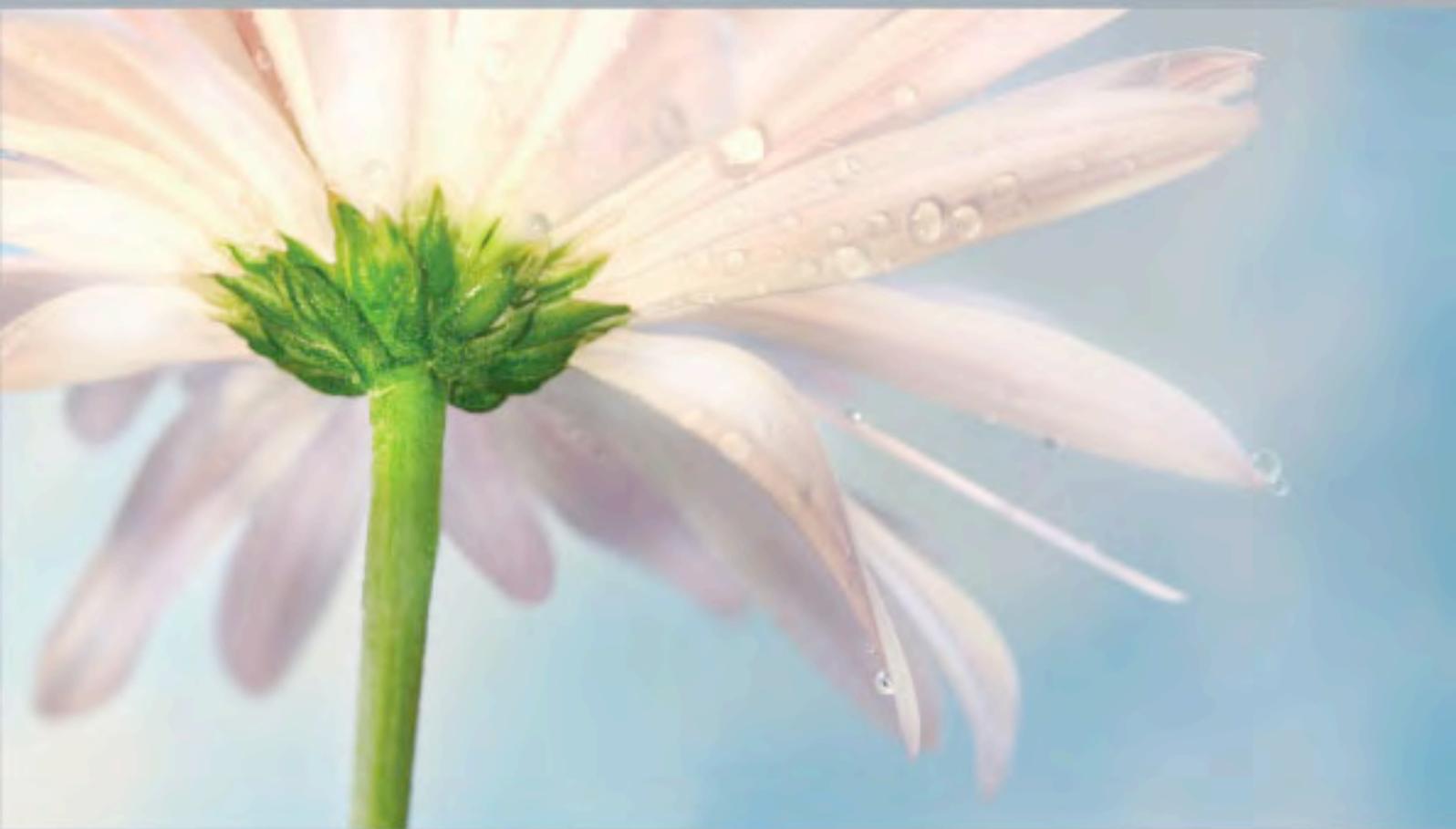


we need to talk about the funeral

101 practical ways to commemorate and celebrate a life



Jane Morrell & Simon Smith
Foreword by Claire Rayner OBE

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4 six important questions

If you can answer the following important questions, you will feel more able to proceed with confidence and peace of mind. Reading through this book will help you to answer them.

1. Are you aware of any written or spoken preferences of the person who has died concerning their funeral arrangements?
2. Do you need to choose between a burial and a cremation?
3. If burial, have you chosen a cemetery, local parish churchyard, woodland or natural burial site? Have you considered a burial on private land?
4. Would you like to look after the person at home for some or all of the period before the funeral?
5. Do you already have a preference for a funeral director, or do you need to choose one based on research?
6. Would you, your family and friends like to have some active involvement in:
 - caring for the body
 - decorating or making the coffin
 - the content of the funeral ceremony
 - conducting or participating in the ceremony?



A child's chance to say a proper goodbye – Hannah's story

When I was twelve my father died. It came as a big shock; luckily my mum and step-dad were really supportive and caring. They encouraged me to take an active role in the funeral. Mum came up with the idea of a drape, to go over the coffin whilst in the church, and to be buried with him. I designed it and doing so gave me a sense of purpose for the funeral.

I decided to incorporate the things that he loved and things that reminded me of him on the drape. Mum helped me draw a hand planting an acorn and out of the wrist of the hand was an oak tree. Around the edge of the drape I painted Native American symbols for things that he loved. We also scanned some photos of important people in his life and stuck these on the oak tree.

I chose a song that reminded me of him to be played at the funeral.

Seeing the drape and hearing the song was a moving experience. It helped me feel some sort of connection to his death.

It was definitely a positive experience to be involved in the funeral. I am very glad that I took the time to create something that connected me to him and say my last goodbye.

I would say it is good to involve children as much as possible in a funeral as it could help them come to terms with the death of a loved one and give a sense of purpose in those last precious moments.

22 transport to and from home

Transporting the body yourself from the mortuary to home or to the funeral parlour is legal, as long as the body is kept completely covered at all times. If you want to do this, and have the means, it is a good idea to have a coffin ready, or to wrap the person in a shroud, large heavy blanket or body bag and strap them onto a stretcher.

Only a few domestic vehicles are large enough to accommodate a coffin, so make sure you measure accurately before you start. Keep the body as flat as possible. You might want to warn your immediate neighbours when you are going to do this.

You can make arrangements with the mortuary yourself, or ask the hospital bereavement officer to liaise on your behalf. Let them know when you will be arriving and what help you might need. You need to take the death certificate with you. When you fetch the person from the mortuary there should be a trolley, which will make it easier for you to slide the coffin into the back of your vehicle. Mortuary staff are not obliged to help you, but often will. When you arrive home, you will need at least four, and possibly six, people to lift. Before you lift a coffin by the handles, make sure they are weight bearing, because some are only for show.



25 decorating a coffin



A coffin can be painted, or pasted with pictures, posters and designs. If you, your family and friends are comfortable to gather together to share this activity it becomes a time to tell stories, laugh and cry together. As designs are discussed and decided upon, and materials gathered, memories will surface and can be shared. Decorating the coffin is an activity in which children can become involved and it can encourage them to ask questions about death and to talk about how they are feeling.

You may feel that you would like to take the time to decorate a coffin on your own. This is a very intense and personal task and you will have the space to think deeply and reflect on many memories.

Cardboard, smooth chipboard or MDF coffins are best for home decoration. In order to have enough time to decorate the coffin before the funeral, you should ideally have it delivered prior to death. If you feel confident about your artistic abilities, you can sketch out your designs and begin. If you feel less confident, you could paint it a favourite colour, onto which you could stencil motifs. An artist could sketch your ideas onto the coffin and you could fill in the colour, or ask them to do so. Pictures of different kinds can make an effective montage. If you want a uniform pattern, use high-quality wrapping paper or wall paper.

37 natural, green and woodland burials

Natural burial and green burial are terms used for returning a body to the earth in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Natural burial grounds may be in nature reserves, flower meadows, woodlands or fields being turned into new woodlands or meadows. These burial plots are often in beautiful surroundings.

In 1995 Ken West, the bereavement officer for Carlisle, set up the first woodland burial site in the UK. The three main objectives were to:

- provide an alternative, more natural environment for the bereaved
- reduce ongoing management costs of burial grounds
- use the land to provide a wider range of environmental benefits

Through the process of organising these woodland funerals in Carlisle some families realised that they could create much more personal and satisfying funerals by participating in making the arrangements and organising the ceremonies themselves. These family-led woodland funerals are often referred to as 'green funerals'.



41 do you receive the right ashes?



A common concern is whether, after cremation, you receive the right ashes. Crematoria have strict control and monitoring systems. The paperwork that must be filled in before the body is accepted is designed for efficient identification and confirmation of the cause of death. Each coffin must have a nameplate attached to it. This identification accompanies the process to the very end when the ashes are placed in a container ready to be collected. The cremated remains are comprised of bone material.

If you are interested to know how a crematorium operates you may ring up your local one and request a visit. Most are open to this.

preparation for a ceremony with heart and soul



A ceremony with heart includes the passions and loves of the person who has died, and a ceremony with soul reflects their values, beliefs and spirituality. The ceremonies that work well need to reflect the beliefs and personality of the person who has died; it is about them.

When thinking about a funeral ceremony, designing it almost, it is important to discover what you want to achieve and to draw up a broad outline, to which you can then add the details. This section looks at the aims of a funeral ceremony and who can conduct it. There are down-to-earth, practical aspects to consider. To what extent do the family want to be involved in creating and running the ceremony? Family members may have very different views as to what a funeral should be like, which may also differ from the views of friends. This section explores how to deal with disagreements, and manage expectations, so that everyone feels included.

46 a family-run ceremony

There is no requirement to have any type of official to lead the ceremony and, though it might be a daunting prospect, you can do it yourselves. It is easier to do this if the family group is cohesive and the number of participants few.

'R's funeral was a collective effort, at which four of his close family each spoke about a stage of his life when they knew him best. Everyone had a ceremony sheet and took their cue from the previous person. Someone was appointed to make sure that the pieces of music started at the right time and another led the words said by everyone at the committal but, apart from that, the ceremony could proceed at its own pace. The informality allowed people to take their time when overcome by grief as they were speaking. Gaps did not seem awkward – they gave time for emotion and reflection. There were no time constraints within the chapel.'

In order to prepare for this type of occasion, spend time discussing and planning the ceremony together and write it down. This can look and feel a bit like a drama script. Then as long as everyone knows the order to follow, things should run smoothly. If you are time constrained, appoint someone as timekeeper to try to keep it on schedule. The closeness of the family group provides a safe environment, allowing everyone to feel and express their emotions. If you are in any doubt about the cohesiveness of the family it is better to find a funeral conductor.



56 weaving flowers into the coffin

In the crematorium the coffin is traditionally placed at a distance from the mourners. Often people respond very positively to the chance of moving close to the coffin, and if it is a woven coffin, bamboo or willow for example, they can place a flower stem into the weave. Encouraging people to gather together like this helps to break the formality of the occasion and brings feelings of comfort and inclusivity for those who want to participate.

Roses, tea tree, camellia, eryngium thistle, heather and herbs are good choices because they have woody stems which are not too thick.

The weave of a coffin is close and stiff so flowers with thick fleshy stems are not suitable. These types of flowers are better placed on top.



68 timing the arrival of the coffin

Decide whether to have the coffin in the room before people arrive, or wait until everyone is settled and have the bearers process it to its resting place.

If the coffin is already in place on the catafalque, or bier, when they arrive, people have time to settle, focus or go up to it, touch it and place their flowers.

It is much more dramatic for the bearers to enter with the coffin when everyone is present and there are many occasions when this may be highly appropriate.



87 life story told by more than one person

Sometimes it is better to share talking about the person amongst a few family and friends. The advantages of this are that each individual does not need to talk for too long, and different relationships bring different perspectives. For example, a sibling will have had a different experience of the person who has died than a son or daughter or an old school or college friend.

Ask people to be time vigilant, depending on the time schedule of the ceremony. Three people, with three minutes each, could be about right for a ceremony lasting forty minutes, but too much time for one of twenty minutes.

*I loved her like the leaves,
The lush green leaves of spring
That pulled down the willows
on the bank's edge where we walked
while she was of this world.*

*To the shimmering wide fields
hidden by the white cloud,
white as white silk scarf
she soared away like the morning bird,
hid from our world like the setting sun.*

Kakinononto Hitomaro (Japan, seventh century)