

From Here to Eternity Discussion Questions

by Caitlin Doughty

Author Bio: (Caitlin Doughty website)

Caitlin Doughty is a mortician, activist, and funeral industry rabble-rouser. In 2011 she founded the death acceptance collective, The Order of the Good Death, which has spawned the death positive movement. Her educational YouTube series "Ask a Mortician" has been viewed almost 150 million times. All three of her books *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, *From Here to Eternity*, and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* were New York Times bestsellers. She lives in Los Angeles, where she owns a funeral home, Clarity Funerals.



Places & Death Traditions:

- **Crestone, Colorado:**
 - Crestone End of Life Project – Non-profit
 - Open sky pyres for community members. (\$500/ pyre)
 - Natural burial ground open to anyone
 - The non-profit holds community end-of-life-paperwork socials
 - Pyre cremation is the norm in India and Nepal
- **South Sulawesi, Indonesia (Tana Torajan)**
 - Bodies of family members are still considered alive and live with the families until their funeral – they can live with deceased family members from 6 months to several years.
 - Ma’Nene – ritual where the family unburies the deceased family member, cleans the body, sees and greets their dead relatives, has picnics, pictures, and conversations with them before reburying them.
 - Bodies are preserved in a process that is close to taxidermy.
 - Torajans believe that familial relationships continue after the death of the body. It is their traditional way to stay connected to the dead.
- **Michoacan, Mexico:**
 - Dia de los Muerto – Days of the Dead.
 - The dead return in spirit form to indulge in the pleasures of the living
 - Spirits can return as long as the family remembers them and puts out an altar for their deceased loved one.
 - November 1 & 2 coinciding with Catholic festivals of All Saints and All Souls.
 - A day to lay down grief, be recognized, and move on.
 - Mexico is one of the most “death engaged” cultures in the world
- **Cullowhea, North Carolina:**
 - Body Farm – Forensic Osteology Research Station @ Western Carolina University
 - Corpses into Compost
 - Urban Death Project – Body composting centers in Urban Areas - “Recomposition”
- **Barcelona, Spain:**
 - Bodies placed behind glass partition or in glass coffin
 - No embalming unless the body is to be transported far away
 - Rented graves and mausoleums where bodies are eventually moved to communal pits/graves

- Family witnessed cremations.
- Biodegradable urns. Bury the ashes of a family around a newly planted tree
- **Tokyo, Japan:**
 - Cremation rate in Japan is 99.9%
 - As population of youth declines, there are less people to look after graves/urns. Need creative ways to look after the dead.
 - Columbarium – Place to store cremated remains
 - Suicide rates highest in the world. Culturally viewed as a selfless, even honorable death.
 - Seppuku (suicide to prevent capture), Kamikaze (suicide to kill your enemy), Ubastu (during famines - abandoning elders in woods to die)
 - Koukokuji Buddhist Temple – Ryriden Columbarium. Trying to find a way to memorialize the cremated dead.
 - Digital lights path to loved one. Light scenes (i.e. seasons) for individuality & to celebrate Buddhism.
 - Shu katsu – “End of Life” products are very popular among the aging Japanese population
 - Daitokuin Ryogoku Royen – Multistory indoor graveyard for housing urns. High tech. Can also do virtual visits to stored urns.
- **La Paz, Bolivia:**
 - Natitas – Skulls with special powers to connect the living to the dead.
 - Get dressed up in beanies, sunglasses, and other accessories
 - Natitas give help on all types of issues – medical issues, financial, helping students with university, etc.
 - The skulls give direct access to the divine
 - Natita tradition started with the Aymara indigenous people
 - Fiesta de las Natitas – people have their natitas blessed by the Catholic priests/church
- **Tower of Silence, Mumbai:**
 - Parsis – Descendants of Iranian Zoroastrianism
 - Dakhuma – Give bodies to animals - Vultures devour remains
 - Bodies placed in tower – men in outer circle, woman in middle circle, children in inner circle, bones in center. Vultures clean the remains until they are just bones
 - Practice is in trouble, because the vultures have died off due to environmental contamination and pollution

Other Information/links:

- Order of the Good Death – <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>
- Caitlin Doughty – Ask A Mortician videos – <https://www.youtube.com/user/OrderoftheGoodDeath>

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Did reading about these different death practices make you uneasy or were you intrigued by the different traditions?
3. Did anything shock or surprise you?
4. Have you ever experienced death traditions outside of the “normalized” standard funeral home? If yes, how did they make you feel? Which do you prefer?
5. True or False: Bodies need to be embalmed to be safe. How does this statement make you feel? Why?
6. The book talks about “death tourism”. What do you think about people who go to observe other culture’s death practices? Is it right/ethical? Why or why not?
7. What do you think about the open-air pyres in Crestone, Colorado? Do you think this is an appealing way to celebrate death? Why or why not?
8. The Torajans in Indonesia live with their dead relative’s bodies - sometimes for years. What do you think of this practice? Is there any appeal to knowing your dead relatives are still with you?
9. The college student at the body farm in North Carolina is worried about the public relations aspect of her Urban Death Project (body composting). She wants to highlight the environmental good of composting verses the politicized idea that the government will begin euthanizing people for compost. How do public relations impact projects like this? Is there any way to minimize/maximize the impact? How might she do that?
10. If you donated your body to science, would you want to know what was going to happen to it? Would you want the people researching with it to know your name or would you rather be anonymous? Why or why not?
11. How do you feel about Europe’s idea of “renting” a grave or mausoleum, where the body is eventually moved to a communal grave?
12. Japan seems to have integrated technology and death – cremation, death hotels, multistory indoor cemeteries, virtual funeral visits, digital help to locate deceased family members, etc. Do you think technology can be an asset in the funeral business? Do you support the integration of technology? Why or why not?
13. What do you think of the idea of visiting your deceased family’s urns/graves virtually, as can be done in Japan?
14. Why do you think the Catholic Church has accepted Natitas? Do you see a difference between Natitas and the European tradition of holy relics (bones of saints)? Why or why not?
15. Both Muslim and Jewish tradition require that the body of a deceased love one not be embalmed and be buried as quickly as possible, yet the American funeral system has laws and regulations that interfere with those and other death/cultural traditions. (p 54) Why do you think that is? Is there anything we can do to change the system?
16. How does your home/family experience death?

17. Have you talked to your family and friends about death? Do you have a death plan? Have you discussed your death wants?
18. The author, Caitlin Doughty, appears to believe that the American funeral system is broken and that Americans have sanitized death and made it impersonal. Is she right? Why or why not?
19. Doughty has written a two other books. Will you read them?

References:

- Caitlin Doughty – <http://caitlindoughty.com/about>
- GoodReads – <https://www.goodreads.com/book/similar/55079092-from-here-to-eternity-traveling-the-world-to-find-the-good-death>
- GoodReads – <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38212121-from-here-to-eternity>
- Reddit – https://www.reddit.com/r/DeathPositive/comments/9vtvwu/rdeathpositive_book_club_3_from_here_to_eternity/
- YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/user/OrderoftheGoodDeath>

Caitlin Doughty Books

Nonfiction

- Smoke Gets in Your Eyes (2014)
 - From Here to Eternity (2017)
- Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? (2019)

If you liked From Here to Eternity, try...

- Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers – Mary Roach
- Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner – Judy Melinek
- Memento Mori: The Dead Among Us – Paul Koudounaris
- The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine – Lindsey Fitzharris
- The Mystery of the Exploding Teeth and Other Curiosities from the History of Medicine – Thomas Morris