

Presentation at the Museum of City & Sea in May 2012 as part of the Death & Diversity exhibition.

When arranging a funeral, there are few rules.

Making a funeral a personal & inclusive event.

Every element of the funeral can be relevant to the person who has died, reflecting their character, interests & acknowledging their connection with friends, family & wider community.

You should be in no doubt whose funeral you are attending.

When people ask what I do, I generally get to hear some wonderful descriptions and experiences of funeral services, both from the perspective of those closely related and distant observers.

I also hear the dissatisfaction and the disasters.

The funeral disasters, some apocryphal, do make a funeral memorable, stories of caskets sliding out the back of hearses at the cemetery, family fights at the venue - verbal and physical. Celebrants unforgivably getting the name of the deceased consistently wrong or a relative tossing their jacket into a grave as a gesture then realising their car keys were in the pocket.

The positive stories are great to hear, they always refer to family involvement with hands on participation and ownership of the event, like carrying the casket a long distance to the burial plot in relay teams. These families have been given the permission or seized the opportunity to take care of their own – in their way.

Those retelling these stories always seem content, relaxed and proud of their achievement and will use words like 'fantastic'!

The negative recounts are always with a sense of agitation, unfulfillment and dissatisfaction. There is a sense of distance from proceedings and matters unresolved – perhaps because the arrangements were all handled by a third party or because of enforced nonattendance - especially when it was thought inappropriate for children to attend.

A funeral director is optional - anyone can organise a funeral.

Legally anyone can take care of all the arrangements. This will depend on your family and support network and ability to cope at a difficult time. I would advise you to appoint a 'Project Manager' who can take time off from other commitments for about 5 days. It is a bit like selling your own house.

Arranging the funeral as a family can be a very fulfilling experience. If arranging the entire event is too daunting - you can decide to take responsibility for some aspects and work with a professional provider. For this to work, communication is key.

A funeral is optional; when someone dies there are two main legal requirements:

- 1. The deceased is disposed of in a respectful and timely manner**
- 2. The death is registered with Births, Deaths and Marriages within three days of disposal.**

The Citizen's Advice Bureau has comprehensive guidelines online.

For yourself

If you have strong views about your funeral choices – make them clear to family members and trusted friends. This will remove their stress of potentially making poor choices on your behalf.

The detail of your directives is up to you. I have heard of one woman who pre-recorded her entire funeral service.

However, while you can set out detailed funeral arrangements in your Will, those organising your funeral are not legally bound to follow those instructions.

For them

Usually you will only ever have to arrange one funeral in a lifetime, there will be many decisions to make, under some stress and in a relatively short space of time. A funeral director's role is to facilitate and guide you through this process.

The following information is on decisions that need to be made before the funeral service – these are still relevant and personal decisions.

CARE of the BODY

Embalming

In most circumstances embalming is optional and a funeral company should ask if you want this option. Embalming is a procedure that preserves the body, slowing the natural process of deterioration. If the deceased is not to be viewed by family members after death – embalming is really not necessary.

Most of the funeral homes in Wellington have a chilled temperature environment for those who do not wish to be viewed or embalmed.

Natural alternatives

There are natural alternatives to care for the body if the family want to spend time with the deceased in their home. This may involve the family washing the person and managing the environmental conditions using ice or dry ice and keeping the room cool to slow down natural deterioration.

It is impossible to predict how quickly this will occur and it may be necessary to close the casket to viewing earlier than anticipated before the funeral.

The dignity of the deceased is paramount; this experience should not be unpleasant or upsetting to family members and should be well managed.

BURIAL, CREMATION or DONATION

Earth burial - natural or conventional

In central Wellington, there two earth burial alternatives - conventional cemeteries at Karori and Makara or the Natural Burial Cemetery where nothing is introduced to the soil that will pollute or interfere with natural environmental processes.

You can be buried in any public cemetery in the country – space permitting, but there will probably be a ‘out of district’ charge.

Sea burial

This is an expensive option but might be entirely appropriate for someone who has had a seafaring history. Permission needs to be sought from the coroner and maritime officials.

Cremation - inter, split, scatter or keep ashes

In case of cremation there are a number of choices to make about what to do with the ashes:

They can be interred at a cemetery. They can be split and distributed amongst family members or transferred overseas.

Ashes can be scattered anywhere with permission of the land owner. Scattering ashes should be done with discretion. I would suggest that you record the GPS co-ordinates of the site.

Donation of organs or body for medical research

Arrangements for donating a body to science must be made well in advance of a death and strict criteria must be met for the body to be accepted by the New Zealand medical schools.

Organ donation has similar restrictions and circumstances of death dictate the viability of healthy organs for transplant.

Donation of tissues is more likely and equally beneficial to improving the quality of someone's life.

TIME & PLACE

Public or private

You can decide if you want to keep the funeral a public or private affair. Publishing a newspaper notice before the funeral is an open invitation to all comers.

A funeral can be held on any day and pretty much in any place with permission.

Be aware there will usually be extra charges incurred for 'out of hours' funerals.

A funeral can be held immediately after death, same day is achievable with prior warning. A funeral can be held later, with or without the body present. You are not restricted to one event, you could have combination of a private family gathering, followed by an event for a particular group, like tramping companions who could go on a memorial walk and perhaps scatter the ashes or you can re-gather as an extended family group at a weekend retreat.

A funeral can be a day of compromise - it is unlikely that a standard funeral of 45 minutes will be entirely fulfilling - it can be a good starting point though.

BOX or SHROUD

Caskets can be certified for natural burial, 'traditional' in shape and colour, painted, printed with a design or home made.

A plain casket can be painted by the family before the funeral - a hands on and communal activity and a good focal point for energy. Those gathered at the service could be asked to write on the casket, drawing people towards it and encouraging conversation.

Objects can be placed inside the casket. I know of a family putting in a small battery operated radio tuned to the deceased's favourite station. Letters, drawings, photographs, favourite foods and beverages are important caring gestures from the living.

Warning: for cremation, there should be NO alcohol or inflammable objects.

A shroud needs a firm base. The body is wrapped in fabric. It is best to check with cemetery that they allow shrouds for burial or cremation.

ENGAGING the AUDIENCE

When all our 5 senses are engaged – we are more attentive and engaged. This can be achieved at a funeral.

Play music they loved to listen to – live or recorded. At a graveside service I directed – Stairway to Heaven by Led Zeppelin was played as the casket was lowered, it was perfect.

Include in the service sheet their favourite recipe, sayings or worldly advice.

A photo display always encourages comment – hairstyles through the ages cause much amusement. Include group shots – this makes people feel more involved and connected with the person.

Displays of objects from hobbies or pastimes are great conversation starters – for people to touch these objects reconfirms their connection with that person.

Smell is our main memory trigger and if you associate your beloved granny with the scent of daphne from her garden or lily of the valley talcum powder – get creative and incorporate that into the service.

Mint humbugs were a very successful focus at one funeral. The deceased apparently consumed them constantly. At the end of the service the family each placed a mint humbug on the casket and took some for themselves as they left the chapel – family and friends were both united and connected.

Another family requested that plain tomato sandwiches be served at the cup of tea event after the funeral as this was his staple diet.

All of these suggestions evoke memories and associations with the person who has died. It is rewarding as a funeral director to see that knowing smile and nod as their memory is triggered – the recognition of what made them, them.

CONNECTING - HANDS ON

New Zealand is a multicultural society. The way we care for our dead is a blend of ideas and practises.

Dressing

Dressing the deceased for some is a pivotal experience. Sometimes initially reticent – family members work together for one purpose, conversation flows, there is usually laughter, re-connections are made and acknowledgment of the death begins.

Staying home or coming home

If the family are comfortable with the concept, staying home or coming home until the funeral seems to be the most natural place to be.

Lowering the casket

Lowering the casket into a grave is about taking charge and taking care.

Filling the grave

Those I have spoken to who have taken the opportunity to 'back-fill' have no regrets and express a huge sense of satisfaction and closure.

CONCLUSION

You should leave a funeral having learnt something new about that person – their achievements, their passions or obsessions, their work history, their skills and talents, their connections or travels.

No two funerals should be the same and you should feel comfortable and confident with the choices that you make - a funeral you can live with.