

What is a funeral for?



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“Basically a funeral says that something significant has happened, that a human life, *this* human life, has ended; and it goes on to interpret this event in some way. When funerals today fail, it is because you would never guess that something significant is being marked.” Tony Walter. *Funerals And How To Improve Them*.

“The main purpose of a funeral is to signify the event of a death.” Roger Grainger.

The funeral is primarily about the person who has died. If they are not made to be present in some way, the funeral will fail. The idea that funerals are mainly for the bereaved has only really gained ground in the 20th Century. Before then the primary task of the rituals around death were to ensure safe passage of the soul. Tony Walter writes:

“To forego one’s own beliefs and values, and arrange the kind of funeral that honours the actual life of the deceased seems to me to acknowledge something very profound about bereavement. Losing someone involves handing them over, whereas to grasp the funeral as your own possession is to cling to your unfulfilled hopes for the dead person.”

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. It also symbolically re-enacts the death and leads the bereaved through a process of separation, transition and re-integration.

When starting to think about a funeral it is useful to keep five important aims in mind. These can provide a guide when you are trying to sort out the order of readings and music. They are:

1. To acknowledge the life of the person in a truthful way and give thanks for that life in its richness and diversity. The person will have meant different things to different people.
2. To acknowledge the loss and ask for the safe transition of the spirit or soul into whatever is believed to lie beyond.
3. To give the bereaved comfort and an opportunity to reflect on and share their loss, perhaps within their larger community.
4. To give the bereaved the hope and inspiration to resume their lives in the knowledge that things have irretrievably changed.
5. To dispose of a body.

How much time or emphasis you give to each of these depends on the circumstances of the person’s death and what the family want the funeral to be. However, the five aims seem to hold true for someone who dies in their twenties or nineties or for the death of a child. Life’s value is not measured in years. The life has always had an impact to be acknowledged and remembered; the spirit has its next journey to make (if this is believed); the bereaved need comfort and the strength to re-start their lives.

The funeral rituals

A ritual is needed because it uses common symbols to lead us deeper into ourselves and our lives to make meaning from the events that have occurred. In the case of a funeral, they are instrumental in bringing us through a rite of passage, which includes separation, a threshold and transition, and re-integration. (van Genneep, Jenny Hockey 2000).

There is **separation** as the death and loss of the person must be accepted as real. There is also the separation of the soul from the body and a change in social status of the person who has died and those close to them. The wife is no longer a wife; the children (of whatever age) no longer have a parent.

Then there is a threshold, a liminal space, where the past has been broken and the future is uncertain, preceding a **transition**. The body will be destroyed; the husband becomes a widower, the wife a widow; there needs to be a readjustment to a new world without that person present, emotional, physical, socio-economic, in status.

And finally **re-integration**, making that readjustment, a coming back into life, with changed social status (widow, head of the family), relationships, a new world without the person who has died.

Much of the separation happens before the funeral, the death itself, perhaps covering the face of the person who has died, opening the window or leaving the body where it is to allow the soul to depart, the person who has died being taken away by the funeral directors. At the funeral ceremony there is talking about the person who is no longer really present, the moment of committal, when the coffin is put in the ground or removed from sight, a symbolic re-enactment of the death.

The transition rituals will start during the time between the death and disposal of the body, as acceptance of the death is grappled with; perhaps clothes and objects are put away; the death registered; the body may be visited; a coffin prepared or painted; the widow(er) may wear black; there may be prayer, meditation, readings, a heightened spiritual awareness. There are few rituals now compared with during Victorian times.

The re-integration begins towards or at the end of the funeral, and parts of this may take a long time to achieve, if ever, as the close family come to terms with their new roles, family gatherings without the person, changes in socio and economic status. Candles may be lit or special meals taken on anniversaries, visits made the grave or the site where the ashes are scattered.

Michael Kearl, in his book *Endings: a sociology of death and dying* (1989), stated "bereaved individuals may be unable to function in their roles if overwhelmed by grief, incapacitated by fear, or unable to develop new relationships to replace the old." The rituals around dying and death, and not least the funeral itself, are present to help with this process.