Creating meaningful and engaging funeral ceremonies



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Introduction

An increasing number of funerals are led by celebrants, using a person-centred approach

With growing secularisation in UK there has been a decline in religious rites of passage and an increase in the number of funerals led by celebrants: *"whose personalised ceremonies reflect …the deceased's beliefs, thus accommodating the considerable middle ground in Britain's religious life between the explicitly devout and the explicitly atheist"* (Walters 2017:199).

As celebrants our work involves helping people give shape and meaning to their experiences. We listen to their stories, feelings and ideas; using this understanding to co-create funerals which both meet their needs and reflect the personality and beliefs of the person who has died.

We offer our experience as an inspiration for further thinking

Drawing on our experience of conducting several hundred funerals we outline the approach we use to co-create meaningful and engaging ceremonies. Through examples, photos, testimonials and evidence from academic literature we aim to explore the role of a celebrant; raising questions about the skills and expertise required and providing a deeper understanding of what the process involves.

A better understanding of how celebrants work can benefit the bereaved and other funeral professionals

Celebrant-led ceremonies are a relatively new phenomenon and understanding of the role is still developing. Through the model below we hope to demonstrate how engaging with families/friends to design a meaningful funeral goes way beyond choosing music and words; requiring a more nuanced and creative process and a trusting and supportive relationship.

Key dynamics of celebrant-led funeral ceremonies

Meaning-*making* rather than meaning-*taking*

- Meaning is created through understanding the stories, values and beliefs of those involved, rather than taking meaning from traditional and socially prescribed forms and practices (Holloway, Hukelova and Bailey, 2018).
- Creating events that are memorable and have lasting effects is somewhat different from a standard service design approach as it 'often involves thinking about things users don't even know they want' (Richards 2014:14).
- Rituals are not givens, they are 'quilts we continue to patch'. We create a new meaningful entity each time based on what feels fitting within the specific context and set of relationships (Grimes, 2000:12).

Implications for celebrant role

→ A more nuanced and exploratory approach than implementing a pre-set religious or spiritual framework and script.

→ Active listening, sensing and feeling, gently suggesting possibilities, rather than offering a standard set of options.

→ Creativity, allowing for organic development; co-creating and guiding, rather than directing.

The importance of process and relationships in creating shared purpose and understanding

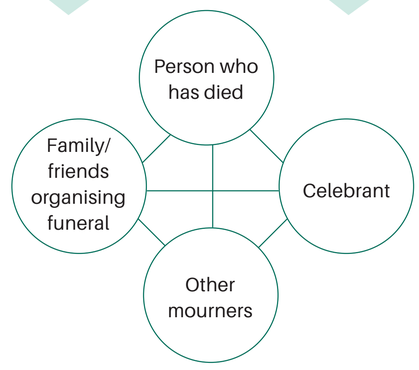
Celebrants work within a complex set of relationships, involving, amongst others:

- Understanding and navigating family dynamics.
- Combining a variety of values and beliefs with integrity.
- Encouraging conversation at different levels: content (thinking), emotions (feeling), spiritual/values, process.
- Enabling people to express their thoughts, emotions and perform on the day of the funeral.
- Rather than representing a 'higher power' the celebrant positions themselves as a partner, guide and coach.
- Working as a creative partner there is often some kind of 'gift exchange' with the process itself considered a valuable part of the experience (Small 1998).

Roles and relationships in funeral ceremony design

Thoughts
Emotions
Beliefs
Values
Needs

Types of personalities
Personal circumstances
Group dynamics



- A guided conversation rather than a fixed set of questions
- Working closely with those involved to understand what is particular about this funeral and this set of relationships
- Exploring feelings and 'reading between the words/what's left unsaid' to offer suggestions
- Seeking the essence of what makes someone unique: finding key words/anecdotes that capture their personality
- Research: finding fitting music, readings or symbolic rituals
- Creating connections between the stories told, music chosen, readings and symbolic rituals to give structure and flow to the ceremony
- Creative writing skills

" You captured mum's essence beautifully. It's as if you knew her…several people asked if you were an old friend."

" You made the process feel very natural. I love how you allowed us to capture his personality in such a positive way."

Competencies/skills/crafting ('how do we do it')

" We were poleaxed with shock and grief when we found you, and you were there, available, interested and warm. You didn't shy away from difficulty."

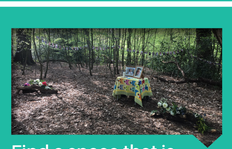
- Helping people understand what the death means for them and their lives
- Establishing core needs and purpose of the funeral
- Building trust, creating a safe, non-judgmental space
- Providing a calm, reassuring presence and authentic and empathic support
- Giving compassionate pastoral and spiritual care

" You listened to us talking about (our 37yr old son and partner) for hours. You shaped our vague wishes into a form and negotiated with us back and forth while we found something right for us. And you made it go like clockwork, a smooth process which was at times funny and at times almost too moving to bear."

Examples ('what we do')

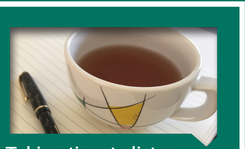

Eulogy, delivered by celebrant or someone else


Use reading that was meaningful to them

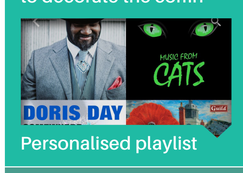

Find a space that is meaningful


Carrying the coffin


Decorate coffin during ceremony


Taking time to listen and be present


Using personal items to decorate the coffin



Personalised playlist

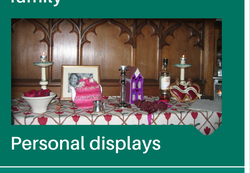
- **Sharing of memories**
- **Music to create atmosphere, express emotions and mark moments.**

- Honouring the life and character of the person who has died
- Reflecting on how they have affected other's lives
- Giving meaning to a life lived

- Marking an ending
- Giving expression to thoughts and emotions
- Therapeutic: helping people to find and (Grimes, 2000, p.279)/navigate their grief (Hoy, 2013:168)

- **Moments of thanksgiving, closure or forgiveness**


Filling the grave as family


Personal displays

Meaning/purpose of funeral ('why we are doing it')


Lighting a candle



Forget-me-nots to plant

- **Allowing time/ space for individuals to reflect on their personal memories, beliefs and feelings**
- **Keepsake (chocolates, flowers seeds etc. at end of service)**

- Reflecting a new relationship between the living and the dead (Hoy, 2013:115).
- Acknowledging the start of a new life/identity for the living
- A bridge between the death and the first steps into a new future

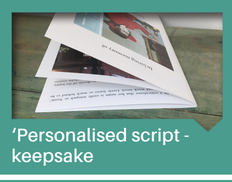
- Support, connection and shared experience through joining together as community
- Reminder of own mortality
- Saying goodbye

- **Singing together**
- **Laying flowers on coffin**
- **Writing messages**
- **Sharing silence or facilitating 'open space' for spontaneous tributes**

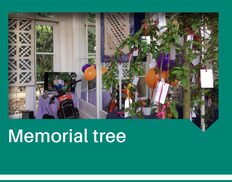

A space for children to play or express themselves


Decorating memory stones


Handwritten hearts - keepsake


'Personalised script - keepsake


A toast to someone's life


Memorial tree


Rosemary to throw into the grave


Scatter petals on coffin

- Sometimes dealing with complex negotiations, with different parties holding distinct beliefs, relationships and memories
- Sensitively blending different elements, beliefs and traditions
- Exploring what the person who died believed happens after death & seeking family views
- Writing 'committal' words that reflect the deceased's personality and beliefs
- Laying the foundations for the weeks and months ahead

" My thanks for both the rose - I plan to press that- and for the lovely script. So unexpected and really special. Such a thoughtful touch."

" Your words are part of how we now remember our baby and will remain so into the future."

" The suggestion of giving each funeral attendee a moment to privately write their favourite memory of my late grandmother meant the family found great comfort and beauty in finding out wonderful anecdotes we would otherwise not have known about and we also have a valuable keepsake."

" Many people said afterwards what a good service it was and that it was lovely that the whole family was involved, they very much enjoyed hearing the children do their readings. The whole thing was really lovely and just what we wanted."

- Speaking and presentation skills
- Adapting communication style to audience
- Stage management skills
- Knowledge of the ritual process
- Enabling participation, providing hands-on support where needed
- Liaising with others, including venues and funeral directors

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Thank you to all the families who have entrusted us with the privilege of co-creating a funeral that felt right for them. And to the funeral professionals, colleagues and venues who have supported us.

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