

# Is this the future of English funerals?

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for the conference of Centre of Death And Society, University of Bath, June 2010

## 1. Where we are now

We have to begin with the question: why are so many funerals so similar when people and people's lives are so diverse? Currently we so often experience the sombre Victorian style funeral rituals, sold as the societal 'norm,' with little personal involvement from families and friends and a great deal of unspoken "secret disappointment" as described by Clare Rayner in her introduction to the FuneralCare Forum report, published in 2003. Funerals are often arranged in an unnecessary hurry. The newly bereaved believe they have to obey a set of rules when disposing of their dead, but do not know what these rules are, how they apply or even who invented them. 'What would people say' if the family didn't have a vicar, a large shiny hearse, limousines, a veneer coffin with plastic handles topped with catalogue flowers, and four strangers in black suits to carry it into the crematorium, to be placed on a remote catafalque at the far end of the ceremony hall for a twenty minute service with two hymns and some readings from the Bible which don't make much sense to them? It doesn't have to be like this, and an increasing number of people from the babyboomer generation and beyond are beginning to realise this. In this paper, based on our experience as contemporary funeral directors and celebrants, we outline what happens when the family dares to 'step outside the box' and say NO to the rules.

**Green Fuse** a small, family owned company based in Totnes (rebranded in 2014 to Heart & Soul Funerals). The funerals we undertake are 35% within 5 miles of Totnes, 65% across a wider area of rural Devon and the larger urban areas of Exeter, Plymouth and Torquay. We offer families something different, a more contemporary approach. The average age of the person who died for whom we arrange the funerals is just 64.

These are the statistics for the last 60 funerals for which we have been funeral directors:

<i>Funerals for people aged</i>	<i>70 or below (31)</i>	<i>above 70 (29)</i>
Average age at death	53.5 years	81 years
Cremation	35%	69%
Woodland burial	42%	24%
Municipal cemetery or churchyard	16%	3%
Private land burial	6%	3%
Eco coffin (woven, cardboard, softwood)	90%	68%
Formal hearse	42%	55%
MPV or family vehicle	52%	38%
Service in church venue	29%	10%
Service in crematorium venue	16%	41%
Cemetery /woodland burial ground venue	26%	17%
Community hall, function room or other venue	32%	33%
Independent funeral celebrant	68%	69%
Religious minister	26%	27%
Family	6%	3%
Spiritual ceremony	58%	45%
Formal religion ceremony	31%	28%

Secular / atheist ceremony	9%	28%
Hymns sung	39%	63%
Other song sung	39%	14%
Family and friends bearing the coffin	93%	93%
Family and friends tribute / eulogy	94%	81%

Just to focus on a few things in the younger group, only 35% cremation and 16% of funeral ceremonies taking place at the crematorium, only 42% using a formal hearse, only 7% having the coffin borne by strangers wearing black suits, only 26% having a formal religious ceremony held by a minister of religion, but with 58% choosing a spiritual ceremony. These turn the statistics of most funeral directors on their heads. If this becomes mainstream, the funeral industry needs a radical re-think of the way it functions. And this isn't because the funerals are all in the 'spiritual milieu' of Totnes. Only 35% are within 5 miles of Totnes, the remainder in the conservative South Hams, Teignbridge and the more urban Exeter, Plymouth and Torquay.

## 2. Because everyone is different

"Everyone is different" is a late / post modern concept and the axiom for our company, green fuse. A midwife will observe that every birth she attends is different – the babe appears with his or her own expression of the experience. When we die our expression of death, our search for meaning, remains our own. We are all the same in the eyes of God or the Divine or Science perhaps, but strive consciously or unconsciously to individuate through our own creative expressions. According to Berger (1969), whereas the protection against meaninglessness through religion used to be the "sacred canopy" to defend us against the terror of death, the new sacred canopy is spirituality.

"The quintessence of modern mourning culture is its individualisation" states Winkel (2001) p.66. She cites Durkheim (1984) "Individualisation is the basic constituent of modern societies, not separating but connecting their members in a new manner of social differentiation"

## 3. The Spiritual Revolution

The breakdown of formal religion in the UK has brought a new demand for different types of funeral rituals for the "congregationally unaffiliated" (Garces-Foley 2003), which are not so much non-religious as 'spiritual', using the definition of spiritual offered by Speck (1998) "a search for existential meaning within a life experience, with reference to a power other than self", which may or may not be called God. It is possible that we are witnessing a massive shift in the sacred landscape that will prove even more significant than the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth Century, according to Heelas and Woodford in their book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005).

The icons of specific religions are recognisable down the millennia, such as the Cross, the Buddha, the Minaret, but those with unaffiliated spiritual beliefs need to create their own iconography or reinterpret these, and also their own words against death, perhaps in conjunction with ones that have meaning for them from different faiths. This synthesis is constantly being born and re-created in post-modern funeral rituals, for example with the use of objects on the coffin and at the place of the ceremony, the way the body is dressed, the use of coloured and patterned cloths and flowers, candle ceremonies, the strewing of petals, the presence of things from nature and many other ideas that families use from their own lifestyles and cultures.

For these expressions of spirituality to flourish the funeral directors have to be willing to reassess their role, to give clear and broad information, be flexible and supportive with their families, listen to them accurately and enable the bereaved to do what is significant

for them to do rather than to follow a current model. This does not mean defending the mourners against the death with codified, opaque and restrictive practices. It means giving them the information and treating them like adults to come to their own conclusions.

This requires the undertaker being a “guide for self-organisation of the bereaved, based on creativity and improvisation” (Reitz 1997) and from this perspective funeral homes would have to change from a “service organisation to a guiding and instructing institution”. Coping with rites of passage to create an intimate, personal atmosphere is basically a duty of the community and cannot be created by the funeral director alone according to Reitz. “It means enabling persons ‘to practice rituals or to behave in ways in keeping with their culture and / or lifestyle.’” (Winkel 2001). Winkel later states that the role of the funeral director becomes one of facilitator, to enable the family to participate in order to create a ritual that is meaningful to them.

#### **4. The role of funerary rites as an adaptive response**

According to Douglas Davies (1997) “Death is part of the environment to which the human animal needed to adapt. Accordingly, mortuary ritual is viewed as the human adaptive response to death, with ritual language singled out as its crucial form of response.” . . . “funerary rites frame this verbal response, relating it to other behavioural features of music, movement, place, myth and history; having encountered and survived bereavement through funerary rites and associated behaviour, human beings are transformed in ways which make them better adapted to their own and for their society’s survival in the world.”

In order to create the setting, the intimate and personal atmosphere, the families we work with often pay much attention to creating a beautiful space for the funeral, full of references to the person who has died. This may be in the village hall where they had their wedding reception, in the garden at home, in a favourite place and is one reason why so few of our families have the main ceremony at the crematorium.

#### **5. Caring for the dead**

These more proactive families who want to do things their way are also more likely to be involved in some way with the washing, preparation and dressing of the body, and the carrying of that body to the funeral ceremony. The manner and circumstances of death influences the physical state of the body enormously and the funeral director often advises whether it is right or not for the family to ‘view’ the body and how it should be viewed i.e. with no intervention; embalmed; or with make up and hairdressing. This position leads to many questions including; who has authority over the body? does the family need to be defended against the realities of death? how does the funeral director handle the considerable diversity within families with regard to viewing the body? Research published in the British Medical Journal in April 2010 by Chapple and Ziebland ‘*Viewing the body after bereavement due to traumatic death*’ concludes that bereaved people think it is important to see the body of their dead relative or friend and even if it was distressing the viewing was rarely regretted and in most cases had beneficial long term effects. It is important for the relatives to be prepared well for the viewing by telling them exactly what to expect, but it should not be assumed that seeing a bruised or damaged body would harm them. Professionals need to listen carefully to the way in which the bereaved talk about the person who has died and reflect the terms in which they speak about the body, as this will indicate where they are in terms of post-mortem identity and continuing social bonds.

The way in which the choice to spend time with or prepare the body is presented by the funeral director to the bereaved, whatever the circumstances of the death, is influential

on the outcome of whether the family and friends will participate in this part of the process or not. We need to be clear about the information and descriptions we give out and trust the families to make up their own minds.

Those who participate in any part of the ritual of washing, dressing, anointing, singing, coffining, or holding a vigil often express feelings of coming to terms with the death and gaining satisfaction from being able to perform these last tasks for the person they loved. It is one way they can reclaim that person, especially after a medicalised death. When we witness a family undertaking these tasks we understand a sense of ancient and intimate ritual and ceremony taking place and being reclaimed. For these families it is an integral part of a good send off.

### **Conclusion**

There is a need to recognise the enormous variations in forms of bereavement behaviour, which are increasing with the babyboomer generation. This demands the funeral director actively to listen to the client in order to understand the values and reality of the family and the community, and to pick up on their needs and desires. Funeral directors must be well prepared with information and have a willingness to support the bereaved with their increasing call for diverse funeral rituals. Ultimately, they may have to change their business model in order to meet these needs.

**Is this the future of English funerals** or is this an aberration in a small corner of England? We don't know the answer to that, but we believe similar experiences are seen around the country where funeral directors give families clear and broad information, allow them to start the process of planning a funeral starting with a clean sheet, give them time and support to make their own decisions and are flexible enough to put aside half a day to help them prepare and set up for the funeral and have a longer ceremony away from the crematorium. We believe that cultural, social and demographic changes will impact on the funeral rituals over the coming decades.

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