

How to arrange a funeral
and
How not to arrange a funeral

Note: The author, Mark O'Connor, is not currently working as a funeral celebrant. The following is simply advice on how to start the funeral process after a friend or relative dies, and how to avoid being cheated

As one journalist puts it:

When someone you love dies, society expects you to arrange two things: a ceremony or rite of passage to honour the deceased person; and the dignified disposal of their body.

The ceremony is the most important part that is what is remembered, and begins the healing. The ceremony is usually performed by a celebrant or a member of the clergy. The dignified disposal of the body is a funeral director's job.¹

But in most countries it's the funeral directors who are running the show.

In Australia, reforms introduced when Lionel Murphy was Attorney General finally broke a near-monopoly of the clergy upon weddings and funerals. The clergy had been offering one-size-fits-all wedding and funeral ceremonies (albeit with beautiful words from the King James bible etc.) These ceremonies were not about the particular individuals they supposedly celebrated or commemorated. They were about the Churches' understandings of the sacrament of marriage or of the fact that a soul had gone to heaven or hell. Non-believers were required to pretend to become temporary Christians for weddings and funerals, or else to put up with insultingly perfunctory registry office weddings or "unbelievers' funerals".

Instead civil celebrants began showing people how they could devise ceremonies with words and rituals that were about themselves (or about their dead friends) *as individuals*. The Churches were forced to compete, and today most of them allow personalised marriages and funerals, though sometimes grudgingly. Australia leads the world in the civil celebrancy movement, and about 50% of marriages are civil ceremonies. (Britain for instance lags far behind.)

It is even more important that there should be personalised *funeral* ceremonies---ones that really speak about the person who has died and thus help start the healing process. (Most couples with a healthy relationship will only laugh if something goes wrong at their wedding ceremony; but a funeral ceremony that miscues can leave relatives, and especially orphaned children, with unspoken/unrecognised griefs dangerously bottled up inside them.)

Yet today it is only civil *marriages* that are in a healthy state. Funerals are not. The funeral parlours are driving quality celebrants out of the business, and offering funerals with expensive coffins and premises but only perfunctory or generic ceremonies.

The funeral directors' trump card has been that they control the bureaucratic process that creates a proper registration of a death and disposal of the body.

I can best explain to you how they use this power by describing a typical event in which I was recently a fly on the wall.

Two sisters who have spent years looking after their elderly mother are looking for a funeral parlour/director to arrange her burial. They are pre-occupied with having the body picked up---since the hospital will only release it to a recognised funeral firm. They have little money, and they have been told that they need to be businesslike. "Get at least three quotes, and compare prices and quality." So they go into the first funeral parlour and tell the receptionist that they just want a quote. The receptionist says, "Absolutely! The director will be here in a minute. But first we'll need some basic info. from you. If you wouldn't mind filling in this form..."

The sisters oblige--and are trapped. The form they are filling in is not really relevant to the quote. It is the information required for disposal of a body, and the form requires them to establish a number of facts about the dead person's identity and history, starting with date and place of birth... The receptionist helps them through the complications of the form. Since she is helping them to talk about the person who has absorbed all their attention and energy of late, they feel the receptionist's involvement as friendly attention, and as proof that this is a caring firm.

By the time the form is finished, 40 minutes have evaporated. They are on their second cup of tea; and there is no longer any question of their moving on to two or three other funeral parlours for rival quotes. At this point the receptionist's reluctance to discuss prices evaporates (along with her need to consult the absent director). She takes them through the three big ticket items: They will need to pay so many thousands of dollars for a suitable burial plot; so many thousands for the firm's services (including their decorous premises and staff, removal and preparation of the body, etc); and finally even more thousands for the coffin.

She shows them a series of coffins that are really far too expensive for them; but because the sisters have failed to agree in advance on how much they would spend on a coffin (in fact had formed only a hazy idea of what the items and expenses would be) they are easily divided and put under pressure. No one wants to be told later, "Well you were the one who wanted to shove Mum into the ground in the cheapest coffin we could buy!" And no other way of expressing their love for their mother has been proposed to them. So they both say they don't like the color of the most expensive coffin, but then pretend enthusiasm for another whose price is only a little less out of their range.

At the end, almost as an after-thought, the "receptionist" says: "You mentioned your mother was once an Anglican. I could arrange for Father McKenzie from the local Anglican church to do the service. He doesn't insist on payment, but I think you should make him an 'offering' of \$180 dollars." She makes this sound like a generous attitude.

The sisters are so relieved to hear this will not be another huge expense that they readily agree--hardly noticing that they have spent most of their money on a lump of rainforest timber that will be briefly glimpsed then slide into the ground for ever, and almost nothing on the service that should have commemorated their mother.

Of course for so small a fee Fr McKenzie could afford to do little more than open up his church, perform a standard ceremony (hopefully pronouncing the dead person's name correctly) and then go out to the grave-site to perform the final (equally generic) committal.

This is what happens in thousands of cases, and relatives are understandably disappointed. In this case things turned out better. The dead woman was my mother-in-law and I am a qualified (though very part-time) civil celebrant. So at this point I stepped in.

I first established that the Anglican priest was prepared to have a "eulogy" inserted into his ceremony, provided he didn't have to write it or deliver it. I then spent a couple of days assembling the story of this shy woman's fascinating and somewhat secretive life, collecting not just the facts but also the anecdotes that best brought out her humanity and the way it had felt to lead her sort of life. Then I checked back with the various informants and reconciled disagreements. (Relatives can be very possessive about their differing versions of someone's life.)

Then I reworked the information into a speech of the right length that was decorous and appreciative, but also true and a useful piece of history for the family's future historians. I also made sure it recognised the viewpoints and contributions to her life of those who were there to mourn her. And finally I rehearsed, partly memorised, and delivered the speech. All this was at least ten hours work (though of course I did not charge for it). It would have cost about \$1000 dollars (or a fraction of the price of the coffin!) if done professionally.

As this story illustrates, funeral parlours are using their position of power to pay celebrants so little that it becomes extremely difficult for a celebrant who does the job properly to specialise in funeral celebrancy. (As one client told a celebrant recently, "I wouldn't even get out of bed for what we're paying you to commemorate Dad's life.") The result could be summed up as: Big profits, poor funerals!

Good and dedicated funeral celebrants commonly practice for a year or so; then, just as they have learnt to do it well, they give up---because they simply can't cover their time

and expenses. There are exceptions. Some enlightened funeral directors will pay a little more to get a worthwhile celebrant; and there are dedicated celebrants who continue to do the job because they have independent incomes and they know how much people need them. But the most common pattern is that funeral directors see that there is a limited pool of money to be got out of the families of the deceased, and so they prefer to de-emphasise the ceremony and the "eulogy" (on which they don't get a cut) in favor of getting people to spend up big on the coffin and their premises and services.

I hope the above is not just another dispiriting tale of how bad the world can be. Ventilating this issue can quite largely solve the problem. Once people realise that the way to have your relatives commemorated properly is to ask around, select a good celebrant (preferably one you've previously seen in action), and hire them *separately* from the funeral director, the standard of funerals can rise just as the standard of marriages has.

PS For anyone who is interested to read further, I append the opening of an article I am working on, on this issue.

A good funeral celebrant at work

“It was after Dad died in a car smash that my life went wrong. At his funeral the undertaker’s man got his name wrong. His mates made jokey embarrassed speeches, and nothing sounded faintly like the man who had been the light in our lives. When Mum got a chance to speak she just blubbered uselessly. Her idea of remembering him was to spend money we didn’t have on a trunk of polished rainforest timber that went straight into the ground. I felt he had punished me by dying, and I pulled away from my mother and sister in a poisonous private grief. Nothing seemed to matter. Next year when a boy I knew from school suggested we knock over an empty house, I said ‘Why not?’ . . .”

I was trying to read the thoughts of a white-faced ten-year old boy, as he stood tensely apart from his mother and sister at their father’s funeral. The mother had tried to describe what her husband had meant to the family, but seconds into her speech she broke down, and had to give over. Luckily the celebrant was one of Australia’s most experienced, known for her meticulous preparation. As the widow stepped down with a despairing gesture, she offered a tissue and continued smoothly—but not, as expected, with the formal eulogy or life-history that was her own responsibility. Instead for the next ten minutes she gave the speech the widow would have given, complete with precise anecdotes: “I know Gail would also want to tell you about the time Jack took her and the children to Tasmania . . .”

Then she began to speak for the children: “Jason particularly remembers how Jack got him interested in fishing . . . He couldn’t believe it when the policeman came that night to say Jack wouldn’t be coming home . . . Tracey feels she has lost her best friend after her mother. One of Tracey’s strongest memories of Jack is how . . .”

The children were far too young to have spoken about their feelings before an audience of grown-ups, but it was clear from their suddenly animated expressions that the celebrant was speaking accurately for them, and with their permission. Later at the graveside she again spoke at length about their father. By now everyone's feelings had been fully recognized; and the mother and children were hugging each other in shared, not private grief. After warmly inviting all present to refreshments after the funeral, the celebrant closed proceedings and motioned to me—her understudy—to slip aside.

Won't they expect you at the reception, I asked, after what you've meant to them today. I never go, she said, From here on, the family are best left with those who are closest to them. They can't keep up the public emotional intensity, and neither can we.

I later discovered that for this masterly professional performance, which had taken her the best part of a weeks preparation, she had been paid less than the hearse-driver.

ⁱ Rayner, Moira, *Modern Values: The Business of Death in New Matilda* at <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=2442>