



value of funerals in the process of grief

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When I'm asked how, and if, funerals can have an impact on grief, I believe there are several ways a meaningful funeral can positively affect us when we're grieving. The word *meaningful* is the key word here – if funerals 'speak' to the mourners and carry a message that resonates with how they feel and think about the death, the funeral can be a significant factor in setting the tone for the way their grief is expressed once the funeral is over.

Let me share an example. Some years ago now, a widow gave me a copy of the words which the clergyman spoke at her 42 year old husband Paul's funeral. He died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack whilst playing a game of cricket. This is how his funeral began:

"How do we come into the presence of God?"

The answer is: just as we are.

We come numbed by tragedy.

We come shocked and shaken by loss.

We come in our pain, In our frustration, disappointed and confused and angry.

We come full of questions...

I believe it is important that we face how we feel and that we face facts...

... this means that the tragedy of Paul's death, too young by half, needs to be named as tragedy – pure and simple. It is no more God's will that he die with still half a lifetime before him than it is our own....."

These words spell out just what's happened and they give permission to *not like it* – more importantly they are a mini lesson to the mourners saying it's okay to grieve, honestly. The widow told me she read and re-read the words of the funeral whenever she was filled with despair and defeat – she said she felt that she was being given permission to be at a low point and even her anger at God was okay. He would understand. I have no doubt that she was given a significant gift by this clergyman who set such an honest and clear direction from the outset for how to approach this sudden death.

Another significant effect which a funeral can have on grief is simply that the very act of organising a funeral, or attending one, breaks down the common early grief reactions of shock, disbelief and denial. The funeral itself, seeing the coffin, watching the coffin move away from sight and being amongst the grief of others all bring reality to the forefront, even though it can hurt and be harsh at the time. This reality of experiencing the rituals of saying goodbye reinforces the message that the death is real, even though we may be in a fog and still be thinking it's all just a bad dream.

I cannot talk about a funeral without focusing on the element of viewings – spending time with the person who has died some time before the funeral. Even though the thought of seeing someone's body can be intimidating, from a grief perspective there are many benefits.

Unlike a funeral which is a public event, a viewing is an opportunity for a personal and private goodbye. Even if family and friends are going to attend the viewing, you can ask the funeral director for some time on your own if that's what you want. This is your time to say the things that matter like: *I love you. I'll miss you forever. Thank you for everything. I'm sorry. I wish I'd said* Being able to say these words to the person, even though you know they can't hear you, is very helpful and can be a cherished experience.

If the death is sudden it may be even more important to have a viewing. Amidst the shock and disbelief, there may be 'unfinished' business that needs to be aired through the opportunity of having a viewing – this is your chance to say the things you wished you'd said, maybe the right time to place a personal letter or photo or significant item in the coffin with the deceased. It allows you one more time to be together.

Even if the body is injured, these days funeral directors have many ways they can present someone for a viewing. From a closed coffin to bandaging injured limbs, to wrapping the entire body but still allowing the opportunity to touch, talk to and be with the deceased – all of these have a place in helping your grief to be expressed and making real what often is an 'unreal' experience.

Whilst we cannot promise that every viewing experience will be a positive one, it can be a helpful way to accepting the death and letting the reality of what's happened sink in. These are important ingredients to set you on the right path in your grief.

Doris Zagdanski is a leading figure in modern day grief and loss education. Her seminars are included in vocational qualifications in Allied Health, Counselling and Funeral Directing. Her books and free factsheets are available at www.allaboutgrief.com