



## Considering How Cultural Differences Influence the END-OF-LIFE Experience

BY KAREN REPPEN

Do you know why many Jews cover the mirrors in their homes while mourning the death of a family member? Do you consider a person is "going home" or "going to heaven" when they die? Do you understand why it's customary for someone of the Islamic faith be buried within 24 hours of death? Are you aware why sugar skulls are part of Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) remembrance celebrations? Do you know what "keening" is?

There's one thing we know for certain: we will all die. But how, when, where, and why is different for each of us. Whether we are ill or injured; young or old; or of

different culture, race, ethnicity, gender, vocation, education, marital status, sexual orientation, economic status, and geographic location, these along with family and social relationships and many other life experiences all influence how we deal with aging, illness, injury, death, and grief.

In some cultures, death is seen as a punishment, curse, or the result of some transgression or failure that results in a permanent end. In others, it's seen as a loving companion that brings liberation and welcomed transformation into another realm of ancestors in a glorious afterlife.

Culture also influences how those approaching death are cared for, determining roles of family members, friends, and their faith community as well as professional caregivers: medical staff, hospice, end-of-life doulas, etc. It also affects decisions about pain management; medications; remedies; and the use of complementary therapies like Reiki, aromatherapy, and even hallucinogens.

How a person's body is handled after death, including the way a person's body is cleansed and dressed, who touches the body, if the body is viewed before disposition at home or

in a funeral home, embalmed, buried conventionally or naturally, cremated, or dealt with otherwise, is also influenced by culture.

One of the most prominent cultural differences is how the dead are memorialized. Ceremonies vary from small private family gatherings to large public celebrations, and from highly structured formal church services to raucous new-age party celebrations of life. Some cultures prefer to do nothing at all.

Grief, too, is expressed quite differently from one culture to another. Some emphasize an open display of grief and even incorporate paid mourners to cry and wail loudly—a practice that is in stark contrast to solemn, quiet, private expression common elsewhere.

Cultural beliefs and practices can give meaning to the mystery and the messiness of death; they help people make sense out of a time that may otherwise be quite chaotic and confusing. However, as technology and medicine continue to progress and our society ages and becomes more diverse, beliefs and behaviors around death will keep changing. It's not surprising that more people are developing completely new and personalized practices designed around their own unique circumstances—attending a death-related event can be a baffling experience.

Whether we recognize it as such or not, death is a community event, and it's important to be aware of at least some of the cultural variations related to it. There are many comparative summaries available that describe how different

cultures deal with the end of life. Doing an internet search for "cultural diversity at the end of life" will bring up several great resources, including those listed below.

We must remember that these sources provide only general guidelines that reinforce the fact that differences are the rule rather than the exception. The best way to learn is to simply ask people about how they approach these matters. Just as important as being familiar with others' perspectives on death and recognizing our own learned core beliefs and their origins can help us avoid ethnocentric views and the myths of universality, propriety, and permanence.

Recognizing, understanding, and celebrating how different cultures approach death is important, especially in an increasingly diverse society. By doing so, we're able to support our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and the greater society more effectively, which ultimately reduces suffering and increases the chances that we coexist in greater harmony.

*Karen Reppen is a death awareness educator and end-of-life doula, grief support specialist, hospice advocate, celebrant, and writer.*



### RESOURCES

[hospiceofcincinnati.org/wp-content/uploads/HospiceOfCincinnatiRespectingDiversity.pdf](http://hospiceofcincinnati.org/wp-content/uploads/HospiceOfCincinnatiRespectingDiversity.pdf)

[lmpc.org.au/admin/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Customs-Beliefs-Death-Dying.pdf](http://lmpc.org.au/admin/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Customs-Beliefs-Death-Dying.pdf)

### DO-NOT-RESUSCITATE BRACELETS

Direct emergency medical technicians, first responders, and emergency healthcare facilities' personnel. See also the Advance Healthcare Directives in the Essential Preparation section or Legal in the General section to set up advance healthcare directives which can detail your wishes when you are unable.

**DO-NOT-RESUSCITATE  
BRACELETS (DNR) INFO**  
(608) 266-1568  
[dhs.wisconsin.gov/ems/dnr.htm](http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/ems/dnr.htm)

### FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICES

**FOSTER FUNERAL & CREMATION SERVICE**  
(608) 661-3678 or (844) 363-7193  
[fosterfuneralhomes.com](http://fosterfuneralhomes.com)

### GUNDERSON FUNERAL AND CREMATION CARE

5203 Monona Dr., Madison 53716  
(608) 221-5420  
[gundersonfh.com](http://gundersonfh.com)

Dedicated to meeting the wishes of the families that we serve. Our priority is to provide personalized and meaningful celebrations of life at a fair value. We offer comfort and attention that our clients deserve, and support them in one of the most difficult times in their lives.

### WALKING EACH OTHER HOME

(608) 444-8327  
[walkingeachotherhomemadison.org](http://walkingeachotherhomemadison.org)  
[facebook.com/walkingeachotherhomemadison](http://facebook.com/walkingeachotherhomemadison)

Information and support for those considering home funerals and natural burials. Educating and empowering families, individuals, and communities in preparing and caring for their own after death.