



Personalizing the Funeral

Information from Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., Fort Collins, Colorado –

“Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies”.

For more information, call (970) 226-6050 or visit their website at www.center-forloss.com

When it comes time to plan a funeral, many details must be attended to, many people contacted and many decisions made. Focus on what is really important - to honour the unique life that was lived.

“Over and over, families tell me that the best funerals are those that are personalized.”
Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

- **Consider the unique life of the person who died.** Think about their qualities, passions, hobbies, likes, dislikes and pastimes. Make a list of their attributes/passions, special memories to share, the achievements of the person who died and the important people in their life.
- **Personalize the elements of the ceremony.** Incorporate the special memories into the funeral plan - visitation, eulogy, music, readings, procession, committal service and the reception. For example, set up a display of photos, memorabilia, collections or artwork. Choose music that was meaningful to the person who died or to the family. Ask the people who were closest to the person who died to participate by playing music, giving readings, being pallbearers, making food, etc.
- **The eulogy is especially important.** It should acknowledge the unique life of the person who died and affirm the significance of their life for all who shared in it. Instead of a traditional eulogy delivered by one person, you may choose to ask several people to speak and share their memories. There is also a growing trend to have people attending the funeral stand up and share a memory of the person who died.

More ideas for personalizing a funeral service.

- Write a personalized obituary. Appoint a creative “word” person in the family to handle this.
- Create a column in the guest book for people to jot down a memory after they sign their name.
- Display personal items or hobby paraphernalia on a table at the visitation, the ceremony or the gathering afterwards.
- Choose clothing for the person who died that reflects his or her life, interests, passions, etc. The clothing needn’t be formal or somber.
- Create a personalized program for the ceremony. Include photos, poems, anecdotes - whatever you’d like.

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- Show a videotape or slide show of the person's life during the funeral. Pictures tell a thousand words!
- Ask children if they would like to write a letter or draw a picture for the person who died. Their "goodbyes" can then be placed in the casket alongside the body.
- Select flowers that were meaningful to the person who died.
- Create a funeral that captures the personality of the person who died. If he/she was zany, don't be afraid to use humour. If she was affectionate, have everyone stand up and hug the person next to them during the ceremony.
- Display photos of the person who died at the visitation. Putting together a photo collage can be a very healing experience for the family in the days before the funeral.
- Use lots of music. Music can be played at the visitation, the committal service and the gathering as well as the funeral service.
- Create a personalized grave marker. Include a poem, a drawing or a short phrase that defines the person who died.

"A well-planned, inclusive, personalized funeral will touch family, friends and you deeply. The funeral will help everyone to begin to heal and provide everyone with great comfort and satisfaction in the months and years to come."

Dr. Alan Wolfelt

Frequently Asked Questions

What purpose does a funeral serve?

It is the customary way to recognize death and its finality. Funerals are recognized rituals for the living to show respect for the dead and to help survivors begin the grief process.

What do funeral directors do?

Funeral directors are caregivers and administrators. They make the arrangements for transportation of the body, complete all necessary paperwork, and implement the choices made by the family regarding the funeral and final disposition of the body.

Funeral directors are listeners, advisors and supporters. They have experience assisting the bereaved in coping with death. Funeral directors are trained to answer questions about grief, recognize when a person is having difficulty coping, and recommend sources of professional help. Funeral directors also link survivors with support groups at the funeral home or in the community.

- If you prearrange your funeral, your wishes for the service and the final burial arrangements will be documented. Your next of kin need only to follow your wishes. Start by contacting a funeral home

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where you would like to make arrangements. They will be able to assist you with the professional services that are required:

- ✓ the type of casket;
 - ✓ suggestions for the funeral;
 - ✓ clergy and music;
 - ✓ preference for earth burial or cremation.
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- The Funeral Director may also be able to assist you and your family in applying for CPP and other death benefits available through government programs, to help with the cost of the funeral.
 - The Funeral Director may also be able to help you and your family write the death notice for the local newspapers.
 - The Funeral Director may contact your clergy, pallbearers, and others who will be involved in the funeral.
 - The Funeral Director will obtain the burial permit and provide your family with the Death Certificate (and copies) that they will need to deal with the financial institutions and insurance companies when settling estate matters.
 - By handling all necessary arrangements, the Funeral Director can free you and your family of much of the burden of the funeral and leave them time to be with friends and family during this difficult time.

Do you have to have a funeral director to bury the dead?

In most provinces, family members may bury their own dead although regulations vary. However, most people find it very trying to be solely responsible for arranging the details and legal matters surrounding a death.

Why have a public viewing?

Viewing is part of many cultural and ethnic traditions. Many grief specialists believe that viewing aids the grief process by helping the bereaved recognize the reality of death. Viewing is encouraged for children, as long as the process is explained and the activity voluntary.

What is the purpose of embalming?

Embalming sanitizes and preserves the body, retards the decomposition process, and enhances the appearance of a body disfigured by traumatic death or illness.

Embalming makes it possible to lengthen the time between death and the final disposition, thus allowing family members time to arrange and participate in the type of service most comforting to them.

Does a dead body have to be embalmed, according to law?

No. Most provinces, however, require embalming when death was caused by a reportable contagious disease or when remains are to be transported from one state to another by common carrier or if final disposition is not to be made within a prescribed number of hours.

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Is cremation a substitute for a funeral?

No, cremation is an alternative to earth burial or entombment for the body's final disposition and often follows a traditional funeral service. In fact, according to FTC figures for 1987, direct cremation occurred in only 3% of deaths.

Is it possible to have a traditional funeral if someone dies of AIDS?

Yes, A person who dies of an AIDS-related illness is entitled to the same service options afforded to anyone else. If public viewing is consistent with local or personal customs, that option is encouraged. Touching the deceased's face or hands is perfectly safe.

Because the grief experienced by survivors may include a variety of feelings, survivors may need even more support than survivors of non-AIDS-related deaths

Why are funerals so expensive?

When compared to other major life cycle events, like births and weddings, funerals are not expensive. A wedding costs at least three times as much; but because it is a happy event, wedding costs are rarely criticized.

A funeral home is a 24-hour, labor-intensive business, with extensive facilities (viewing rooms, chapels, limousines, hearses, etc.), these expenses must be factored into the cost of a funeral.

Moreover, the cost of a funeral includes not only merchandise, like caskets, but the services of a funeral director in making arrangements; filing appropriate forms; dealing with doctors, ministers, florists, newspapers and others; and seeing to all the necessary details.

Contrary to popular belief, funeral homes are largely family-owned with a modest profit margin.

What should I do if the death occurs in the middle of the night or on the weekend?

Most Funeral Directors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Will someone come right away?

If you request immediate assistance, yes. If the family wishes to spend a short time with the deceased to say good bye, it's acceptable. They will come when your time is right.

If a loved one dies out of Province , can the local Funeral Home still help?

Yes, they can assist you with out-of-Province arrangements, either to transfer the remains to another state or from another state.

So, I've decided on cremation. Can I still have a funeral or a viewing?

Yes, quite often some sort of viewing precedes the actual cremation. Your Funeral Home can assist you with the necessary information for a funeral with a cremation following or a memorial service.

What government agencies help defray final expenses?

Usually, Funeral Directors will help gather the necessary information to apply for financial assistance from Social Services, Veteran's, retirements and any others.

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