Contemporary funeral rituals
Jane Morrell and Simon Smith

Both traditional religions and small ethnic groups 'show a concern with death and most societies set about ritual performances which help make sense of the ending of a life by reconstructing the identity of the dead within some wider framework of reference. In all this the power of language assumes a dramatic part in accompanying other ritual acts in emphasising human belief in the triumph of humanity over death and in asserting the plausibility of existence' (Douglas Davies, Death, Ritual and Belief).

Jane Morrell

The funeral, and the time leading up to it, take those who are bereaved through an important transition which, if done well, can help them to grieve their loss and eventually move through to some sense of resolution and acceptance. In this article we explore the changing nature of the funeral in contemporary society, as many people move away from formal religious practice to a more personal spiritual one. We draw on our personal experiences of working with families as funeral directors, arrangers and celebrants in the area of Totnes in Devon, to devise personal and meaningful rituals and ceremonies.

Simon Smith

A contemporary funeral

Jean had been active up to the last day of her life. She took great care of her home, was a volunteer helping other elderly people in her community and remained closely involved in the lives of her three sons, now in their fifties, and eleven grandchildren, aged between seven and twenty five. Her sudden death at 78 brought a real sense of shock. Always organised, she had left a pre-paid funeral plan, stipulating cremation. The family had been to the crematorium quite recently when Jean's brother had died, and they weren't keen to go back for another impersonal twenty-minute service – in fact some of the grandchildren refused. So, what could they do?

After a few days in which the funeral evolved through discussion, we helped them to arrange to have the funeral ceremony at home, amongst all Jean's things, with the coffin present. The space wasn't massive, but by removing the double door between the lounge and the hall and putting a small gazebo in the garden, they could accommodate the necessary sixty people at a squeeze.

'In the same way that Jean was very accepting of what life brought her, she saw death as an unknown quantity, neither ruling out the possibility of an ongoing journey, nor that the end of this life might be just that. What we can be sure about is that the legacy of her thoughts, words and deeds will continue through the memories she has left behind with all of you. Grown lighter than breath, she is set free in our remembering'. From her ceremony.

They decided they wanted the funeral to be on Saturday so that everyone could come. We arranged for the funeral directors to bring the coffin to the house at 1pm and to pick it up again at 3pm. We booked the cremation for 10 o'clock on Monday morning. Just the three sons would accompany Mum.

Jean wasn't religious, but not really an atheist either. Once the family knew they could devise a ceremony entirely of their own, they chose to sing 'Let It Be' and 'Morning Has Broken', they read some favourite poetry and had an informal space in which anyone could speak about Jean. They lit a big candle, and each of the grandchildren lit a small candle from that flame. Towards the end of the ceremony, in a very moving moment, Granny's big candle was extinguished and her picture put away, to signify the reality of her death. Once the coffin had gone, everyone was invited to stay for 'high tea', Jean's favourite meal.

The three sons had had no idea that such a funeral was possible. Most people know so little about funerals that they are easily swept into the conventional. In many ways there was nothing extraordinary about what happened. The ceremony was entirely in character with Jean and her family, and included rituals special to that family, the gathering of the clan at Jean's house, lighting candles to make an occasion special, singing those particular songs together, eating 'high tea', making the grandchildren central to the proceedings, and even the three sons taking responsibility alone for the 'difficult' jobs, in this case taking Mum to the crematorium. In this way, it was an extraordinary funeral ceremony and ritual.

The purposes of a funeral

But was it a 'proper' funeral? There was no vicar, no liturgy, no formality. Could it satisfy the main purposes for having a funeral, for example:

1. To enable families and friends to understand, share and mourn their loss and remember and reclaim elements of their relationship

with the person they may have lost suddenly or to illness or distance perhaps years ago.

2. To illuminate and give thanks for the life of the person who has died. A good funeral nourishes and warms us as we interweave and share stories, memories, music, poetry, sadness and humour amongst the community of family and friends who loved the person.

3. To confirm the reality of the loss and say goodbye to the physical form of the person who has died, and ask for the safe transition of the spirit or soul into whatever is believed to lie beyond, helping those left behind to achieve closure.

4. To help the survivors take comfort from each other, initiate their grieving process and find a new sense of being in a world that has irretrievably changed.

This family-centred ceremony did meet all these criteria. Jean's community gathered to share their loss; they celebrated her life with familiar stories, well worn anecdotes and by talking about Jean's qualities and what she meant to those present; they kept a solemn moment to say goodbye when they extinguished the candle; they began to put their loss into context, the loss of the family's matriarch, its hub, leaving a gap, uncertainty of what would happen in the future, for example the future of the family home, how decisions would be made and where they would meet at Christmas, which was less than six months away. Life had irrevocably changed, and the future was unknown.

When we talk about funerals, we mean the whole time between a death and the end of the process of disposing of the body of and memorialising the person who has died. Very often, not knowing what to do, the whole process is handed over to medical and funeral professionals, leaving the family feeling lost as bystanders. The activities in which families and friends may participate include laying out, anointing and caring for the person who has died, holding a vigil around the body at home or elsewhere either in the days following the death or the night before the funeral - all activities that were common not so long ago. Other possibilities are decorating the coffin and ceremony hall, transporting the body to the funeral, bearing the coffin into the ceremony and others if they wish to. We find that families that have participated in some of these activities have a greater depth of acknowledgement of the reality of the death, more opportunities to mourn, talk about and understand the implications. Through this, they are often able to be more present at the funeral itself. If the funeral does pass in a blur, they may gather people together for some kind of formal or informal memorial afterwards, perhaps associated with the interring or scattering of the ashes, or they could build a temporary shrine at home as a personal transitionary space, or use the clearing and arrangement of the person's possessions as a ritual.

The death of someone close leaves each person at a threshold, knowing that life will never be the same, but uncertain of what the future will bring, a liminal space of unknowingness. It makes us question the meaning of existence, our relationship with the person who has died, the structure of the family, our own identity and mortality. The funeral marks that transition. It offers a personal and collective transformation at the physical, emotional and spiritual levels. The ceremony is a container, providing the form for ritual, which helps us to make the transition. Everyone participates in the ritual, by virtue of being there with a shared context and purpose, connected as the community of people who knew and loved a person.

The ancient rituals and liturgies for death often no longer speak to an increasingly secular population. The church or church-like ceremony hall, big black hearse, solid coffin borne by men in black, litany and prayers to a God in a form no longer identified with by many and archaic language are uncomfortable for a public in which well over eight in ten people have no regular religious practice but only 15% call themselves atheist.

Family centred funerals

Like Jean's, families often already have many rituals in their lives, which are so familiar as to go almost unnoticed, such as repeating particular phrases and mottos, eating together, making particular food for special occasions, lighting candles on birthdays and anniversaries or taking spring flowers to a grave.

In Pharos (Magazine of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, Autumn 2007) John Pearce wrote about the 'trend towards family-centred, participative funerals' where the family is more involved in devising, arranging and participating in the funeral, not wanting to hand it all over to professionals. These ceremonies often evolve over a number of days and it takes time, skill and sensitivity to help a family to explore their options, feed in ideas and support them to make their choices. A personal ceremony may have just a small element that makes it special and meaningful for the family, or be quite unconventional. In the latter case the family members need to take time to discuss these, and as long as the different aspects are 'in character' and do not come as a shock, they are usually appreciated. Even fractured families can find a sense of unity if they are enabled to devise and participate in a ceremony together.

'Having drunk deeply of the heaven above and felt the most glorious beauty of the day, Agnes now becomes absorbed into the being of the universe. Through the flame of cremation she rises high above into the sky, and further still to the sun and stars, still further beyond the stars into the hollow of space, losing thus her separateness of being to become a part of the whole'.

It is the funeral ceremony that everyone remembers, and which has the capacity to contribute to the healing process or to upset because it did not 'hit the mark'. It is here that the person who has died takes centre stage for the last time and those attending begin to come to terms with the death and any difficulties left over, and also celebrate one, unique life. A funeral ceremony is like a theatrical event – where the physical elements such as coffin, place and flowers are matched with the content and the atmosphere created. By making the ceremony truly central to the whole process of arranging a funeral, the family can draw on its own rituals as well as traditional funeral rituals to create a personal experience to say their farewells.

Jack had for years played saxophone for the Sunday lunchtime jazz session at his local pub. This was a weekly ritual in his life. When he died aged 53, his family decided to recreate the jazz club for his funeral ceremony. Following a cremation to which his sons drove him in a hired silver Chrysler Voyager, his ashes were brought to the ceremony as the centrepiece of a table of photographs and memorabilia, set out with candles. The mourners sat at tables with drinks and live music was played, but also within this a more formal ceremony took place. People from different aspects of his life spoke about him, two hymns were abridged and read by a priest. Where there would normally be a committal, the last goodbye to the body, the ashes were removed from the room and a black and white photograph put in their place during a minute of silence. A highly unconventional funeral, everyone said it was 'just Jack', a fitting and memorable tribute to his life.

James Roose-Evans, says in Passages of the Soul -– Rediscovering the Importance of Rituals in Everyday Life: 'all great faiths have precise rituals for the dying and the dead – what rituals do we have to offer to those of no specific faith or tradition? A ritual is a journey of the heart, which should lead us into the inner realm of the psyche, and ultimately, into that of the soul, the ground of our being. Rituals, if performed with passion and devotion, will enhance our desire and strengthen our capacity to live. New rituals will evolve but the ancient rituals and liturgies are also capable of rediscovery as we learn to make them our own.'

By working consciously with the synthesis of the new and the old it is possible to nurture invigorated ritual by holding a ceremonial framework that is flexible enough to work for the particular family as well as the universal, the contemporary as well as the traditional. When the mourners are actively involved, they can perform the ritual with passion and devotion. For example 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' have a great sense of history and comfort, bringing in the context of all those who have gone before. These few ancient, simple lines of the committal ceremony repeated at a less formal woodland burial ceremony can be the time when not only the handful of earth is thrown onto the lowered coffin but also stems of garden flowers are gathered and thrown by curious children and adults alike. The generations are side by side in their ritual and a shift in family dynamics begins.

But not everyone wants an unconventional funeral and it is important not to throw out the baby with the bath water. The beauty and atmosphere of many churches, the liturgy, the act of singing together, radiate a sense of

ancient ceremony and ritual bringing comfort to many, and this may be enough. When the family and mourners are invited to light a night light and place it on the coffin, weave a flower into a woven coffin or to leave their places and look at the pictures and messages written on a cardboard coffin a new sense of participatory ritual is involved.

'The sun of her last day sets, clear in the sweetness of her liberty. Grown lighter than breath, she is set free in our remembering. She is hidden among all that is, and cannot be lost'.

Ruby had committed suicide at the age of forty two. Her funeral was held by a minister in the church in which she had been christened and married and contained much of the traditional liturgy, a reading from the Gospels and a short address, as would have been expected by her parents. But also, to reflect her work as a herbalist, the church was filled with aromatic herbs. A friend of hers, an actor, read a very dramatic piece by Ben Okri which was found in a book by her bed, perhaps the last she read. It seemed to speak about depression and suicide, through the flamenco dancer who, in a terrifying dance of life and death, 'stamped the dampness from her soul'. Having come in to Handel's Water Music, which was played at her wedding, we left to music of her favourite band, the Doobie Brothers. We released a homing pigeon as a symbol of her return 'home'. These relatively small touches made the funeral unmistakably Ruby's, evoking her identity one last time before we all had to say farewell to her physical presence and hang on to her in our memories.

How therapists can help

As a therapist you could provide a valuable service to any of your clients who are facing their own or the death of a loved one, by knowing more about them. The level of ignorance about funerals is quite astonishing. Even when we go and talk to hospice workers, who are with bereaved families on an almost daily basis, we find that most have little idea about the wide range of choices and the options available to families to devise a special funeral based on their own beliefs and rituals. Just to let people know that they can participate in the care of the person who has died and the arrangements, choose an independent funeral conductor or family member or friend to take the ceremony, hold the funeral at home, in a function room or community hall, or anywhere else with permission of the owner, choose a woodland burial, decorate a coffin and devise their own ceremony, perhaps based on existing family rituals, can transform their experience of the whole funeral process, help them to reclaim their relationship with the person who has died, begin to come to terms with the death and adjust to their changing circumstances. The funeral can initiate a healthy grieving process and leave good memories of a hand-made, singular event which honoured the person who has died. In short, those present can have a transformational experience.

If, as a therapist, you are working with a bereaved person who has not had a good funeral experience, encouraging them to create a further ceremonial ritual can help to move them on. This may be a full memorial service, or gathering a few family and friends for an informal ceremony, which could be just to sit and talk about the person for an hour, play some of their favourite music, or go to their favourite place or teashop. An individual alone could create a temporary shrine to the person who has died, light a candle for them, go through photographs, write down all the things they did together and plans left unfulfilled. What's important is to invoke consciousness into whatever act they choose, to make it a ritual with intention and boundaries, separating it from normal life so that it speaks to the imagination and imprints a definite memory. Over a quarter of a million people a year do something with the ashes, scatter them, inter them, make something with them or keep them on the mantelpiece.

Another role you might consider is to become a funeral conductor or celebrant. The therapeutic skills of listening, drawing out, reflecting back and helping people to make connections and find meaning, are vital ones for the funeral conductor to have in order to help the family devise a ceremony that will capture the presence of the person who has died and provide a ritual which, on both the emotional and spiritual levels, moves those left behind through the transition from life as it was to life without the person and the change in identity that involves.

Conclusion

The way that funerals are devised and arranged, the content of the ceremony and the types of ritual they involve, all contribute to the experience of the family and friends left to mourn. In our experience, when families are involved and the funeral reflects the life, views, personality and beliefs of the person who has died, the funeral ceremony and the time leading up to it contribute significantly to beginning a healing process and moving through the transition. What people lack most is information and support to take control of the funeral and make it their own.

Jane Morrell and Simon Smith founded and run Green Fuse Contemporary Funerals, working as funeral directors, advisers and conductors. They are authors of *We Need To Talk About The Funeral - 101 Practical Ways To Commemorate And Celebrate A Life,* available as a paperback for £14.99 or an e-book for £9.99 from (www.greenfuse.co.uk/funeralbook.htm). They founded and run the New Bereavement & Funeral Trust (www.nbft.org.uk), a registered charity, which trains health, social and bereavement care professionals to inform and support patients and families with regard to funerals at the time they need it. They also train funeral conductors. Both Jane and Simon are trained in Psychosynthesis Psychotherapy. Green Fuse Contemporary Funerals, 7 High Street, Totnes, Devon TQ13 7HT. Tel: 01803 840779. Email: jane@greenfuse.co.uk