



Lesson: The Culture of Death and Dying

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students explore and compare cultural traditions, history and rituals associated with death and dying.

The video clips provided with this lesson are from **Homegoings**, a film that brings to life the beauty and grace of African-American funerals through the lens of mortician and funeral home owner Isaiah Owens. Owens introduces the rarely seen world of undertaking in the black community, where funeral rites draw on a rich palette of tradition, history and celebration.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Express views on and beliefs about death and dying
- Identify similarities and differences among death rituals across cultures, religions and/or spiritual practices
- Compare and contrast varied cultural perceptions and approaches toward death and dying
- Relate preferences for death rituals

GRADE LEVELS

9-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Language Arts, Social Studies, Current Events

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- Chart paper and markers

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: Going Home (length 3:00)

This clip begins at 2:25 with a black and white photograph of a crowd gathered outside a funeral home. It ends at 5:25 with a woman in a white dress laughing, as she paces in front of a pew.

Clip 2: Preparing for Death – Part 1 (length 2:40)

The clip begins at 10:53, with the image of a sign with the name Linda Williams-Miller and her date of birth but no death date. It ends at 12:48 when Redd says, "...I was showing her this top last night."

Clip 3: Preparing for Death – Part 2 (length 0:45)

It picks up again at 14:15 when Redd says, "I know one day it's going to happen," and ends at 15:00 when Redd says, "...going home to be at peace."

Clip 4: My First Funeral (length 2:39)

The clip begins at 18:14, with Owens drawing lines in the soil, as music plays in the background. It ends at 20:53, with background music and an image of a spoon in the soil.

Clip 5: The Black Funeral Director... A Friend (length 1:29)

The clip begins at 21:37 with a black and white photo of a funeral in a house of worship, followed by Isaiah Owens' voice saying, "The black funeral director..." It ends at 23:06 with a black and white photo of a funeral.

ACTIVITY

(NOTE: Some students may not be open to talking about death and/or may have recently experienced the death of a loved one. Please be sensitive about their desire to communicate when ready.)

1. Tell students that they are going to have a conversation about death across different cultures. Read the following options and ask students to raise their hands for which option best describes their belief:
 - Death is passing on to a new life – it is a spiritual journey
 - Death is an end, not the start to an afterlife
 - I have a different opinion
 - I am undecided
2. Ask students to stand. Tell them they will move around the classroom briefly to chat with a few peers about what they believe death and dying involve. Explain that each will start by having a conversation with one other student, and then

every two to three minutes each will find a new partner. The following question will drive student discussion:

- Where does your belief originate? For example, is it religious? Is it connected to your family culture?
3. Tell each student to find a partner and begin chatting. Watch time; signal students to seek new partners after two to three minutes. (**NOTE:** This task should last fewer than 10 minutes.)
 4. Invite students to share what they discovered about their peers' perceptions of death. Record key points on chart paper, asking students to note what seems to be common among the perceptions. Draw attention to cultural perspectives.
 5. Briefly describe the film *Homegoings*. Show Clip 1 (length 5:52), which shows an African-American funeral. Tell students that as they watch the segment, they should imagine themselves in that setting. Have them jot down the particular aspects of the death rituals that are most striking to them, whether it is attire, people's emotions, etc. Invite students to share their thoughts. Do they feel inclined to participate in the rituals? .
 6. Distribute the **Culture of Death and Dying** graphic organizer. Instruct students to reflect individually on death rituals, either from their particular cultures or those in which they have participated, those they have witnessed or those of which they are aware, and to complete the relevant sections on the graphic organizer. (**NOTE:** If students are not fully aware of particular cultural practices—theirs or others'—related to death and dying, they may research specific cultures or spiritual practices. There are several resources connected to this theme in the lesson's Resources section below.)
 7. Divide students into small groups. Distribute a sheet of chart paper and marker to each group. Instruct group members to share their perspectives and then, as a group, outline the differences and similarities among these points of view. They can simply place these in two different columns or use a Venn diagram. (**OPTION:** If time permits, have group members shift between groups to add to and/or refine the lists.) Have each group post its list, and ask the other groups to review the lists. Students as a class should compare the lists to identify all of the overlapping elements. Students can then note which of those elements Clip 1 echoes.
 8. Students discuss:
 - What do all of the cultures, religious practices and spiritual practices that have been discussed value equally when it comes to death rituals?
 - Across cultures and religious/spiritual beliefs, why are death rituals as much for the living as for the dead? How must the transition be meaningful for both?

9. Show Clip 2 (length 6:39), which shows Linda Williams-Miller preparing for her funeral at Owens Funeral Home and discussing her rationale for death planning, as well as her views on dying. Ask:

- How do Owens, Williams-Miller and her goddaughter negotiate the discussion of and planning for death? (**NOTE:** The discussion is open, light, business-oriented and practical. It is a plain-language discussion with some humor and not much sadness.)
- How does Williams-Miller negotiate the reality of dying? How does planning her funeral figure into this emotional negotiation? (**NOTE:** Williams-Miller recognizes that the end is coming, as she has been ill. Hers is a practical approach. She wants to make sure everything is ready and that her children do not have to figure out funeral details later on. Planning helps her to prepare calmly for her inevitable demise, as well as to accept her end with dignity and comfort.)
- What is your comfort level in discussions about death and dying?

10. Invite students to draw on the film and the classroom conversation about different cultural/religious/spiritual perspectives on death and dying and their personal beliefs about death to envision the most meaningful type of death or transition ritual that would benefit the living and the deceased. Have students share their ideas.

EXTENSIONS

1. Sometimes, a childhood interest turns into a lifelong career, as was the case for Isaiah Owens. In other cases, a specific event or desire leads to a professional calling. Show students Clip 3 (length 2:39), which shows Owens reenacting the “funerals” he created as a child, and have students read “Morticians Talk About What’s Tough, and Why It’s Almost a Calling” (http://magicvalley.com/lifestyles/morticians-talk-about-what-s-tough-and-why-it-s/article_a10710c1-b000-5159-8d7c-278f273babff.html). Ask them to remark briefly on the experiences that Owens and Mike Parke (featured in the article) had that led them to become morticians. Then, engage students in one of the following tasks:

- Students discuss people they know whose life interests or activities resulted in long-term professions in adulthood.
- Students look at their current interests to determine whether those interests might drive their future career choices.
- Students discuss people they know for whom an event or experience was the driving force behind a career choice.
- Students identify and discuss factors that can influence career choice (friends, family, culture, media and so on). Some helpful information:
 - ✓ <http://www.careers.govt.nz/plan-your-career/helping-young-people-make-decisions/what-things-influence-a-young-persons-career-decisions/>

- ✓ <http://www.onlinecollege.org/2011/05/17/what-influences-your-career-choice/>

2. Students delve into the history and current status of the funeral business in African-American communities to explore and discuss its evolution, impact and role. They particularly note the African origins of the homegoing, as well as the racial discrimination that led to the rise of the African-American funeral industry. Show students Clip 4 (length 1:29), in which Owens speaks about African Americans in the funeral business. Background sources include:

- **Examining the African American Way of Death and Business**
<http://masonresearch.gmu.edu/2011/03/examining-the-african-american-way-of-death-and-business/>
- **The History of African-American Funeral Service**
http://www.woodsvalentinemortuary.com/The_History_of_African-American_Funeral_Service_320351.html
- **A.G. Gaston: From Log Cabin To Funeral Home Mogul**
<http://www.npr.org/2010/12/21/132089160/a-g-gaston-from-log-cabin-to-funeral-home-mogul>
- **Homegoing Funerals: An African-American Funeral Tradition**
<http://www.us-funerals.com/funeral-articles/homegoing-funerals.html#.UVOXbxIAP4M>

3. As the film points out, African Americans were pushed in the direction of the funeral business. In the United States, other groups of people have also found themselves in certain types of professions as a result of specific circumstances. Students research and lead presentations on the pros and cons of society “forcing” a specific livelihood on a group of people, or socio-economic conditions allowing a certain group of people to practice a livelihood or a livelihood that becomes an industry fixture within a specific community or population.

Sources of information include:

- **Chinese Laundries**
<http://chineselaundry.wordpress.com/>
- **The Kaffenion Connection: How the Greek Diner Evolved**
<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/14/nyregion/the-kaffenion-connection-how-the-greek-diner-evolved.html>
- **Irish American History (firefighters/police)**
http://www.irishcoincufflinks.com/Blog/?page_id=148
- **History of the Emerald Society (firefighters/police)**
<http://www.phxfireemeraldsociety.org/history.html>

4. Death can be expensive, from the cost of a casket to the burial expenses. Assign students to explore the various aspects of the “business of dying” to determine whether the business is centered on the consumer or the money, and to identify ethical issues/concerns connected to the funeral industry. Students assume the roles of funeral business owners, small business advocates, consumers and others and debate the role

and purpose of the funeral industry within a framework of ethical business. Information sources include:

- **Funeral Ethics Organization**
<http://www.funeralethics.org/index.htm>
- **The Funeral: Your Last Chance to Be a Big Spender**
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/business/19death.html?pagewanted=all>
- **Ethical Issues in Today's Funeral Industry**
<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/ethical-issues-todays-funeral-industry-62750.html>
- **Funeral Consumers Information Society**
<http://www.funeralinformationsociety.org/>
- **Death with Dignity National Center**
<http://www.deathwithdignity.org/category/ask-ddnc>

5. The traditional funeral is one option at death. But, there are other types of death rituals to consider that are more personal and sometimes less expensive than standard funerals. Students explore and compare and contrast some of these alternatives, such as home funerals. Sources include:

- **Alternatives to the Traditional Funeral**
<http://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/14/alternatives-to-the-traditional-funeral/>
- **More Families Are Bringing Funerals Home**
<http://www.nbcnews.com/id/20845739/>
- **Alternative Funerals**
<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/980310.death.html>
- **After Death: 8 Burial Alternatives That Are Going Mainstream**
<http://www.livescience.com/15980-death-8-burial-alternatives.html>
- **Alternative Funerals: Thinking Outside the Box**
<http://www.dailyfinance.com/2011/04/20/alternative-funerals-thinking-outside-the-box/>

6. Isaiah Owens is a true entrepreneur. Ask students to explore the characteristics and qualities of a successful businessperson: vision, ability to adapt business to economic times, knowledge of the consumer/community need and so on. Then, assign students to create a **Top 10 List of Necessary Entrepreneurial Skills** and present/share the list in an economics/business course lesson on entrepreneurship. Students might jumpstart this exploration via the PBS program *These Kids Mean Business* (<http://www.pbs.org/programs/these-kids-mean-business>).

RESOURCES

Isaiah Owens Enterprises

<http://www.isaiahowensenterprises.com/>

Undertaking the Way Home: Funeral Profession Reversed in Detroit

<http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20120221/LIFESTYLE/202210306#ixzz2OqGEvAjh>

Last Rites—Color Line Persists in Funeral Industry

<http://www.wypr.org/news/last-rites-color-line-persists-funeral-industry>

Black History Month: Hallowed ground

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/02/black_history_month_hallowed_g.html

10 Extraordinary Burial Ceremonies from Around the World

<http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/10-extraordinary-burial-ceremonies-from-around-the-world/#iDqCxT6YW6wzPyPq.99>

Death in Cultures Around the World

http://dying.lovetoknow.com/Category:Death_in_Cultures_Around_the_World

Death: Cultural Traditions

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/onourownterms/articles/cultural.html>

World Death Rituals

http://www.deardeath.com/death_rituals_across_cultures_.htm

Transition Rituals

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Health/Health-Support/Grief-and-Loss/2001/05/Transition-Rituals.aspx>

On Our Own Terms

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/onourownterms/>

With Eyes Open

<http://www.pbs.org/witheyeyesopen/>

Islamic Teachings on Death and Mourning

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/search-results/?cx=008853845758841447609%3Axyz0bppp8wu&cof=FORID%3A11&ie=UTF-8&q=Islamic+Teachings+on+Death+and+Mourning&x=0&y=0>

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>

This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

[SL.9-10.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.11-12.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.9-10.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

[W.9-10.7](#) Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject.

[W.11-12.7](#) Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

[RI.9-10.7](#) Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

[RI.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Historical Understanding, Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 2: Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership and different ways that groups function.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Language Arts, Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, nonprofit and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans more than 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes the Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, WETA Television, *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, the Harm Reduction Coalition and the New York City Charter School Center.

CULTURE OF DEATH AND DYING

IDENTIFY THE CULTURE AND/OR SPIRITUAL/RELIGIOUS BELIEF	
VIEWS ON DEATH AND DYING (e.g., death means going home)	
DEATH RITUALS (e.g., funeral, burial, viewing of the body)	
EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO DEATH	
RITUAL DEATH ITEMS AND CLOTHING	
HISTORIC BASIS	

