

Do funerals really matter?

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Of course funerals matter. They've always mattered. The difference in today's world is that the look and feel of funerals has changed immensely and many families these days want a say in how a funeral should look and what they expect to get for their money. But I'm jumping the gun, let me go back a few years.

In 1980, my husband and I needed to arrange a funeral, the first in our family. Our baby daughter Claire had died suddenly and unexpectedly – a classic cot death. In hindsight, we made many mistakes with her funeral. It all started with making an appointment to see a funeral director the very next day. Completely numb and in shock, we turned up to make significant decisions we were in no state to make. We decided to have a private funeral – immediate family only and a handful of close friends. Not even our three-year-old daughter attended, we thought it would be too upsetting and she wouldn't really understand what was happening anyway. We were so wrong!

What we didn't know was how that decision would later impact our circle of family and friends. Neither did we know we had offended many people, especially our parents' generation – their traditions meant you must pay your respects, you must turn up, and we had unwittingly sent a message that said, "We don't want your condolences, we don't need your support, don't turn up".

Without a funeral, people often don't know if it's alright to contact you or raise the subject of what's happened. The funeral is seen as the "right" time and the "right" place to approach you, even if you don't really know what to say. In our case, many friends and colleagues avoided us, or acted as if



nothing had happened. I was hurt and disappointed in their behaviour but I now know they probably thought they were doing the right thing. The end result was that we often felt unsupported and very alone in our grief.

Fast forward to the past 20-30 years in funeral history. This is an era marked by enormous changes which continue to this day:

- The “undertaker” has been replaced by the “funeral director” who is essentially an event organizer, much like a wedding planner;
- Corporate funeral companies have emerged in an industry that was traditionally marked by generation after generation of family ownership;
- More females than ever before are funeral directors and learning the trade of embalming – traditionally viewed in the funeral industry as “man’s work”;
- Civil celebrant-led services are outnumbering religious services, just as cremations far outnumber burials; and
- There is a new look and feel around funerals. These days they come in all shapes and sizes. The buzz word is “personalisation”.

We are learning that people want more involvement, more talk about the person and less talk about religion. They want the funeral to be true to the life that was lived, creative and authentic. The atmosphere should be more relaxed, not stiff or formal; funny not just serious; colourful, not sombre; filled with music, not just words; outdoors or in a favourite place, even at home; themes around hobbies, footy teams or achievements to be evident; held at dusk or dawn; catering is expected afterwards, even bar service; funeral home chapels need to be contemporary and welcoming, not old fashioned, dark and dreary.

Amidst these trends, one principle still holds true – funerals are for the living and the living need to grieve.

Funerals underpin a necessary part of grieving – they reinforce the reality that the death has actually happened. Furthermore, we need to allow our grief to surface – a funeral provides a safe and appropriate place to show and share our feelings with others. We should not underestimate how helpful this can be in setting the foundations for healthy grieving.

We cannot talk about the importance of funerals without mentioning funerals in the context of Covid 19. There is no doubt in my mind that restrictions added to the grief and sense of isolation already being felt.

My mother died in November 2020, in the height of the Covid shut down in Victoria. After living an amazing life of 92 years, only 20 people were allowed at her funeral. In truth, much of my sadness centred on my children and grandchildren from Queensland who could not attend their adored Oma’s farewell.

We created a special ritual for them – everyone in the family who could not attend was asked to email a portrait photo of themselves, which was framed and placed on an individual “empty chair” to symbolise their presence. We added a long stem of orchids to each chair, which was then taken to the cemetery and placed on Mum’s casket before it was lowered, again to symbolise their presence even at the graveside. It was the best we could do, and in hindsight, such a poignant image – so many chairs, so many photos, so many people who loved their Oma.

Rituals are an important part of funerals, and an important anchor for society in general. They hold meaning and communicate a message, when words often fall short. Funerals and their rituals help us to say: “Thank you. I love you. I’m lonely without you. I’ll always remember you. You meant a lot to me.”

