

TOWARD A MORE USEFUL FUNERAL

Trained celebrants — often with backgrounds in psychology, social work, acting and other professions that emphasize writing or public speaking — are helping families create personalized ceremonies to honor loved ones who've passed on.

TEXT **Andrea Cooper** ILLUSTRATION **Michelle Thompson**

DIANE MEILY PLANNED HER OWN FUNERAL as she lay dying of cancer. She met with the mortician at her bedside, chose her own casket and videotaped a farewell message. She was a high school teacher; it was meant to be an inspiration for her students. She envisioned a personal, uplifting service to convey the spirit of her life, capped by the playing of her favorite song, Josh Groban's "You Raise Me Up."

But Meily's pastor of 15 years had his own ideas about her funeral. In a call with the family following her death, he turned down several of her last requests, including the song. Meily's family was devastated. Her father, already weakened and wheelchair-bound from a stroke, wept at the news that his daughter's funeral would not be as she had hoped.

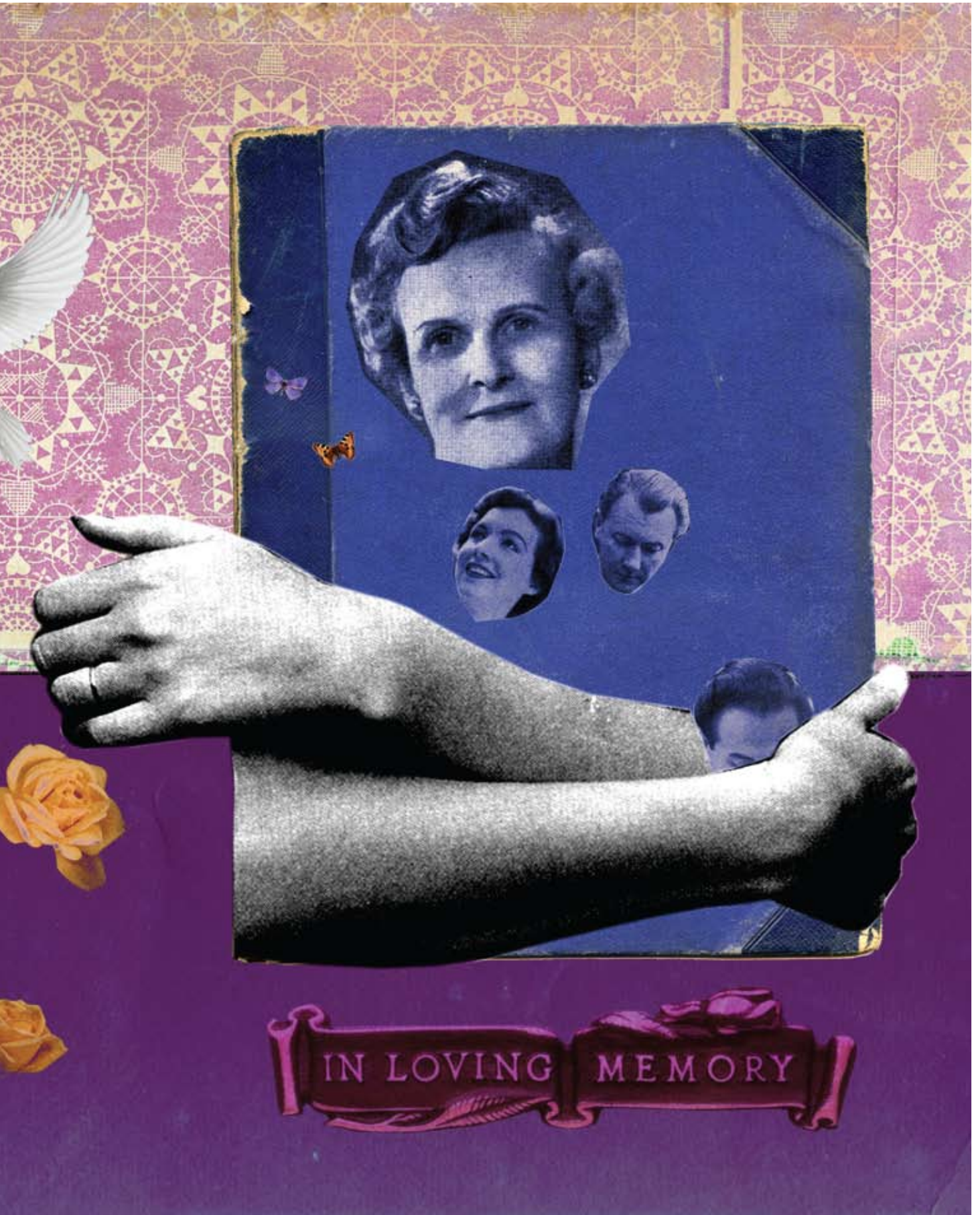
So Meily's sister, Pam Vetter, took matters into her own hands. Or rather, her own voice. During the funeral, after sitting through a sermon that had no connection to Meily, Vetter stepped into the pulpit and sang the Groban song as part of the eulogy, to the shock of the pastor and the applause of 250 people in the church. "It was the biggest turning point of my life," says Vetter, who was 38 when her sister died.

That experience triggered Vetter's passion about funerals. They didn't have to be impersonal rituals that could be about anyone. Funerals could be intimate, filled with storytelling, favorite music and readings that reflect the person's life. Vetter, a former broadcaster, decided to pursue a new career as a funeral celebrant, a person who helps families create meaningful funerals.

Meaningful funerals. Isn't that a given? Aren't most funerals meaningful and personal? If you've been to one recently, you know that's not always the case.

Families with no house of worship or clergy too busy to lead a service may resort to a "rent-a-minister," says Glenda Stansbury, dean of the In-Sight Institute in Oklahoma City, one of the organizations that train funeral celebrants in the U.S. Such fill-in ministers, typically meeting the family for the first time right before the funeral, often use a template service; there are horror stories of funerals where the deceased's name is mispronounced or not mentioned at all. One widely publicized example was the 2010 wake for author Philip Carlo. Actor





Tony Danza, one of Carlo's close friends, reportedly walked up to the priest during a long-winded soliloquy about religion and said, "Excuse me, but this is not about you. It's supposed to be about my friend, and if you can't do that, maybe you should let someone else speak."

IF CLERGY MEMBERS DON'T ALWAYS SUPPORT grieving families during funerals, it may be that they never learned how. "You have to understand that clergy people are not trained in funerals. You would think they would be, but they're not," says Doug Manning, a minister and president of In-Sight Books Inc., parent company of the In-Sight Institute. "You go to seminaries, they never teach you about death, dying or funerals."

Beyond that, some houses of worship see funerals as an opportunity to evangelize about their faith. "They teach ministers to basically preach a sermon at the funeral service just like on a Sunday morning. Many times they will share the Gospel whether [the family] wants it or not," says Dave Page, a pastor and celebrant in Westlake Village, Calif. "People are hurting, and we, as ministers, need to be part of the healing process, not adding to the pain."

But there is another force behind the rise of funeral celebrants: the increasing number of individuals and families who aren't religious, in the traditional sense. Among Americans age 18 and older, 16 percent say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith, according to the 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Among Americans ages 18 to 29, 1 in 4 say they follow no specific religion. Men are much more likely than women to shy away from organized religion; the Western states have the highest proportion of self-described atheists and agnostics in the U.S.

The celebrant movement began in Australia in 1973 to provide leaders for secular weddings. By 1977, the movement had expanded to include funerals, a development led by Australian celebrant Dally Messenger. The concept didn't reach the U.S. until much later, through the initiative of two Americans.

Manning, already a noted speaker on grief and healing, spoke in Australia in 1992 and became intrigued by celebrants he met there. A later trip to New Zealand, where celebrants are also common, confirmed his sentiment. "I came home convinced that we had to have that in the United States," he says. He started his training institute in 1999.

A year later, Gaile Sarma, a linguist in New Jersey, met Messenger on a trip to Italy and learned

about celebrancy. She liked the idea so much she sought his help establishing a branch of his organization in the U.S. The Celebrant Foundation & Institute in Montclair, N.J., opened in 2001.

Though the two organizations have a similar mission, differences are apparent. In-Sight is a for-profit entity that focuses on funerals and offers a three-day training course. About half of its students are funeral directors or staff. The Celebrant Foundation is a non-profit offering an eight-month course. Graduates are "life-cycle celebrants" who may conduct funerals and other rites of passage, including weddings, home blessings, baby namings and even divorces.

THE CELEBRANT FOUNDATION has 600 graduates; about 530 are in the U.S., and others work in Canada, Mexico, Spain, Northern Ireland and France. Some 1,500 celebrants have graduated from the In-Sight Institute, including about 1,200 in the U.S. Celebrants come from many backgrounds, including medicine, psychology, social work, acting and other professions that emphasize writing or public speaking. Some celebrants focusing on funerals are, in fact, clergy, Vetter says. "They realized that reading the same funeral sermon over and over 100 times a year was not serving families' needs," she says.

Whether trained by In-Sight or the Celebrant Foundation & Institute, most celebrants begin developing a memorial service through email exchanges or a meeting with the immediate family. At this point, family members are asked to share their stories about the loved one. What did he like to do? What were his passions? The values he lived by?

What was he most proud of?

There can be joy in these conversations, Manning says, moments when one family member tells a story and another says, "I didn't know that." They may also talk about roles during the service: who might light candles, who might read a poem or prayer. "I think the family meeting is the most healing thing we do," he says. Additional calls, in-person interviews or online research often help round out the portrait.

Then the celebrant writes a script for the service, fashioning a narrative of the person's life and incorporating rituals and readings in keeping with family wishes. "It's about creating a ceremony that's meaningful and significant for them," says Dorry Bless (yes, her real name), a celebrant in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. It could include traditions from their family and faith, or rituals created together by the celebrant and family. Many services have a spiritual component of some sort. They can take place almost anywhere, including funeral parlors, houses of worship, parks, restaurants and homes.

Or even a martial arts studio. That's where Vetter conducted a dramatic memorial service for April Stirton, a 28-year-old Los Angeles stuntwoman who died in a motorcycle accident in April 2010. Stirton had also been an instructor at a performance martial arts and gymnastics studio. The studio co-owner, Mike Chat, wanted to hold a service for all those who couldn't attend Stirton's funeral in North Carolina, where she grew up. But he had no sense of what to include.

Vetter led a conversation with friends from different parts of Stirton's life to get ideas. Drawing upon the depth of talent among



his students, some of whom perform on Broadway, Chat and colleagues created a service that included circus performers, musical artists and speakers. About 200 people attended, and at a reception afterward, parents and students brought their favorite baked goods because Stirton enjoyed baking. “A lot of April’s stunt friends knew very little about her life here as an instructor, and we found out about different adventures she had been on with her stunt friends,” Chat says. “It was very comforting. She lived young in years but with no shortage of experiences, that’s for sure.”

Most celebrant services, though, are simpler.

Linda Berger, a celebrant in Lancaster, Pa., researched the life of a 99-year-old woman by talking with the woman’s bank trustee and sources he provided, uncover-

ing details of her community philanthropy that her much younger relatives were thrilled to discover. Some families share mementoes with guests — puffs of cotton to recall a woman who loved clouds, or even folded bits of duct tape, handed out by the children of a father who used duct tape to fix, seemingly, everything.

OF COURSE, MOST U.S. FUNERALS remain traditional, religious affairs, and not everyone agrees that the clergy has had an iffy track record of officiating them.

“I’ve heard the opposite. The average pastor would be evaluated quite highly in terms of providing grief counseling and funeral planning,” says Philip Jenks, media relations specialist with the National Council of Churches, whose members include the Episcopal

FITTING TRIBUTE

After her sister’s funeral, Pam Vetter decided to pursue a career in helping families create meaningful funerals for their loved ones.

Church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and the United Methodist Church. “In every profession, there would be examples of people who aren’t functioning satisfactorily, but I haven’t heard this as a generalized complaint.”

Still, it’s clear that the funeral celebrant movement has grown significantly in the last decade, meaning that celebrants are increasingly called on to deal with the messy reality of families in times of crisis. Also, celebrants must devise ceremonies to mark the most painful and inexplicable deaths: a gang killing in Queens. A murder/suicide; a mother and two young daughters who die of carbon monoxide poisoning; a 4-year-old boy taken by illness.

And celebrants often deal with — and sometimes help soothe — festering family resentments. To remember artist Shirley Zimmerman, Bless led both a memorial service and a graveside ceremony in New Jersey. The graveside ceremony incorporated Jewish prayers and traditions; the memorial service featured quotes that varied from St. Augustine to Christopher Robin. Along with photos, the family set up a table with some of Zimmerman’s paintings and sculptures, accompanied by her artist’s tools.

Zimmerman’s daughter, Dorian, says her relationship with her mother was challenging. But the process of creating the service, she says, reminded her of the positive aspects of their bond. “Dorry really made it into something more than I ever expected it to be.” ¶

Andrea Cooper is a journalist and essayist whose work has appeared in many national magazines and on NPR’s “All Things Considered.” She writes regularly on psychology and social issues.