



## When I Die, Please Do Something

**I**n her dresser drawer, they discovered a hand-written note that read, “When I die, please do nothing.” She had just taken her last breath.

And so began the distressing dilemma faced by many families: honoring their loved one’s request to do nothing or honoring their own desire to do something to mark their loved one’s life.

Anguished, my childhood school friend called me in a panic. “How can I do nothing?” she asked. For Judy, doing nothing was the equivalent of sending out a loud and clear message that her mother didn’t matter, that her mother wasn’t special, that her mother’s life was forgettable and not important.

I asked Judy to imagine that her mother was still alive. Could she have a conversation with her mother now, knowing her final wish of “nothing”? I encouraged Judy to imagine telling her mother why it was so important that she be given the opportunity to say goodbye, to receive support, to publicly declare her love and take the first of many steps toward healing her broken heart. Judy needed that important space to help her accept the harsh reality that she was now motherless.

Then I asked: “What would your mother say in response?”

Judy told me that her mother, first and foremost, always put her daughter’s

well-being and happiness before anything else. She told me that her mother thought she was being selfless with her request to do nothing but that ultimately, her mother realized that she was robbing her loved ones of the opportunity to start the grieving and healing process.

Some people feel guilty when they’ve made a fuss of. “I’m nothing special,” they think. “My family should spend their time and money doing something fun instead of crying over me.”

But your funeral is not a gift you give to yourself. Your funeral is a gift you give to those who love you. It is a gift you give to those who wake every morning and ache with the realization that your arms will never wrap around them again. It is a gift you give to those who go to bed every night with the hope that you will visit them as they sleep.

Judy’s family found a compromise: They hosted a visitation they believed their mother would have agreed to had they had that conversation while she was alive. As a result, Judy received real hugs, not the virtual kind via Facebook. Friends and family gathered to remember, support and collectively grieve. Judy, along with her father and sister, listened to stories they had never heard and came to really comprehend

the impact that their mother and wife had had on others.

The experience was so healing that Judy’s father, who also had a “do nothing” request, changed his mind.

I will likely preplan my funeral one day. I’m only 50, so I think (hope!) I still have time to take care of this task. But my final wishes will be based on what my family needs. I realize that they may not even know at this point what that is so there will be lots of wiggle room, space and suggestions for creative rituals that will help them move through the stages of their personal grief.

I want them to make a fuss – not out of some ego-driven need to be the center of attention but because I know from my years of working with the grieving that a fuss is what’s necessary when we lose a loved one. I want red wine and pink roses and a chocolate buffet. I want my family to feel and hug and connect. I want an uplifting ceremony overflowing with tears and laughter and applause. I want them to look at me one last time as they simultaneously say goodbye and hello to their new life without me in it.

When I die, I want them to do something.

*Linda Stuart is a Life-Cycle celebrant in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.*