

2020
VISION



A Place To Go

Ceremony can give us a place to go with our feelings of loss and grief, a place where time seems to stand still and our emotions are safe and **free to flow.**

BY LINDA STUART

“He wasn’t religious, so we didn’t have a funeral.”

I was saddened to learn that my new friend had missed the opportunity to honor her wonderful husband’s life with a relevant and healing ceremony. She’d attended too many convenient, ready-made funerals that failed to resonate, so she decided that doing nothing was better than doing something that didn’t fit.

She couldn’t find a place to go that felt right.

Moments like these are exactly why I became a Life-Cycle celebrant. It all began after a conversation 13 years ago with a funeral professional who expressed concern that people were opting out of funerals because they didn’t know where they fit. Could they have a funeral if they weren’t religious? What if they were spiritual but not part of an organized religion? What if they wanted something nontraditional? Because they couldn’t see an option that fit their beliefs and values, they chose... nothing at all.

We’ve all been to a funeral service that just didn’t feel right, the one so disconnected from the person we knew and loved that we fidgeted throughout and uncomfortably wondered if we had misread the date in the obituary or were at the wrong funeral home.

But ceremonies and religion are not mutually exclusive. When it comes to funerals and grief, what brings one individual solace may deliver despair to another. If we as funeral professionals impose a religious or off-the-shelf ceremony on a family because of our own beliefs – or lack of willingness to seek alternative officiants – it results in funeral experiences that fall flat, devalue what we do

and diminish future opportunities to serve families.

Religious or secular, modern or traditional, casual or formal – the best ceremonies are grounded in authenticity and are a true reflection of the life that has been lived. If God was not part of that life, then perhaps God should not be part of that death.

A family with which I recently worked felt exactly that. Here is what Ralph’s daughter, Kimberley, had to say about her father’s funeral ceremony:

“My father lived with integrity and authenticity. A religious-based funeral for him would have been an uncomfortable contradiction to how he chose to live his life. But when he died, we still needed a place to go to express our emotions, and I knew that a party or a few speeches was not enough. The structure of the ceremony provided a safe and meaningful space complete with music, eulogies and a touching ritual using my mother’s briefcase as a container to hold my dad’s treasures – each brought up individually by family members. At the end, we encircled his urn, surrounding him with our love and memories one last time as we poured his favorite wine and toasted to the man who has forever changed our lives. It was a truly beautiful, inclusive and healing experience for everyone in attendance.”

With or without God, we all need a place to go when someone we love dies. An appropriate ceremony can provide that much needed space.

What Is Ceremony? How Can It Help?

In modern society, it seems there are increasingly fewer opportunities for us to physically come together for the sole purpose of connecting, crossing thresholds and marking moments of change. Good funeral ceremonies not only help people begin to accept the death of someone they love, they also foster connection through a transformational shared experience.

Said author Elizabeth Gilbert: “Ceremonies create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don’t have to haul those feelings around

with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safe-keeping.”

Ceremony can give us a place to go with our complicated feelings of loss and grief, a place where time seems to stand still and our emotions are safe and free to flow with ease.

I like to think of ceremony as a container. An officiant “holds space” and a ceremony holds elements that separately may not carry the same depth of meaning as they do when they are combined in a structured experience.



Actions Can Speak Louder Than Words

Sometimes there are no words to sufficiently express how we’re feeling and, even if there were, they don’t always help move us through difficult transitions. Sometimes we need more than words. We need meaningful actions. That’s where ritual comes in. Rituals can help us cross thresholds, giving us a sense of “before and after.” Always grounded with intention, they are made up of purposeful actions and can help us connect to something bigger than ourselves. They can give us something to *do* when words aren’t enough. That action is often the missing piece in open-mic “celebration of life”-type events – there are lots of words, but as humans, we crave more.

Structure Doesn’t Mean Stuff

Another family with which I recently worked was initially a little uncomfortable with the idea of incorporating a ritual into their mother’s funeral ceremony for fear that it would be

too formal or stuffy. But the sweet ritual we created was possibly the most memorable and meaningful element in the entire ceremony.

A colorful woman who adored anything sweet, gooey and decadent, Jean could find any reason to bake treats for her family. And while dessert was always on her menu, what ultimately made her happiest was being surrounded by family. At her memorial, we set up a high-top round table with 12 brightly frosted cupcakes, one for each of Jean's immediate family members, and inserted a birthday candle into each. A large pillar candle, lit at the beginning of the ceremony to represent the bright light Jean brought to the world, stood in the center of the cupcakes.

For the ritual, family members were invited to come up together – surrounding Jean's light – and, one by one, they passed a taper lit from Jean's candle and used it to light the candles on their individual cupcakes. In so doing, they created a circle of light and love for Jean. Toward

the end of the ceremony, Jean's two youngest grandchildren were invited to blow out the candles and guests were encouraged to make a wish.

Can We Please Slow Down a Bit?

You may not like what I'm about to say – and it may not be ideal for scheduling purposes – but with cremation on the rise and other modern preservation options available, there is no need to crank out funerals in three or four days. In fact, a meaningful, personal ceremony client families and their guests will remember takes a lot more time than that.

As a Life-Cycle celebrant, it's typical for me to spend 20+ hours on discovery, research, writing, editing and rehearsing before the ceremony is even performed. It absolutely takes that much time to foster trust and connection and create a ceremony that is meaningful, significant and transformative. I need much more than the 48 to 72 hours typically allotted for this creative process. And families, even when a death is anticipated, still often need days or even several weeks to absorb the enormity of what has happened before they can focus on what they want and need from a funeral ceremony. When a family is given a reasonable amount of time, they often find the process of sharing stories and expressing happiness and heartbreak to be incredibly healing.

We have one chance to help the family get it right, one chance to help them capture their loved one's essence in a deeply meaningful and memorable way, one chance to ensure that they got what they needed and don't feel "cheated" by a less-than-satisfactory funeral experience because important decisions were rushed and made with less than a clear mindset.

"Closure" is a bad word to describe something that is *not* going to happen in a few days (if ever), so it's vital to stop rushing this important process.

Who Can Help?

As religious participation continues to decline and many families no lon-

ger have a clergyperson who knows their life stories and can share them in the context of a ceremony, funeral professionals will be called on more and more to recommend ceremony officiants. Thus, it's important to become familiar with all of the options. Let's take a closer look at the different types of officiants who can provide ceremonies:

- **CELEBRANTS** may be religion-based, secular-trained or untrained and self-declared. There may be a great difference in the ceremonies they provide. Ask about training, certification, religious affiliation and experience to be sure they will provide the ceremony you desire.

- **LIFE-CYCLE CELEBRANTS** are professional officiants rigorously trained in the history of ritual and ceremony. Collaborating with families to create one-of-a-kind ceremonies that reflect each client's preferences, beliefs, cultural background and values, they are experts in ceremony design and creation and the art of ceremonial public speaking.

- **CLERGY** have been trained and approved for religious service. Because they provide a faith-based ceremony according to the tenets of their denominations, you may wish to verify that their approach aligns with a client family's beliefs and confirm that the clergy member will support any ideas the family may have to personalize the ceremony.

What Does It Mean for You?

The quality of funeral ceremonies is a reflection on your business, so I urge you to pay more attention to this area of your profession by ensuring that families receive not just the best in the services you provide but also the best funeral ceremony.

By doing so, you can help people find a place to go that feels like home – a place that's the right fit for them. ☰

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