

Ceremony

By Brian Johnson

Living Funerals celebrating life during life

Fundamentally, there's one problem with a traditional funeral: The deceased can't hear all the lovely things being said about them. Wouldn't it be nice if you could hear praise showered upon you about your life before it's too late? That notion is precisely the point of a living funeral.

Of course, it would be impossible to hold a living funeral for someone who dies in a circumstance such as a car accident, unless some 30-year-old guy decides to have a living funeral for himself for no apparent reason. But that would be more of a "praise party" than a living funeral, which his friends would probably think is strange and unnecessary.

No, living funerals are generally reserved for the terminally ill, or possibly someone of a very advanced age. In these cases, a living funeral can be a wonderful way to get the person's loved ones together one last time to tell him or her how much they meant to them, and properly say goodbye. It can be highly emotional, like all funerals, but it helps give the living a better sense of closure and peace. You often hear people who have recently lost a loved one lament, "I never got a chance to say goodbye." With a living funeral, they have that chance.

"It gives the soon-to-be-deceased the opportunity to really celebrate

their life along with their loved ones in a way that's meaningful and significant to them," said Dorry Bless, a celebrant and board member and funeral committee chair of the Celebrant Foundation & Institute based in Montclair, N.J. "It really allows them to be a part of the last rite of passage and to mark it in a way that has significance for them by telling their story, by being involved in working with their celebrant and their family, it becomes a collaborative effort. Just as on the other end of the spectrum, womb to tomb, families are so involved in planning for the birth of a child with attending classes and welcoming the baby. This gives the individual the opportunity to be involved and aware and conscious at the end of their life, if that's their wish."

'Doin's and Goin's On'

Although living funerals aren't a new concept, they're now starting to gain a little footing as a more accepted practice. One of the most

famous living funerals was that of Felix Bushaloo Breazeale. Breazeale got the idea for a living funeral when he decided to

make his own casket out of a black walnut tree that was growing on his property, and it set him to thinking that he would like to hear his own eulogy. The local newspaper picked up his story, and soon nearly the whole town of Kingston, Tenn., became involved. On June 26, 1938, three days before his 74th birthday, Breazeale's funeral was held at a small church, where hundreds of "mourners" gathered, including some curious souls from surrounding states. The Rev. Chas. E. Jackson, pastor of the First Christian Church of Paris, Ill., delivered the funeral sermon. He gave a very positive speech, saying Breazeale was an "exemplary citizen." According to an article in *The Roane County Banner* at the time: "It's not a bad idea," Mr. Jackson said, referring to the funeral services for a living corpse. He said he didn't like the idea at first, but had changed his mind. "If a lot of those roughnecks out there had to face the music before they pass out, it would improve their way of living. This may mark the day of a new era

in funerals.”

The article continued, “It is interesting to find an individual of this type,” the speaker continued, “who finds time to look into the future. It might be a wholesome thing if everyone could hear his own funeral preached.”

According to the article, Breazeale seemed pleased with the outcome of his funeral: “Bush said that the sermon was the finest he had ever heard and was well-pleased with all the ‘doin’s and goin’s on,’ although he said he never intended for his funeral to be ‘such a big stir off.’ He had in mind to have a quiet affair, he said, until the newspapers got ‘aholt of it’ and let everybody know about it.”

Breazeale lived another five years, dying on Feb. 9, 1943. There was no additional funeral held, only a burial service. A movie based on Breazeale’s living funeral, “Get Low” starring Robert Duvall, was released July 30, 2010.

Living funerals are also a traditional part of Lakota Sioux culture. The tribe views death as a natural transition to the next stage. According to VillageMemorial.com, a website that provides information on alternative death care, “Prior to death, the Lakota Sioux make sure to forgive. They ease tensions by making amends. They release loved ones from feelings of guilt for acts they may have committed against them. They make a point to accept one another’s faults and thoughtfully collect their precious family heirlooms to distribute to their family members. The gifts passed on to you are meant to be passed on down the line each generation. Thus, each member becomes (more of) a caretaker of the family heirlooms than the singular owner.”

The Lakota Sioux commemorate the death one year later with a gathering. “The death anniversary party is partly a memorial service and partly a tribute to the individuals who showed kindness to the

departed loved one and the family. The guest of honor (this might be the best friend of the deceased), will carry a picture of the deceased to show it to all who attend,” according to VillageMemorial.com. “After a memorial service, the atmosphere changes, and the event becomes festive and joyful. Attendees will share a meal as they share happy memories and stories about the deceased. Everyone will speak about the deceased. At the end of the party, attendees are honored by gifts – former belongings of deceased’s.”

As a celebrant, Bless is often contacted about performing a living funeral. As this option becomes more popular for terminal patients, Bless has received requests to educate care centers and hospitals on living funerals. “I had a regional cancer care center contact me a few months ago for a patient that was interested in doing this, but it ended up not coming to fruition. At some point I’m actually supposed to go to the cancer center and do a workshop for the nurses there for other patients who might be interested in this,” Bless said. “So I think death care is reaching a different level of consciousness, and people are becoming more aware that they can be a part of their final goodbye; they’re making those choices.”

Usually, holding a living funeral ceremony at a hospital is not a problem. “I think hospitals these days are welcoming in terms of the different programs, the way they have guitar players and violinists come through the hospital and therapy dogs,” Bless said. “I think as long as it doesn’t get in the way of their business at hand and their care for patients. You couldn’t have a hundred people in there.”

Living Opportunities

Bless explained that a living funeral can be presented in a variety of different ways. “It can be formal or informal, the ceremony can be

completely scripted or it can be a situation like a gathering, where those invited get up to share. There can be a ritual or not. The loved one nearing the end of their life might not be bedside. They might be able to get dressed for this occasion and muster their energy and actually be a part of it in a very vital and vibrant way,” Bless said.

The ability for families and loved ones to say goodbye creates an opening for the bereaved to accept the loss more easily, Bless said. “It’s an opening to say, ‘We’re going to this next stage. We’re going to the place where grandma won’t be here anymore. But we’re celebrating grandma now, and she wants to be a part of that and she wants you to know how much she loves you, and she wants you to know what she hopes for your future and what she wishes for you. And even though this might be the last time you physically see her and get to say goodbye, this is a memory she wants to leave you with,’” Bless said. “So it’s one more memory that everyone gets to tuck in their heart, and it’s really a living testament to legacy, in a way that the person gets to participate in making a statement about the legacy they leave behind.”

According to VillageMemorial.com, a living funeral is an opportunity for those involved to experience reconciliation and forgiveness. “The Living Funeral focuses on a proactive message such as things we are grateful for, things we learned from experience, and things that served us well in guiding our actions,” VillageMemorial.com stated.

One drawback to having a living funeral is that it may be too emotional for some, seeing the terminally ill person for possibly the last time and having to accept that their life is going to come to an end soon. “Some people might not be able to attend a gathering like this,” Bless said. “Everyone’s individual. But I think it creates an opening for the next stage, which is grieving and loss and going on in life without this person in physical form.”

Bless said that in addition to a living funeral, some patients may choose to use their remaining time to take other life steps before they die, such as getting married. "Some of our celebrants are involved in a program called 'Wish Upon a Wedding.' They volunteer their services pro-bono, and that's an organization that gives the terminally ill their dream wedding as they're dying," Bless said. "So a lot of our celebrants will go bedside and marry couples. It's in relation (to living funerals) – people who choose at the end of their life to complete and make a decision that is really very bold, as well as for their family that's involved."

VillageMemorial.com said that living funerals can be used as an extended family reunion of sorts. "Some living funeral gatherings can be joyous, extensive four-day weekends to exotic destinations or resorts, lighthearted family reunions or quaint picnics with those closest to one who is departing," states the company's website. "National parks and eco destinations are gaining ground as locations for end-of-life ceremonies, satisfying the needs of the contemporary family."

According to Bless, some patients also choose to leave a legacy by recording messages prior to their death for their loved ones. These messages can be stories of their life or wishes and advice for the survivors.

VillageMemorial.com calls this an "ethical will." "It is a method of passing the torch," VillageMemorial.com stated. "We share our hopes, aspirations and legacy of values with our loved ones and hope that our wishes will be realized through them. In this way, the ethical will serves as a method of enculturation. The ethical will is a tool for empowering our descendants."

Effect on the 'Death Funeral'

Much like Breazeale, who didn't have a traditional "death funeral"

following his living funeral, some who go the living funeral route may not have any funeral ceremony at the time of their actual death, or they may have a diminished service. However, some families still need to have the death funeral, to help them with closure and for the benefit of loved ones who couldn't attend the living funeral.

"The family might certainly have a more traditional funeral or memorial afterward. For some people I think that might be where they need to be," Bless said. "I think it's meeting people where they're at and knowing that not everyone will be able to attend an end-of-life celebration of life. Or vice-versa, they may be able to go to that and not the funeral."

She added, "Again, I think it depends on the family and the family's wishes and how the loved one expressed themselves when they

were living what they wanted. They might not want a big funeral but maybe the family needs to do that. I think that what it might do is that it makes it clear for the family... it creates an opening for the family to carry on. So however the family chooses to acknowledge the death when the death actually happens in actual ceremony and ritual, or whether it's burial or cremation, I think it really helps to kind of pave the way."

Bless said that it also helps the family not feel any regret, because they know in their heads and hearts that they gave the deceased precisely what they wanted. "Now the family needs to move into that next stage of transition where they're burying their loved one," she said. "I think that that is a necessary thing for the family to do in order to allow that grief and embrace it." ❖



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