

The question that everyone faces after the death of a loved one is, "what do I do next?". More and more an even casual reading of the obituaries of any newspaper will include the statement: "No Service by Request". Families sometimes choose a direct and speedy disposal of the body, with no viewing or service, either out of regard to the wishes of the deceased, or out of a desire to spare themselves or others any further pain or suffering.

This is particularly true in North America. Accompanying the decline in religious observance and the secularisation of society has been a rise in the number of cremations. Many religions and cultures follow this custom, so in and of itself, the rise in the count of cremations does not explain the upsurge of 'de-ritualised' funeral practices. In fact, these same faiths and societies often have very elaborate services and festive rituals accompanying cremations. It seems that the act of doing nothing to mark the death of a loved one stems mainly from the mistaken notion that the living must be spared yet further grief and that the act of actually viewing the deceased is too painful a reality to consider. Ultimately, both are actually a denial of death and the human need to have a ceremony of some type to mark this final transition.

As well, many people no longer find meaning or value in traditional funerals which, rightly or wrongly, are often judged as empty and uncreative. Traditional services may be even judged as bizarre or morbid to a generation unaware of their meaning and purpose. Rather than consider other service options the decision is hastily made simply to do nothing. This "no muss, no fuss" attitude towards death leaves no place for the inherent human need to practice healthy mourning. It is moreover a denial of the role of pain, suffering and tears in our journey to wholeness. We no longer seem to use or want the symbols that announce a death and unless religious-based are even sometimes illiterate of their meaning and purpose in a traditional funeral service. Ultimately, a denial of mortality is at the bottom of such 'de-ritualisation'.

Not having any service might at first seem a simple solution, but a very important reality is overlooked. The service is primarily for the living as well as for the dead. Bereaved family and friends have a profound spiritual, social and psychological, necessity within their human psyche to respond in a formal and corporate way to their loss and thus, to fulfil several significant needs.

The first is to accept without reservation that the death has occurred; this is why the viewing of the deceased is so significant. If viewing is not an option than at least participating in a commemoration of some type is crucial. It convinces us that the person is really departed from us and provides a focal point that our senses can perceive and understand, and thus accept.

Secondly, such a rite of remembrance allows us to say goodbye and hence, to pay our respects and offer our tribute to the deceased and in turn our support to the family. It is a sociably acceptable format for such acknowledgement and care to be expressed.

A service also is crucial to the living in order that they might put closure to their loss and thus, move on to continue and complete their grief work. The service becomes a crucial starting point for such a journey.

Finally, a service responds to the very deep spiritual needs of people. Even in the earliest of times, flowers or personal objects were placed in the grave and some form of ceremony was celebrated, in order to fulfil this exigency. For a person with a religious background such an option is natural. Even when we have no set religious affiliation however, the want to reflect and mark this most ultimate rite of passage remains, as everyone has a spiritual nature by virtue of being human. Hence, a service can be religious, in accordance with set ritual prescribed by that faith; or deeply spiritual in its use of inspirational readings, reflections, and creative use of symbols.

The choice of the type of service to be held is made against a background of both religious beliefs and cultural norms and expectations. As well, there is a desire to balance the wishes of the deceased with the needs of the living, in putting closure to their loss and moving on in their grief work. The service you select helps to overcome your sense of 'disconnectedness' in order to re-centre yourself and to make that transition to life without the physical presence of your loved one. Before you decide what observance will mark the death of your loved one, it is important to be aware of the options available and their meaning.

A funeral is a rite or ceremony for the dead which requires that the body be present. It is usually traditional and often religious in nature and mostly takes place in a place of worship or funeral home. Although formal in its ritual, it is a celebration allowing both affection and reverence to be expressed.

A memorial is also a ceremony that commemorates the life of the deceased in a positive way, but without the presence of the body. These may occur in any venue from a worship place, funeral home, hall, or home. Often a picture of the deceased and/or 'momentos' of them are used as a focal point for the service.

A celebration of life is a memorial which extols the accomplishments, virtues, talents and personality of the deceased. It is often creative and participatory and strives to gladden the living by use of empowering and positive recollections, inspirational readings and meaningful symbols..

A non-sectarian service is a non-religious service which may be spiritual and inspirational in tone without making direct reference to God or religion.

A wake usually takes place the evening before a funeral or memorial service and is a time for family and friends to gather. It is often combined with a viewing or visitation, thus providing an occasion to view the deceased in a casket and to offer prayers and support.

A burial or interment is the placing of the casket containing the body of the deceased in the ground. Some religions have specific protocols regarding the choice of burial or not and even the manner in which it is to be done.

An entombment is the placing of the casket above ground in a crypt or mausoleum.

Cremation refers to the process of disposing of a body under intense heat within a special furnace called a retort. The ash and bone fragments are what remains and are then gathered. The building housing this process is called a crematorium.

Cremaains is a designation for cremated remains.

A memorialisation refers to what is done with the cremated remains. They usually are inured, that is placed in an urn, a vase like receptacle or other style of container. This urn may be kept at home or placed elsewhere.

Interring or interment refers to the placing of the urn in a burial plot, a columbarium niche, or a mausoleum.

Scattering the cremated remains on land or water is another way that cremated remains are dealt with. It is important to note that there are often civic, provincial, national and even international laws strictly governing this latter choice. As well, religions may have definite protocols or guidelines outlining whether cremation is an option and/or how it is to take place.

A columbarium is a niche in a memorialisation wall, crypt, or mausoleum. The name comes from the Latin for a "dove's alcove". Cremated human remains are interred there.

A committal service refers to the brief ceremony which takes place at the graveside or in the case of cremation at the end of the funeral service. It commends the body to return to the earth and if a religious service to eternal peace and to God's care as well.

A reception is a social gathering that occurs after the service. It can be very informal with refreshments such as coffee, tea and/or sweets and sandwiches; or more elaborate with a buffet or a served meal. It may be held in a church hall, a hospitality room of the funeral centre, a restaurant or a home. Often religious or social customs and expectations predetermine these choices. From a psychological point of view it is always important to allow family and friends such a social time, to offer their support and comfort to one another. It is a meaningful ritual and affirmation that life continues on.

All the above choices are socially useful and emotionally valuable for the living as both a way of bringing closure to their loss and as an important part of the therapeutic re-orientation of the survivors in the bereavement process. Such observances are imperative as they link the deceased, the bereaved, the sacred, and the community in socially acceptable ways. From a spiritual and psychological point of view, traditional

funerals provide the fullest means of social grieving. The body is viewed, the senses accept for themselves the reality of death, and there are set roles and specific grief work to do. There is also a familiarity and comfort in the age old rites of one's faith, no matter which it be.

Your funeral director is professionally trained to assist you in a supportive, caring way, in making an informed choice that will be sensitive to both your needs and your beliefs. Rather than pressure, such a professional simply clarifies and guides you through what can often be a bewildering time of life..

There is a value and dignity to human life and so it is only natural that human death be fittingly commemorated. Birth, graduation, marriage, and retirement are all celebrated with family and friends. So too, the funeral or memorial service focuses our attention on the very meaning of life and allows us an opportunity to reaffirm those relationships nearest to us. Religious or spiritual faith gives perspective and support to our grief, thereby making it more bearable and giving hope. In honouring our deceased with a service we validate their person and extol and celebrate their contribution to our lives. Such a tribute allows us to express our appreciation of them in order to release them; then we can grow to cherish their memory without pain but with acceptance.

Community Resources

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

ARK - Counsels children and teenagers who have experienced the loss of a parent through death or divorce

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

Suggested Reading

These complimentary booklets and pamphlets are available from your funeral director.

A Guide to Funeral Costs for British Columbians, To help you understand, Funeral Service Association of British Columbia, Victoria, B.C.

Helpful Information About Funerals. Publ. by the Funeral Service Association of British Columbia.

Understanding Grief, A new beginning, Very Reverend Michael Sabara.

There are many other books available from libraries and bookstores on a variety of topics dealing with death and grief. The following are a few of my favourites.

When a Loved One Dies, A guide to help you plan and arrange immediate details, Pastoral Care Services, Fraser-Burrard Hospital Society.

Grollman, Earl A. Time Remembered: A Journal for Survivors. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

Kushner, Harold. When Bad Things Happen to Good People. New York: Schocken, 1981.