

When You Must Think About a Funeral

Ideas for the Service Arrangements

Funerals are just barbaric” was the philosophy Cindy learned from her parents and adopted for herself. She could understand no sound reason for why people invested large sums of money, looked at dead bodies in caskets, and sent extravagant floral arrangements. But when her 17-year old son was killed in a tragic automobile accident, her views changed.

What she learned for herself was how *important* the “ritual” was in her own journey through grief. “I couldn’t believe the outpouring of love from Bob’s teenage friends,” she said. “It seemed so important to them to see his body in the casket while holding on to one another. It was hard to see him in the casket and I really cried—but I would never have believed how helpful it would be for me.”

“Funeral” Means Many Things

The term *funeral* holds a diversity of meanings depending on your family background, religious affiliation, and cultural heritage. For some, the idea of a funeral service suggests an outdated custom while for others, it is “just the thing to do.”

The funeral service is not just “something we do because of tradition.” Rather, it fulfills some vital functions to help you, your family, and friends in your own journey through grief.

Ceremonies marking the death of a person are observed in virtually every culture throughout the world. Like weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings, and high school graduations, the funeral service is an important “rite of passage.” These rituals help us mark significant changes in life, and provide a framework for the individual, the family, and the community to pass through those changes.

Funerals literally help us to *reaffirm* basic values and beliefs and *remember* the ways our lives were impacted by the person who died. They also help us *realize* that death has occurred and *release* the physical presence of the person who died so we can go on living.

Rather than seeing them as outmoded, contemporary psychology is united in supporting the use of healthy mourning customs *including*



Every culture marks death with significant ceremonies

funerals. The reason is simple. The death of a loved one causes a great upheaval of the emotions, physical well-being, and thinking process. As disorienting as the bereavement process is, funerals help us find our direction again.

It is natural to fear being embarrassed or “losing control,” but be assured that these tears are a *helpful* part of the bereavement experience. Though these parts of the ceremony are difficult, your bereavement needs are simply too important to ignore.

Creating a Personally Meaningful Service

Some people are “down” on funerals because they have never attended one they found meaningful. You can ask your clergy or other officiant to work with you in creating a service that will be personally meaningful to those attending and that meets the four vital needs of all grieving people. These ideas may also help:

- Invite three or four friends to share a favorite memory during the service
- Create a photograph collage to share at the visitation
- Select music that is appropriate to your loved one's life and beliefs
- Include family members or close friends in reading poems, scripture, or special tributes
- Choose a casket or urn that can be customized with insignia, pictures, or important symbols
- Bring significant items to the visitation to arrange near the casket, including a fishing rod, garden tools, camera equipment, books, artwork, or other expressions of your loved one's life
- Assist the funeral director in closing the casket as a personal goodbye
- Place a photograph, letter, toy, or symbol in the casket

Today, Tomorrow, and Beyond. . .

Grief does not disappear in a few days or even a few months. When a loved one dies, our lives are changed forever; life takes on a new "normal" rather than returning to how things were before. But creating a funeral ceremony that is a reaffirmation of shared values and a tribute to a life lived is vital to helping family members and friends begin the journey we call bereavement.

This article was written by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy oversaw the clinical counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice until his recent appointment to the Medical Humanities faculty at Baylor University. Copyright ©2013, 2000 by GriefConnect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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