said. “You realize you’re going to die someday, and wonder how could someone your age die? What happens is people have a selfish response to other people’s deaths. The more you deny it and try to be separate from it, the more people are psychically destroyed when it happens in their lives.”



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In recent decades, psychological researchers have developed ways to measure the emotional reactions that emerge when considering death, using surveys like the Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale (MFODS), which assesses areas like fear of being destroyed, fear of a conscious death, and fear of the body after death.

These researchers have found that jobs in which workers jump from one tragedy to another, like critical care [nurses](#), can lead to increased death fears, as can jobs in which people put their lives at constant risk, like [police and firefighters](#), who score higher on death anxiety scales than college faculty and business students.



Medical historian Lindsey Fitzharris discusses anatomical specimens she has encountered in her work. (Elli Papayanopoulos)

That makes sense to Doughty, whose work in the death business over the last six years, has allowed her to handle the corpses of everyone from babies to drug addicts to elderly people who committed suicide. “If you’re getting little snippets of death in a horror movie or on the news—like those women who died in a [limo fire](#)—yeah it’s going to train you to be in this cycle of fear, absolutely,” she said. “They are little fear bombs that go off in your mind and reinforce a pattern of terror.”

Relying on the media to understand death isn’t realistic, she said. A University of Minnesota [study](#) suggested the same when it found that students who watched 10 episodes of “Six Feet Under” over a period of five weeks had a mild increase in fear of death, although they showed less fear about what happens to the body after death, and less fear of being destroyed.

In contrast, those who work in professions like Doughty’s, with the most intimate, at times prolonged exposure to individuals’ deaths, such as hospice care workers, medical students, physicians, and [suicide prevention workers](#), show lower levels of death anxiety.

Harrawood of McKendree University conducted a study in 2009 that measured the death anxiety of 243 U.S. [funeral directors](#), and found that those who had been in the business longer showed less fear of death than their younger counterparts, suggesting that “daily conscious acceptance of death,” decreases fear.

In other studies, those close to dying, such as the [elderly](#) or [terminally ill](#) also showed lower levels of death anxiety, indicating that coming to terms with the end can make it more acceptable, wisdom that [younger](#) and healthier people

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could learn from.

“A person needs to be exposed over a longer period of time in a rational way,” Doughty said. “Reading, talking about it, watching documentaries, going to cemeteries and sitting and thinking about your mortality. Not seeing a quick glimpse of a body without makeup, but actually sitting with the body for period of days and letting it be normalized.” She plans to open a funeral home that allows families to wash, dress, and sit with their dead loved ones, instead of sending them off for someone else to embalm.

Doughty believes your relationship with death is one of the most important you will have in life. “It’s constant work,” said Doughty. “It’s not like I reached a certain point and was like, ‘death, I’m so comfortable. I can die whenever. YOLO!’”

But speaking earnestly and intelligently about death and loss can help us integrate it into our lives more fully, and develop more comfort with it, said Robert A. Neimeyer, editor of *Death Studies*, the leading professional journal in the field, and an author of books on death anxiety and grief therapy.

“Whether frank and courageous conversation about death and loss takes place in a classroom, therapist’s office, church or temple, or the local Starbucks,” Neimeyer said, “my guess is that it can help us explore and articulate frameworks of meaning for negotiating the often unwelcome transitions that confront us all.”

* * *

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker said awareness of our own death made each of us want to engage in activities that rendered us unique, reaching a level of “immortality” by leaving our mark on the world, and impelling us to look for permanence in our kids and careers, art and architecture, religions and cultures. This desire, he said, steers our decisions, including ideologies, fellowships, and fashion choices.

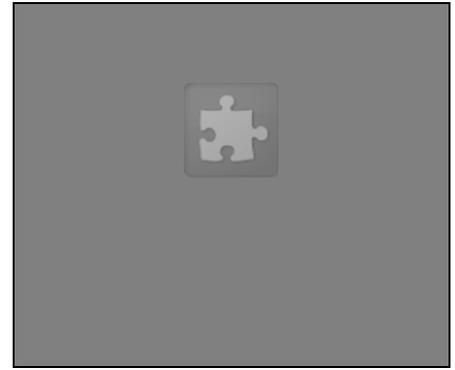
“When I came to the Death Salon, I was really curious about who would be here,” said Allison de Fren, a filmmaker in the audience who spoke during the question and answer session of a Friday afternoon Death Salon panel. Held at [The Center for Inquiry](#) in Hollywood, the panel featured a professional dominatrix who had worked in “death play,” a medical-humanist scholar trained in 18th century literature, an alternative mortician, and the founder of Morbid Anatomy, a Brooklyn-based museum and library.

Each human's constructed identity is "an elaborate drapery that provides us with the fortitude to carry on despite the uniquely human awareness of our mortal fate."

“I would say there is a particular aesthetic going on,” de Fren said, glancing around the room and noting the number of women wearing cat-eye glasses, and that most appeared to be in their 30s. One wore a Raggedy Ann-style vintage dress and had bright pink hair. Another, a kimono top and a side mullet. Plenty sported straight across fringe bangs.

Like Becker, psychologists who work in [Terror Management Theory \(TMT\)](#), believe that each human’s constructed identity is a [shield](#), an “elaborate drapery that provides us with the

fortitude to carry on despite the uniquely human awareness of our mortal fate.”



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It could be argued that death get-togethers are simply expressions of deep-rooted death denial. No matter how much we might claim to be unafraid of death, or believe that we can be, fear of it always catches up to us, festering in our psyche. We can try to tackle our obvious death fears together, but it will still remain in the collective and individual subconscious.

“What is the fundamental root of human behavior?” Doughty said. “I think it’s death. I agree with Becker. I think about what I’m doing every day working to bring awareness of death into the culture. That is my own hero project. Absolutely. But I try to be aware of that.”

At the Death Salon cabaret, Paul Koudounaris, the scholar who researches bejeweled skeletons, gave a slideshow of anonymous skulls from the late 16th century. They were believed to be the remains of early Christian martyrs. He told the story of how he had been photographing in Germany one day when a local asked if he would be interested in seeing a skeleton covered in jewels holding a cup of its own blood.

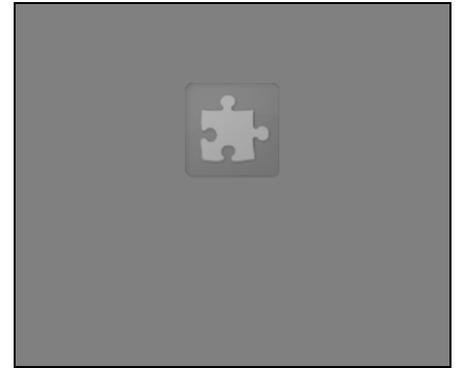
“That’s like asking a child if he wants candy. Would you be interested in chocolate rivers?”

Koudounaris said the man told him to go through a path in the forest, to an old, dilapidated church. “If you pull off the boards on a side alter you’re going to find something splendid,” he remembered the man telling him. “And indeed I did.”

They turned out to be the finest works of art ever created in human bone.

Building rituals, scholarship, art, and community around death may have arisen out of subconscious fear as forms of “symbolic immortality,” which allow people to feel like a part of something larger. But some might argue that these cultural creations are needed to protect us from our own realization that we are “animals groping to survive in a meaningless universe,” as TMT theorists put it, who turn into, “complex and fancy worm food,” as Becker wrote.

The Los Angeles Death Salon was the first of its kind, but there will be one in England in 2014, and in Cleveland in 2015, opportunities for the public to glimpse what can be revealed, sometimes splendidly, when what is peeled back is not the necessarily absolute fear, but the layers of death itself.



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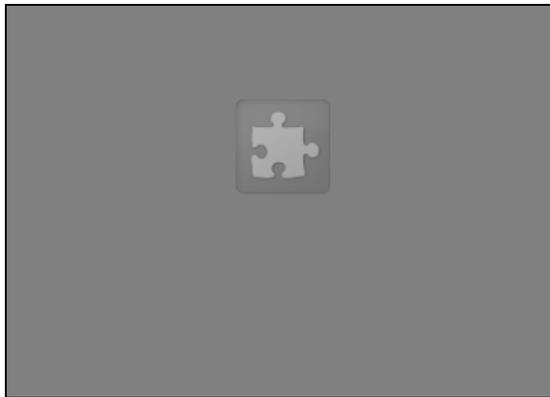


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Slätlantican • 6 days ago

I must admit I find this topic fascinating; the need to demystify death is something that has been brought to my attention in the past by members of a profession that might surprise some people: Farmers.

When I was growing up in a small town, many of my classmates were the children of farmers. I had completely unconnected conversations with the father of one of those friends and the grandmother of another who bemoaned the way we now die: not only in sterile hospitals, but separated from our families and young children, who they felt got a distorted view of death because they never saw it. They were keen on having their own children at least experiencing death by, for one example, quickly bringing them to the scene if an animal had an accident and could not be saved. Or, if an animal's death was planned, because it was sick and suffering, for example, they would involve their children in the planning, both to demystify it but also to give the occasion a sense of gravity and to make sure there was a sense of honor for the animal.

They had related views on reproduction, but that's for another time . . .

17 ^ | ▾ • Share ›



Augustulus → Slätlantican • 6 days ago

Just to be serious for a moment, this new death acceptance movement, whatever you want to call it, is not going to work. If you read the memoirs of holocaust survivors, for example, they talk about how many of them, when faced with imminent execution in the camps, would do anything to survive just a few minutes longer. The experience of people who actually find themselves in life and death situations is one of extreme panic, and a willingness to do anything to stay alive a bit longer, to fight to the maximum, to do a Sophie's Choice even and sacrifice a child to buy more life. It's awful, but that's reality. This death poetry, death salons, is just a self-deluding fantasy of upper class twits, who are still healthy, privileged and protected, and who know very little about real life.

20 ^ | 4 ▾ • Share ›



Slätlantican → Augustulus • 6 days ago

This death poetry, death salons, is just a self-deluding fantasy of upper class twits, who are still healthy, privileged and protected, and who know very little about real life.

Oh, I'm quite sure my farmer friends would agree. As do I.

1 ^ | ▾ • Share ›



Alexa Raigh → Slätlantican • 6 days ago

I'm going to have to humbly disagree on this one. I went last Friday, and found that the crowd, while interested in spooky cat eye liner (though who isn't?) had a very mature attitude about

their own mortality and that of loved ones. I met more than one person who said, "I wish I had a more personalized funeral experience for my mother," or "I would do something different with myself." Wheels were turning, intellectually speaking, about how we handle death in our culture, and how removed from it we are.

In terms of your accusation that your "Farmer friends" would agree, that those of us there are all upper class twits, I think that's really arrogant of you. You don't know other people's lives, or what they're bringing to the table. It's completely unfair of you to assume such things. I personally have lived on a farm in down state New York, and yes, animal death is more apparent there than in Los Angeles, but in terms of human death, that's a different matter. Being reminded that everyone dies is a very comforting experience. Especially since I personally (and therefore I'm sure other people there) spend much of my free time in the chemotherapy wing of a hospital with a family member. Countless times I've heard someone getting "Bad News" and thought how terribly unfair that was, and it hurts. But events like this remind me that everyone goes at one time or another, and while that might not seem fair, that's part of the bargain of being alive. All we are able to do is make the best of the time that is allotted to us.

12 ^ | v • Share ›



Slätlantican → Alexa Raigh • 5 days ago

Alexa, first of all, thanks for sharing your experience.

I never questioned that intellectual wheels are turning, merely whether they were accomplishing anything. I think you did at least a passable job of showing that such meetings can be purposeful.

As to whether or not the people that go to such things are "upper class twits", well, I guess that just goes to show that the Internet does not always bring out the best in all of us. But your reply provides an example both of cogency and civility, and I apologize for not being likewise.

4 ^ | v • Share ›



Guest → Slätlantican • 6 days ago

Alexa Raigh, this is in reply to your comment replying my Farmers & Twits post, because apparently it won't let me post directly to you because your comment is being "moderated", whatever that's all about:

Alexa, first of all, thanks for sharing your experience.

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