

## DEATH AND GRIEVING

# DIY Funerals as Therapy

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Recently a man told me how great a privilege he felt it was to have carried out his daughter's wishes for her own funeral. She had left clear instructions and fulfilling her directions gave him an aim at this traumatic time and a great sense of satisfaction in giving her his final gift for the 'celebration of her life' as she had requested. I too felt good about arranging my mother's funeral and shared the sense of giving her a gift. Another therapeutic aspect of taking charge is receiving the warm appreciative comments afterwards.

We can all remember the ceremonies we have found comforting long after the event, and we all recall these funerals we felt were soulless long after the event, so it is important that everyone attending feels that thought and effort have been given.

It's a relief if instructions given by the dead person have been left with the will, but if no particular wishes are to be met then the choice is yours to create an imaginative and memorable event. For me I prefer lots of participation from family

and friends, even a simple contribution such as 'how I first met the deceased' is of interest. Other excellent suggestions can be got from *A Practical Guide to Non-religious Funerals* by Jane Wynne Willson. If you have ideas but are anxious about conducting the ceremony ask a priest to do what you want, or a member of the Society of Friends or British Humanist Association to lead it for you.

One lady I met sent a tape to each of her children with her instructions for her own funeral and another man had prepared an address to be played at his funeral for the audience.

All is possible and to have created a memorable event will offer comfort to the bereaved and to yourself in a way you cannot imagine nor fully evaluate.

These are some notes setting out my own wishes for 'the celebration of my life'.

- Brother to be master of ceremonies.
- Masses of candles and flowers and each person in their celebratory clothes.
- He will teach and lead everyone through the greetings dance in a circle.

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I shall be in a cardboard coffin surrounded by candles in the centre of the circle.

- In turn each person speaks to me, saying
  - i) how we first met
  - ii) what they valued in the friendship
  - iii) any hurt or grievance they still holdThe purpose of this is to acknowledge it and then release it.
- Group scribe to sign their name in felt tip pens on the cardboard coffin.
- Musical interlude as yet still to be planned!
- Everyone says something affirming their own life now followed by feasting.
- Everyone is given a helium-filled balloon which they carry with them to nearby burial place and after my coffin is lowered the balloons are released to symbolise my newly freed soul.
- Each person leaves with flowers to take home and a book or article I owned. Any letters I've written saying farewell will be distributed.

### *A DIY Funeral*

I found planning my mother's funeral an education, a bonding experience with my four siblings and therapeutic exercise for myself. Organising the event ourselves seemed the easiest way of getting what we wanted. I wanted this to be memorable and supportive.

Our funeral took place inside the funeral parlour, as the local church was not available. This proved an excellent informal venue; the room was a peculiar shape with five oddly angled walls. We placed the coffin in the centre of the room and we sat around the sides facing the centre

so we could see each other and then outlined the programme we would follow. I had invited a priest to say a Latin mass for us on his portable altar to start the ceremony. He then took a back seat for he was not the master of ceremonies! My younger brother then asked his four siblings to stand linking hands as he told us about one of his good early memories. Another brother performed on the flute and then followed stories and memories from many other participants.

Prior to the day I had asked people to write down or come prepared to speak of a memory they had of my mother and those not wanting to speak would have their piece read aloud by another. This really taught me how good it is to hear these anecdotes from any period of my mother's life. I had provided helium-filled balloons for the children and grandchildren and these I now distributed. We walked to the graveside carrying the festive looking balloons and there I suggested we release the balloons, thinking of them as symbols for her departing soul and as an opportunity to release any painful emotional attachments we still had to our mother. This was one of the most useful rituals for me as we released the balloons into the air and watched until the last speck had disappeared from view. There followed a special tea in a cosy café with log fires, given over to our funeral party.

I did enjoy it, and so did my family. I was particularly touched by a compliment given me by a sister, who asked me if I would organise her own funeral when the time came!