



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT VIEWING AND FUNERALS THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF FUNERALS

for individuals

VALUES OF THE BEREAVED INDIVIDUAL

Reality Testing

When a loved one dies, we all know, intellectually, that they really have died. But people - no matter how bright or sophisticated - have strong feelings which are not logical when a powerful emotional issue is involved. One hears, "I just can't believe he's gone."

And the speaker means it, to an important extent.

Seeing the body as the focal point of a ritual (the funeral) is a powerful form of reality testing. Social scientists who study grief and the serious psychological problems it can cause consistently find value in viewing and the funeral. We all know instinctively how bad not seeing the body would be when a plane crashes or a bombing occurs. Great sums are spent searching for lost bodies, and we all understand why.



Establishing Significance

When bad things happen to someone, like surgery or an illness, that person needs to talk about it, to work through its significance in their lives. Ceremonies and rituals establish significance. If we were purely intellectual beings without emotions, we could fairly call funerals barbaric...and weddings, too! But people need to think back, to reminisce and reflect, almost like taking a life-inventory. Without this we can't move on, and grief becomes a more difficult, delayed process. It isn't healthy to repress memories, and at a funeral, you don't do that.

Viewing and Comfort

As medicine advances and people linger on longer, their appearances at death become increasingly disturbing. Emaciation is most common. People's faces can be lined with pain or bloated from IV fluids. We see them gasping for breath at the end. Embalming is not intended to make them look alive, but it can be very comforting to see your loved one look peaceful, not in pain, and more like you'd want to remember them. You will carry this memory-picture (or the one from the hospital room) for a long time.

Your Physical Health

The link between high stress and lowered immune system function is well established. Loss of a loved one is stressful indeed, and people undergoing grief - particularly when poorly handled and prolonged - do experience elevated rates of disease and mortality. The funeral itself may create some minor, short-run stress for the individual - but nothing compared to the stress of repressed, mismanaged, long-term grief.



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for the family

VALUES OF THE BROADER CIRCLE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS



Social Support

It's very healthy and helpful for the individual or individuals closest to the deceased and for those in the deceased's "outer" social circle to show support for one another. Going through all the rituals of viewing, visitation, funeral, burial, and time together in the home is certainly the best way to show support...to show "we're all in this together." One can't always think of words to say at such occasions, and that's quite alright! Your mere presence speaks volumes. A handshake or a touch on the shoulder is more eloquent still.

Reminiscing

Family and friends start to build a living memorial to the deceased as stories and recollections are passed back and forth at the visitation and in gatherings at the home where people return after more formal ceremonies. Friends may know some memorable stories which even close family member wouldn't have been aware of. Concerns that rituals around death are too social or that humor isn't appropriate at such a time completely miss the point. People need other people, and the lost loved one would certainly hope the people who miss them most could also smile and laugh when thinking back over their times together. Also, these reminiscences can communicate affection and caring which cannot always be stated otherwise.

Family Bonds

With the exception of very dysfunctional families, there's little that does as much for familial closeness as being together at "ritual" times such as Thanksgiving, a wedding, or (perhaps most of all) a funeral. Family gatherings around important life-events raise our appreciation of the family, and increase our feeling that we are secure within this group: the most important people in our lives.



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in our culture

HOW OUR CULTURE VIEWS LOSS



Death Avoidance and Funeral Directors

Historically, few cultures have tried to cope with death without ritual or without the body present. This demonstrates the basic human need for these practices. But many modern societies are experiencing pressures to eliminate viewing and the funeral. We're a death-denying culture. Death is unpleasant...let's avoid it. Anyone who wouldn't avoid it, like a funeral director, must be a ghoulish rip-off artist. That's an easy theme for a tabloid TV segment, at least. Actually, of course, there are some funeral directors who are unscrupulous, or who are unskilled at embalming and cosmetology...just as there are unscrupulous and unskilled people in every vocation. The majority, however, are not this way. They have come to this field either

because other members of their family have been funeral directors or because they have had an experience with death which has shown them how much a caring person can do at a time of loss. Repeated studies have shown funeral directors rank very high in terms of the public's perception of their trustworthiness vs. other professions. Apparently, people enjoy the cheap "exposés," but they also know who they can trust when the chips are down.

Here's What I Want for My Funeral

In previous times, death was less hidden away; now it happens in hospitals and nursing homes. People encountered more deaths in their lifetimes. Now we ridicule and resent rituals, a convenient defense against the responsibility of sharing difficult life experiences. The better educated we are, the more we claim a ceremony surrounding the death of a loved one is unsophisticated. Misguidedly we tell our offspring, "Don't fuss over me. Just cremate me and save your money." We think we're making things "convenient" for our loved ones in this way. We even draw up pre-need funeral plans, forcing these austere measures on people who love us. We have the selfishness to forget we won't care in the least after we've died, and that the funeral is for the living! Grief is not an enemy to be avoided; it's an inevitable process to be lived through.



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personalizing

PERSONALIZE

The Key to a Valuable Funeral

You have the power to maximize or minimize how good the funeral ritual will be for you and your family; just remember the word "personalize." If your funeral director or clergyperson resists you, find another funeral director or clergyperson. You should be able to feel, "Mother would have loved the interior I selected for that casket." You should play music special to you and your loved one. Have everyone bring photographs and other personal items too. Be sure your funeral director is prepared to help you display these things. Have people close to you and your loved one say a few words; this can be very meaningful for them and for the listeners. And by all means don't let the primary speaker go through his or her presentation with only a few references to the person who has died. You want to hear their name, and you want to hear it often. If the speaker didn't know the deceased well, get together and give them stories, descriptions...the material they need to give you what you need. Don't be fashionable; don't be afraid. Have your grief, and have your ritual.

