

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





Thank you - your ongoing membership makes Leonardo English possible.

If you have questions we'd love to hear from you: [hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com)

---

**Episode #097**

**Death Around The World**

**12th Oct, 2020**

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Death around the world, what happens when we die, how that is celebrated, or remembered in different countries all over the world, and talk a bit about the future of what happens when we die.

## Death Around The World

[00:00:41] It is going to be a bit of a [morbid](#)<sup>1</sup> episode, it's all about death, but how this human [inevitability](#)<sup>2</sup> is celebrated is a fascinating subject, so if you excuse the fact that the entire episode is about death, I hope you'll find it to be an interesting one.

[00:00:59] OK then, we've got that [disclaimer](#)<sup>3</sup> out of the way, so let's begin.

[00:01:04] Death happens to all of us. It's the one human experience that every single person will get to experience, even if that might not be a pleasant thought.

[00:01:17] And despite it being a shared human experience, there is a lack of common understanding about what exactly happens when you die.

[00:01:28] Physically, we know, of course.

[00:01:31] Whether it's through disease, a road accident, old age or anything in between, your heart stops, blood stops going to your brain, the [kidneys](#)<sup>4</sup> and [liver](#)<sup>5</sup>, you become [lifeless](#)<sup>6</sup> and stop moving, and it's then that a doctor will give as the 'time of death'.

---

<sup>1</sup> relating to death

<sup>2</sup> something that is certain to happen

<sup>3</sup> a formal statement saying that you don't take responsibility for something

<sup>4</sup> the pair of small organs that take waste from the blood

<sup>5</sup> the large organ that cleans the blood

<sup>6</sup> dead, not moving

## Death Around The World

[00:01:50] This much we know, but what happens after that both physically and [spiritually](#)<sup>7</sup> depends on where you live, your culture, and your religion.

[00:02:02] You could say that this is the biggest unknown in the world.

[00:02:07] Death is a [one-way street](#)<sup>8</sup>, there's no asking someone what it was like when they died.

[00:02:15] The closest that we can get to that is [accounts](#)<sup>9</sup> of people who have supposedly come back from the dead, who have come back to life after their heart stopped.

[00:02:27] Stories of people whose hearts have stopped often include visions of bright lights, being [revisited](#)<sup>10</sup> by children and loved ones, and them being in an almost dream-like state.

---

<sup>7</sup> relating to your spirit, not your body

<sup>8</sup> a journey with no return

<sup>9</sup> witness statements, stories

<sup>10</sup> visited again

## Death Around The World

[00:02:40] But most scientists are pretty [sceptical](#)<sup>11</sup> of these, and these strange visions are normally just [attributed](#)<sup>12</sup> to a lack of oxygen in the brain, which causes this [lucid-type](#)<sup>13</sup> of dreaming.

[00:02:55] Of course, the simple, rational, scientific [atheist](#)<sup>14</sup> answer to what happens when we die is 'absolutely nothing', but that would make for quite a short episode.

[00:03:08] So we are going to talk about some of the other ideas about what happens, how this is celebrated, and why.

[00:03:17] Even going back to prehistoric times, there has been a belief that there is something more that happens when we die, that there is something [non-corporeal](#)<sup>15</sup>, not relating to our bodies, that happens when our bodies stop working.

[00:03:33] The belief about exactly what this is, how it works, and what happens to it varies a lot, but we can group it together as being the idea of something like a soul.

[00:03:46] Something that is part of us that continues to exist after we die.

---

<sup>11</sup> doubting, not believing

<sup>12</sup> explained by

<sup>13</sup> (of a dream) feeling real and awake

<sup>14</sup> not believing in Gods or the supernatural

<sup>15</sup> not relating to the body

## Death Around The World

[00:03:52] It has been a topic for philosophers and religious thinkers for centuries, and different religions and cultures have developed different ideas for how it relates to the body, and what happens when we die.

[00:04:06] The ancient Egyptians and ancient Chinese believed in an idea of a dual-soul, that your soul was formed of two parts, one which stayed near the body and another that proceeded to the [afterlife](#)<sup>16</sup>.

[00:04:23] The Ancient Greeks [battled](#)<sup>17</sup> with the idea of the [soul](#)<sup>18</sup>, with Epicureans considering it to be made up of [atoms](#)<sup>19</sup>, like the rest of the body, but Platonists, the [disciples](#)<sup>20</sup> of Plato, believing it to be made out of nothing, not part of the material world at least.

[00:04:42] Aristotle believed that everything that was alive, from humans to plants, have souls, and it's indeed the existence of a soul that makes something alive.

---

<sup>16</sup> a life that some people believe begins after death

<sup>17</sup> if people battle with an idea, they debate it

<sup>18</sup> the spiritual part of a person that some people believe continues to exist after death

<sup>19</sup> the smallest chemical unit

<sup>20</sup> people who believe and follow the ideas of someone else

## Death Around The World

[00:04:55] And early Christians accepted this Greek idea of the [immortality](#)<sup>21</sup> of the soul, that the soul was something that was created by God at [conception](#)<sup>22</sup>, and lived forever, even after death.

[00:05:10] We could of course go on forever talking about the different interpretations of the soul, but the point is that there seems to be a shared human belief throughout different cultures and traditions all over the world that there is something that continues to exist after death.

[00:05:29] In the West at least, we aren't very good at talking about death.

[00:05:34] It's quite a [taboo](#)<sup>23</sup>, and if you bring up death in conversation with someone, they probably will think you are very weird, rude, [creepy](#)<sup>24</sup>, or a combination of all three.

[00:05:48] Most of us, thankfully of course, don't have that much contact with death, and when we do have contact with it, it's normally an elderly relative.

[00:05:59] This doesn't make it any less difficult to deal with of course, but it does make it quite infrequent.

---

<sup>21</sup> living forever

<sup>22</sup> the time when a woman falls pregnant

<sup>23</sup> a subject or word that is avoided by a society

<sup>24</sup> strange or unnatural

## Death Around The World

[00:06:07] Just going back 200 years though, the situation was very different.

[00:06:12] In Victorian England, in 1840, the average age of death was 29, and one in six babies died before they were a year old. In the worst [slum](#)<sup>25</sup> areas of industrial towns of England, the most [deprived](#)<sup>26</sup> areas, the average age of death was just 13 years old.

[00:06:37] Having a child, [sibling](#)<sup>27</sup> or parent that died was completely normal.

[00:06:43] I'm sure it didn't make it any less painful when your child died, but it was far more frequent than it thankfully now is in the West.

[00:06:52] And the fact that death was so frequent, so [commonplace](#)<sup>28</sup>, back in Victorian England is actually one of the reasons for the creation of what to us now might seem like one of the strangest death traditions, something called the Death Portrait.

[00:07:11] When a family member died, whether that was a parent or a child, families would often [commission](#)<sup>29</sup> a photo to be taken, a family portrait of the alive family members together with the dead one.

---

<sup>25</sup> a very poor and crowded area

<sup>26</sup> very poor and not having basic amenities

<sup>27</sup> brother or sister

<sup>28</sup> happening often

<sup>29</sup> to pay for something to happen



## Death Around The World

[00:07:27] In the case of a young child, it might be the only photo that would exist of them, so it would be the only record that they would have of the child.

[00:07:38] They would get a professional photographer to come and take the picture, and the dead person would be **propped up**<sup>30</sup>, made to stand up, or put in a chair, with their eyes open looking at the camera, as if they were alive.

[00:07:54] The photographer might edit the photograph afterwards - not in Photoshop, of course, but they would edit the photograph by painting on it, to make the dead person look, well, not so dead.

[00:08:07] If you have seen any of these photos they truly are bizarre to us in the 21st century, but you can understand why they did them.

[00:08:17] They might be the only way that the family would have to remember what the **deceased**<sup>31</sup> person looked like, and serve as a **memento**<sup>32</sup> of that person's life, no matter how short it might have been.

[00:08:30] Nowadays, depending on what country you live in, your religion and your culture, any number of things might happen to you after you die.

---

<sup>30</sup> lifted and held in a position

<sup>31</sup> dead, not moving

<sup>32</sup> something that helps you remember someone or something

## Death Around The World

[00:08:41] You might be [cremated](#)<sup>33</sup>, burned, and buried.

[00:08:44] You might be [embalmed](#)<sup>34</sup>, filled with [formaldehyde](#)<sup>35</sup>, a chemical to preserve your body, and laid to rest on a table in the living room so that family members can pay their respects.

[00:08:56] You might be buried quickly facing Mecca.

[00:08:59] Any number of different things may happen, and we certainly shouldn't pass judgment on what is right or wrong.

[00:09:08] Today though, we are going to talk about some of the more [unorthodox](#)<sup>36</sup> death traditions, things that might surprise you.

[00:09:17] Our first death tradition is of the Toraja people in Indonesia.

[00:09:23] When a Toraja person dies, they aren't buried or [cremated](#).

[00:09:28] Instead, they are treated as if they are just sick, not actually dead. Time is required to prepare for a proper funeral, which can take weeks, months or years.

---

<sup>33</sup> (of a body) burned

<sup>34</sup> (of a body) treated with chemicals to prevent it decaying

<sup>35</sup> a chemical used to preserve dead bodies

<sup>36</sup> different or unusual

## Death Around The World

[00:09:41] Until that time, the dead person is treated with a mixture of water and [formaldehyde](#) to preserve the body, and they are kept in the house, as if they're still alive.

[00:09:53] Their relatives take time to prepare for the funeral, and then a huge party is held to celebrate their life. The idea is that death isn't an immediate black and white thing, and so this process makes it easier to deal with.

[00:10:11] Only after this big funeral are they buried. But they aren't laid to rest forever.

[00:10:18] Indeed, every few years their bodies are dug up, they are taken out of their graves, dressed up into clothes, and they are [paraded<sup>37</sup>](#) around, introduced to new family members, and treated as if they were still alive.

[00:10:36] So for the Toraja people death is a [fluid<sup>38</sup>](#) process, the line between life and death is grey, and they never really treat their dead as if their lives have properly ended.

[00:10:51] Next up in our list of [unorthodox](#) deaths around the world is what's called the Sky Burial in Tibet.

[00:11:00] Tibet, as you may know, is high up in the Himalayas.

---

<sup>37</sup> taken or moved around (in celebration)

<sup>38</sup> not fixed

## Death Around The World

[00:11:04] The ground is often frozen, meaning it's hard to dig into it to bury someone, and there isn't much wood, so it's hard to make a fire to [cremate](#) someone, to burn their body.

[00:11:19] Especially in poorer areas of rural Tibet, what happens is that the [corpses](#)<sup>39</sup> of the dead, the bodies of people who have died, are left out to be eaten by [scavengers](#)<sup>40</sup>, by birds such as [vultures](#)<sup>41</sup>.

[00:11:36] It's an incredibly spiritual event, with monks [chanting](#)<sup>42</sup> prayers around the body, cleaning it, wrapping it in cloth, then taking it up to a burial site before it is broken into pieces and left to be eaten by the [vultures](#).

[00:11:55] The [vultures](#) eating the body serve two purposes.

[00:12:01] Firstly, Tibetan Buddhists believe in [reincarnation](#)<sup>43</sup> and these [vultures](#) represent angels, taking the body to the heavens to be [reincarnated](#) as something else in another life.

---

<sup>39</sup> dead bodies

<sup>40</sup> animals that eat other animals that they haven't killed

<sup>41</sup> large birds that eat dead animals

<sup>42</sup> singing or saying a phrase continuously

<sup>43</sup> the belief that a dead person's spirit is reborn in another body

## Death Around The World

[00:12:14] And secondly, by allowing the [vultures](#) to eat the body, this saves the life of another animal that the [vultures](#) might have otherwise eaten, for example a little mouse.

[00:12:27] When you think about it like that, I think it's quite a nice idea.

[00:12:31] Our third example is from Ghana.

[00:12:34] Now, you might be familiar with a [meme](#)<sup>44</sup> of dancing Ghanaian [pallbearers](#)<sup>45</sup>, of people dancing while carrying a [coffin](#)<sup>46</sup>.

[00:12:43] In recent years Ghanaian funerals have developed a tradition of having [extravagant](#)<sup>47</sup> [coffins](#) that reflect the dead person's preferences.

[00:12:53] So there are [coffin](#)-makers that will make a coffin of a Mercedes Benz, if that person drove a Mercedes, of a can of coke, if that person loved drinking Coke, or of whatever they wanted.

[00:13:06] There are now adverts for [coffin](#)-makers alongside the streets of Ghana's capital, Accra, and [coffin](#)-makers are highly [sought after](#)<sup>48</sup> artists.

---

<sup>44</sup> a piece of video or image that spreads quickly on the internet

<sup>45</sup> people who carry a coffin at a funeral

<sup>46</sup> a long box in which the body of a dead person is buried

<sup>47</sup> costing a lot of money, often more than what is necessary

<sup>48</sup> in demand



## Death Around The World

[00:13:17] We could certainly go on with examples of [unorthodox](#) death traditions around the world - there is a tradition of eating the dead in the Amazon rainforest, of cutting off part of your finger for each relative you lost in a tribe in Papua New Guinea, and of cutting yourself as a way of remembering a [deceased](#) one in certain Aboriginal tribes in Australia.

[00:13:43] These traditions might seem strange to me or you, or they might not do, but no doubt whatever traditions you have around death in your country or culture would seem equally weird to someone in Tibet or a Toraja person in Indonesia.

[00:14:00] And although how we [confront](#)<sup>49</sup> death has evolved as we have, there are some technological advances that may mean we start to think about life and death in completely different ways.

[00:14:14] Of course, we are living for longer and longer, but this isn't a point about people living forever.

[00:14:21] There are some pretty [sound](#)<sup>50</sup> biological arguments, some pretty convincing reasons, to suggest that this isn't going to happen any time soon, and even if it could, living to be 150, 200 or more could be fairly unpleasant.

[00:14:39] As we live more of our lives online, sharing photos, sharing our views, personalities, and there is an ever increasing amount of data about who we are that will

---

<sup>49</sup> face, meet, deal with (often a difficult situation)

<sup>50</sup> sensible

exist forever, it's not [beyond the realms of possibility](#)<sup>51</sup> that a digital version of us will continue to exist forever, well after our deaths.

[00:15:02] A company like Facebook, which don't forget owns Facebook of course, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Oculus VR, a virtual reality company, has a huge amount of data about its users. Who they are, who they contact, what kind of stuff they say, what websites they visit, who they actually are.

[00:15:23] People often joke that Facebook knows them better than they know themselves, and if Facebook has all this data that it has collected over the course of someone's entire life, let's say from when they were 13 years old right through to when they are 80, then with virtual reality and artificial intelligence it will be able to do a pretty good job of recreating a digital copy of that person.

[00:15:50] You might be able to have a conversation with a [deceased](#) loved one, you might be able to see what they would have looked like if they had had the chance to grow old, you could do almost anything with them, and it would be like they were there with you.

[00:16:05] In a weird way, if you have lived in a country where you haven't really been able to leave your house, town, or city for the past few months and you have had to communicate with loved ones through things like video calls, this potential future isn't really that different.

---

<sup>51</sup> not possible

## Death Around The World

[00:16:23] Now, this might completely [creep you out](#)<sup>52</sup>, and you might think it's the weirdest thing in the world, but the possibilities will certainly exist.

[00:16:34] And much like it might seem strange to us that the Victorians used to have Death Portraits, and you might be [baffled](#)<sup>53</sup> to think that the Toraja people keep their relatives in their house for months or years after they die, a future where at least a digital version of our loved ones remains after they pass is certainly not so far away.

[00:17:00] OK then, that is it for today's episode on death around the world.

[00:17:05] I know it was a bit [morbid](#), but that's death for you.

[00:17:10] It's the only [inevitability](#) in life, and so we may as well be curious about it.

[00:17:15] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode. You can head right in to our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](http://community.leonardoenglish.com).

[00:17:25] I'd love to know: how is death celebrated in your country?

[00:17:29] Would you talk to a virtual version of a [deceased](#) loved one? It would certainly be weird, but I think I probably would.

[00:17:38] So, I'd love to know what you think - the place to go to is [community.leonardoenglish.com](http://community.leonardoenglish.com)

---

<sup>52</sup> if something creeps you out, it makes you uncomfortable

<sup>53</sup> confused

**English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #097**  
**Death Around The World**

[00:17:44] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo  
English

[00:17:49] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

---

## Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Morbid	relating to death
Inevitability	something that is certain to happen
Disclaimer	a formal statement saying that you don't take responsibility for something
Kidneys	the pair of small organs that take waste from the blood
Liver	the large organ that cleans the blood
Lifeless	dead, not moving
Spiritually	relating to your spirit, not your body
One-way street	a journey with no return
Accounts	witness statements, stories
Revisited	visited again
Sceptical	doubting, not believing
Attributed	explained by
Lucid-type	(of a dream) feeling real and awake



## Death Around The World

<b>Atheist</b>	not believing in Gods or the supernatural
<b>Non-corporeal</b>	not relating to the body
<b>Afterlife</b>	a life that some people believe begins after death
<b>Battled</b>	if people battle with an idea, they debate it
<b>Soul</b>	the spiritual part of a person that some people believe continues to exist after death
<b>Atoms</b>	the smallest chemical unit
<b>Disciples</b>	people who believe and follow the ideas of someone else
<b>Immortality</b>	living forever
<b>Conception</b>	the time when a woman falls pregnant
<b>Taboo</b>	a subject or word that is avoided by a society
<b>Creepy</b>	strange or unnatural
<b>Slum</b>	a very poor and crowded area
<b>Deprived</b>	very poor and not having basic amenities
<b>Sibling</b>	brother or sister
<b>Commonplace</b>	happening often

## Death Around The World

<b>Commission</b>	to pay for something to happen
<b>Propped up</b>	lifted and held in a position
<b>Deceased</b>	dead, not moving
<b>Memento</b>	something that helps you remember someone or something
<b>Cremated</b>	(of a body) burned
<b>Embalmed</b>	(of a body) treated with chemicals to prevent it decaying
<b>Formaldehyde</b>	a chemical used to preserve dead bodies
<b>Unorthodox</b>	different or unusual
<b>Paraded</b>	taken or moved around (in celebration)
<b>Fluid</b>	not fixed
<b>Corpses</b>	dead bodies
<b>Scavengers</b>	animals that eat other animals that they haven't killed
<b>Vultures</b>	large birds that eat dead animals
<b>Chanting</b>	singing or saying a phrase continuously
<b>Reincarnation</b>	the belief that a dead person's spirit is reborn in another body

## Death Around The World

<b>Meme</b>	a piece of video or image that spreads quickly on the internet
<b>Pallbearers</b>	people who carry a coffin at a funeral
<b>Coffin</b>	a long box in which the body of a dead person is buried
<b>Extravagant</b>	costing a lot of money, often more than what is necessary
<b>Sought after</b>	in demand
<b>Confront</b>	face, meet, deal with (often a difficult situation)
<b>Sound</b>	sensible
<b>Beyond the realms of possibility</b>	not possible
<b>Creep you out</b>	if something creeps you out, it makes you uncomfortable
<b>Baffled</b>	confused

*We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*