Stories from Funeral Celebrants

Celebrating the Life While Mourning the Death
Stories from Funeral Celebrants

Celebrating the Life While Mourning the Death
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorry Bless</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Standing Ovation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristine Bentz</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whom I Serve</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte Eulette</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trixie the Wonder Dog of Love</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Phillips</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About a Life Celebration</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail Ruben</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A “Jewish” Graveside Service</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald Fierst</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why a Funeral Celebrant?</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly Pruett</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodbye, Dad</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin O’Brien</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blazing Glory</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois Heckman</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Father’s Funeral</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry Lieberstein</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting Readings for Memorial Service</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kateyanne Unullisi</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Why and How of Working With A Funeral Consultant</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

A celebrant is someone who officiates a ceremony usually reserved for clergy. In America today this term is becoming synonymous with a person who is not part of the clergy and takes the approach of celebration.

The life of the person or the transition to a better place is the cause for celebration, not the loss of a loved one. Mourning at a funeral is natural and an important part of the process of letting go and moving on with our lives.

Many celebrants call attention to a person’s contributions and things that made them happy. This book is a compilation of stories of how truly special people have changed the loss of a person into a Celebration of Life.
Life-Cycle Celebrant® Dorry Bless constructs and presides over one-of-a-kind ceremonies to mark the cornerstone events in her clients’ lives: marriage, birth and death. She also designs rituals for those extraordinary in-between moments: career and relationship transitions, moving, milestone celebrations, life-shifts experienced from disease/healing, and animal companion tributes. Between 2006 and 2011, Dorry received her certification from the Celebrant Foundation and Institute in funeral and healing/transition ceremonies, weddings, and family and children’s ceremonies. Her works have been published in Yoga Journal, Natural Awakenings, and American Funeral Director. She has been interviewed by Daily Undertaker.com and McCune-Miller McCune Magazine. She has also been a frequent contributor and presenter at the Celebrant Foundation & Institute's annual Wisdom Conference and served on CF&I's faculty as an educator for the funeral course.
A Standing Ovation

In theaters all over the world, when the curtain comes down at the end of the night, the cast comes forward to take their bows. If the performance is truly extraordinary, the audience rises to their feet and shows their appreciation with a standing ovation. Similarly, at the opera, the audience pays tribute to an exceptional aria by shouting ‘bravo, bravo’ signifying the vocal piece was well done. The word ovation comes from the Latin ‘ovo’ meaning I rejoice. Bravo or brava (feminine) has its origin in Italian and means brave or bold.

Not many people get a standing ovation at their funeral. What could a standing ovation and a funeral possibly have in common? At first blush, one can’t imagine this passionate display of emotion happening within the context of a funeral ceremony. After all, we are conditioned from a young age to think of funerals as glum, mournful, obligatory affairs. We have become comfortable with writing off the potential of ceremony to reassure us. Time and again, we leave funerals feeling empty and dissatisfied. Simply, they fail to capture the story of the unique life lived and to ignite our hearts.

A celebrant funeral—often called a Celebration of Life—breaks this mold, providing a respectful alternative to our preconceived notions about what a funeral or memorial should be. A Celebration of Life tells the unique story of the deceased. It does this with a trained eye, soulful presence, skillful use of symbolism and structure, and most of all, in accordance with the family’s wishes.

A celebrant knows that in the end—and the beginning and the middle—it’s all about the life story, the strengths and vulnerabilities, accomplishments and disappointments, work, play, joy, and sorrow, and the time spent with family and friends. Each story is carefully chosen, every reading selected to tell this story to honor this singular person’s life. Prayer and scripture can be utilized to honor the beliefs of the deceased and the family as well. There might be important keepsakes, photos, or memorable artwork on display on a memory table. Meaningful music and ritual are considered and, of course, the life address or eulogy—whether delivered by the celebrant or through the shared memories of friends and family. Each of these elements is
woven together with care, creating an honest, compassionate, meaningful portrayal of the deceased.

There is a saying in Chinese Buddhism, “Life is made up of ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows.” Ceremonial tribute attends to this paradox by offering an honest context for the soul to experience the precious mystery of life and share it with those present. The language of ceremony allows our grief, pain, joy, love, and even our laughter to be expressed in a real way. As a result, it is the soul that speaks, offering up a human experience of the sacred.

Each family decides for themselves what a good funeral is. You might not know where to start, or may have an idea already in place. Perhaps there has been time to discuss this with your loved one and you are prepared to carry out their wishes. A funeral officiated by a Memorial Celebrant can help you realize the ideal ceremony, custom fitting it with the details necessary to make it a special event.

Celebrant funeral ceremonies and ritual services are gaining popularity with today's families, who often identify as secular, interfaith, spiritual, atheist, or include the self-expressed—though faithful—baby boomers who no longer have clergy or a house of worship. A Funeral Celebrant is a professional, trained and certified in the art of ritual, ceremony, world and faith traditions, mythology, ceremonial writing and speaking. A Celebrant learns about your loved one’s life through gentle, unhurried time spent with you, your family, and even your loved one’s friends.

Upholding a gold standard of service, Celebrants provide you with every word of the ceremony beforehand, assuring the accuracy of each detail and that your loved one’s life is portrayed as you had hoped. A personalized ceremony is not superfluous, but constructed with clear intention, research, time, professional training and knowledge. These ceremonies can be held in the funeral home, graveside, a park, a beach, a restaurant, your personal home, or wherever you see fit. It can take place immediately after the passing of a loved one, even months or years later—all in response to the family’s needs.

When it is time to do the hard work and plan a loved one’s funeral, we might stop, take a deep breath and ask ourselves how we wish to recognize this one precious, unique life. Will
we rejoice in the life lived? Will we celebrate the frailty, the joy, the mystery and the wonder? Will we be moved to rise to our feet and shout out, ‘bravo?’

Eva received a standing ovation at her funeral. She was lying in a closed casket covered with flowers when her elder daughter, Nora, ended her tribute to her mom with these words, “There is one more thing that has been on my mind. My mom was always modest and humble about her achievements. She had so many gifts and never hesitated to give of herself to others. I’d love it if we recognize my mom now—all together.”

Nora then led family and friends as they rose to their feet. Their acknowledgment was heartfelt, their sentiment rousing. The applause rang out like thunder.
Kristine Bentz is a trained Life-Cycle Celebrant and founder of Sweetgrass Ceremonies. She inspires, guides, and assists people through the necessary ceremonies during times of loss. She helps celebrate the departed in a variety of meaningful ways – even by honoring a beloved animal companion. Together, you create a memorable experience based upon your stories, beliefs, and values.

Kristine’s certification as a Life-Cycle Celebrant® was received through the Celebrant Foundation & Institute. In addition, she is a Home Funeral Guide, certified by Final Passages in California. She is currently an instructor at the Institute, leading courses in the fundamentals of Celebrancy, as well as Funerals and Ceremonies for Healing. Kristine considers it a joy to be part of the worldwide Celebrancy movement – initiated in Australia 30+ years ago – helping people create meaningful and relevant ceremonies. It is her great privilege to serve families and communities in this way.
Whom I Serve

Unlike a minister, priest, or rabbi—whose attentions generally serve a congregation and individuals seeking religious guidance—Life Celebrants make themselves available to those in need of assistance building a Life Ceremony, regardless of their religion, race, or creed. The individuals, families and communities I serve tend to hold a few similar values in common.

- **Desire to Create Meaningful Occasions**—Everyone I serve wants to, somehow, thread their own and/or their loved one’s beliefs, stories and values into a ceremony or celebration. They do not want a rote script about the promise of afterlife. They want to experience words, prose, music or ritual with relevance to their lives. They may be without a map for accomplishing this, needing guidance while co-creating a meaningful ceremony of remembrance.

- **Dedication to Family and Friends**—Regardless of geographical distance from each other, my clients value their relationships and kin more than any material possessions. They are fully present in their connection to loved ones and extended communities of friends, near or far.

- **Enthusiasm for Natural Places**—Many folks I serve love the outdoors and find serenity while enjoying natural spaces. They are likely not affiliated with a faith organization, yet feel a sense of sacred space or ‘church’ in the scenic wilderness, a desert hike, or their own vegetable garden.

- **Belief in ‘Something Greater’**—My clients often have a sense of spirituality or mythology, the belief in some kind of Source, Spirit, Divine Presence, or Energy. Many have grown up in an organized belief system, left it behind mid-life, and forged their own spiritual (or sometimes non-spiritual) identities.
Ideal Qualities in a Ceremony

When working with families and communities to create a Ceremony of Remembrance, I tend to encourage certain ritual characteristics that commonly benefit the experience.

- **Bringing the Essence:** There are many ways to bring someone’s essence to the ceremony. Ways to achieve this include symbolism, music, photos, video, quotations from the honoree, narrative and storytelling—all carried out with honesty and passion.

- **Beginning ~ Middle ~ End:** A logical progression of ceremonial elements allows the service to flow naturally. This series of events can be manipulated in a myriad of ways to suit the needs of the family.

- **Relevant Ceremonial Elements:** The concept of rote, dreary, lackluster template services has deterred many of us from wanting funerals for ourselves. But the funeral rite is a vital step in the life process, the method of release and succor for those left behind. When your goal is to reflect—with absolute honesty—on the life of the honoree through music, ritual elements, prose and narrative, a fulfilling and satisfying experience can be realized. Relevance fosters a breeding ground for a healing and meaningful experience.

- **Support for Mourners:** Especially during ceremonies for committal—either burial or handling cremains—a sense of support for the principal mourners is central to the experience. This calls for honesty about the physical separation, followed by an acknowledgment of rejoining the elements—earth, water, air, fire—and comforting elements when ‘the work’ of the disposition or ceremony is complete.

- **Safe and Comfortable Gathering Space:** Ceremonies to remember and honor a life may occur anywhere. A mortuary chapel isn’t vital nor is a high price tag. What matters most is feeling comfortable and safe. This may happen in a church, a home, or on the shore of a river. One family may desire a seaside scenario, while others prefer their own backyard. I encourage you to consider a space that provides sanctuary for you and yours, despite the presence of walls.
One Fabulous Lady

Sometimes, the fulfillment of a life is acknowledged, even celebrated, while the honoree is still with us. It might occur through a series of support rituals, a small ceremony, or a large celebration. This scenario provides an enormous healing opportunity, allowing the honoree to express a wide range of emotions: grief, forgiveness, happiness, frustration, bittersweet tears, relief, or laughter. The same applies to surrounding caregivers or family.

The following is a story about a woman and her family who chose my support services for three separate occasions: during her decline, at the time of her death, and afterward, in celebration of her life. For the purpose of telling this in respect of the family’s privacy, we’ll call her Evelyn.

Evelyn lived into her early 90s, residing in the casita behind her son and daughter-in-law’s residence. Evelyn was creative, perceptive, worldly, talented, opinionated, and beautiful. Her family took exceptional care of her physically, and realized she may have needed more care than her simple bodily functions demanded. They wondered if she would find comfort in emotional or spiritual dialogue without the pretense of a Church (to which she did not belong) or formal therapist (of whom she wanted no part.)

After an exhausting search, the family contacted me, asking if I’d be willing to provide spiritual care on a weekly basis for their mother, who forged her own deeply spiritual path of combined faiths and practices. As a certified midwife to the dying, I welcomed the post. We agreed to meet in her home, once a week for two hours, for as long as she felt physically able.

We worked together for a few months. I listened to her. We sang. We drew. I read stories, myths, and parables related to themes about which she felt concern. We listened to music. She dictated thank you letters for people to receive after her transition. I wrote. We sat together in silence. We savored our time together.

More than anything, I supported her emotional story and spiritual selves as they drew closer to death. Together, we created a series of small and simple sustenance rituals to give her strength during her active dying. With a few family members, we held an intimate backyard
ceremony to celebrate her life while she was still fully present. Everyone was open, sharing their words of love and forgiveness, their laughter and tears.

Two nights later, Evelyn died in her sleep at home in her casita. She transitioned as peacefully as we could have hoped. Her family surrounded her with love the following morning. Her son decided to act as his family’s funeral director, something entirely legal in Arizona and in 41 other states. I supported the family in making their decisions, filing the paperwork with the Office of Vital Records and caring for Evelyn’s body.

Later that evening, an informal vigil took place. The family washed and dressed her in her finest pink suit, making Evelyn's worldly body beautiful. She rested upon her bed surrounded by vases of flowers from the yard and soft candlelight. She truly was, as the saying goes, lying in grace. Evelyn was a lively and well-loved character, and neighbors soon started arriving, spreading the word as they went.

Food, wine, desserts and flowers all started pouring in! Adults, children, even dogs, came to visit, sharing our laughter, relief, sadness, and tears. Quiet glances were shared (all expressions were welcome) and those who wanted to sit with Evelyn were welcomed to do so at their own pace.

This is how our ancestors grieved.

It wasn’t long ago that we mourned at home, surrounded by the comfort of kin and familiar surroundings. When a family member dies at home, this kind of family-led care is a natural and healthy extension of care giving. It may not be suitable for everyone or every circumstance, but when it works—as with Evelyn—nobody could imagine it occurring any differently.

Since it was Evelyn’s final wish to be buried at a historic family plot in another state, her children made sure her wish was fulfilled. A full funeral and burial service occurred for her in her home state.

Back home, a few weeks after the burial was complete, the family held another Celebration of Life to honor Evelyn. Again, they asked that I help guide this occasion. Since the
community they lived in was quite large, it boasted an expansive community center. Anticipating a large attendance, they selected this facility for their event. It was a good thing they did. Nearly 100 individuals came to grieve and celebrate the life of this wonderful woman.

Storytelling and laughter were of central importance to the family. Therefore, we co-created a meaningful ceremony including participation and ritual. We opened and closed with a drumming circle comprised of grandkids and friends. The family played a DVD with images from Evelyn’s long, rich life, telling story after story. The family started, but soon others joined in.

Wanting to provide everyone with some small memento of Evelyn—some keepsake to store her in their hearts forever—the family had purchased a supply of small, gleaming silver key chains. These were engraved with a dancing angel on one side and Evelyn’s favorite saying on the other, “The state of your life is nothing more than a reflection of your state of mind.”

It was a meaningful and memorable service, much like Evelyn herself. At the end, we raised a toast to Evelyn and the wonderful life she led.

It was an honor and privilege to have served Evelyn and her family during each stage of her passing. They embraced the opportunity to grieve fully, before, during, and after her death. Though every person and every service is different, it is this sense of acceptance and memorialization that is important and that we all strive to give our loved ones.

A Celebration of Life in the Park

When a beloved colleague passes, their work community is often left adrift. Not wanting to impose on family and close friends, these individuals can be left with a sense of never having really said goodbye. The following story is about a memorial held by a group of colleagues to honor the life of a friend.

The group I served in this scenario was comprised of healers and educators. Their intuitive need for meaningful remembrance came easily to them and they vocalized it. They asked me to guide their informal picnic gathering in a local park to remember their colleague, Dianne.
She’d passed in her early fifties, much too young for someone of such vivacious character, such intensity. Her spirited, uplifting nature buoyed everyone around her, and her absence created a gaping hole in their work culture. A few of them had attended a Catholic memorial service for her, but wanted to celebrate her outside, with lightness, love, music, and good food. This celebration is what we co-created after I listened to their desires:

Nearly 50 people, including some of her family, gathered one afternoon near a big pond. The surrounding view of distant, purple mountain peaks was a favorite of Dianne’s. Friends and musicians sang and played guitar. We set up an impromptu altar, covering a long, low table with photos and symbols of her presence. The group—via a collection—had purchased a walnut memorial urn with Diane’s picture on it and a small angel holding a computer. People brought meaningful items to place upon the altar, but also to place inside the urn, which already had a home on a shelf in their break room back at work.

Some brought pictures, polished stones, lottery tickets, and flowers, things Diane was fond of. A few craft stations were set up for making angels out of beads and big hefty paper clips. These we hung from ribbons in a tree above the altar.

I opened and closed the ceremony, but most of our time was spent sharing, storytelling, and playing music. Those unable to attend the celebration sent emails, which others read on their behalf.

We shared a Litany of Remembrance, more music, and then a potluck feast. The warm breezy afternoon, accompanied by the backdrop of water and mountains, would have suited Dianne perfectly. Many in attendance commented on how they felt closer to her during the celebration, feeling somehow comforted.

This comfort is at the core of why we gather, why we hold Celebrations of Life. We help each other carry the burden of emotions accompanying death. Together, we affirm the life lived, perhaps subconsciously affirming our own as well.
Charlotte Eulette is International Director of the Celebrant Foundation & Institute of Montclair, New Jersey. Her articles about the importance of personalized ceremonies have been published in *American Funeral Director Magazine* and *Divorce Magazine*. She was interviewed on the NPR shows *All things considered* and *Market watch*. Her TV appearances include CBS Morning show, CBS News with Dan Rather, and NBC news.

Celebrant Foundation & Institute is a 501c3 non-profit educational organization with headquarters in Montclair, NJ, a member of the International Federation of Celebrants. The Institute educates Life-Cycle Celebrants® in the art of celebration, symbolism, and tradition. Celebrants are trained to officiate virtually every life event, including weddings, engagements, funerals, memorials, end-of-life tributes, baby welcoming, adoptions, dedications, anniversaries, birthdays, civic/community/non-profit ceremonies, survival-healing, and transition ceremonies including divorce, recovery, and job loss.

“As a Celebrant, I understand the importance of ritual and ceremony during all stages of life. Though going through the process is often difficult – as with the passing of a loved one - the end results can be overwhelmingly beneficial. I would like to share the story of how my family said goodbye to a very special friend. Despite the nature of our companionship, it was still important to have a meaningful farewell, to lay her spirit to rest both physically and emotionally.”
Trixie the Wonder Dog of Love

She was a 14 ½ year old, lanky Irish terrier. I got her from a wonderful breeder on the North Fork of Long Island who, ironically, had a very Irish last name and lived on Whiskey Road. We named our pup Trixie, after the redhead on the 1940’s TV show “Honeymooners.” I remember her little furry form, crying non-stop in her cardboard box as we drove two hours on the Long Island Expressway back to our home in New Jersey.

It was hard to believe that something so tiny, no bigger than my coffee mug, had such a strong life force. I had mixed emotions as I tried to comfort her. I loved that we had gotten her but felt terrible to be taking her away from her family and sibling puppies. For 14 ½ years Trixie grew up strong and healthy, living up to her name in every way. She was spry and whimsical, her long elegant legs, red bristling coat, and twinkling eyes were enchanting. It was funny, even as a senior she hardly aged and only slowed down a bit just a few weeks before she died. We didn’t see it coming—she tricked us and we thought she’d live forever. We had 14 ½ wonderful years with Trixie, and cherished every minute of that grand canine happiness. She was aware and there for me.

Trixie influenced everyone she met. She was an honorary member of my company’s board of directors and never missed a meeting at the office. Even the birds who sang in the garden when she sat in the shade of the plum tree to admire them—guarding our yard (her yard) from trespass—seemed to miss her presence. Young and old, human or animal, we will all miss her tremendously.

This past August, Trixie completed her life, leaving the world that much dimmer without her energetic light. We know she will live on in our hearts, but it was a very difficult goodbye. Some say we enter into a contract with our animal companions; they love us unconditionally and we agree to care for them in life, as well as when their time comes to die. Trixie taught us so much, and her light of life will always remain brilliantly lit within us.

Several months after her passing, we decided it was time to have a memorial. In honor of Trixie, we built a small open-air doghouse of simple, raw materials in our backyard, her favorite sanctuary. It was important to us that she knew her home was always with us, even in
spirit. We draped Trixie’s dog tags on the little wooden rungs, where they would play in the wind forever, safe from the rain and snow.

One evening in October, a few of our friends and their dogs gathered in our backyard to honor Trixie. We provided them with white slips of paper, asking that they write something meaningful about Trixie: a memory, a farewell, or something they appreciated about her. As twilight faded into evening, we gathered around the spirit house in an uneven circle. Each of us lit a few candles at our feet, mindful of the dry grasses and gusting winds. By this gentle light, we said something about Trixie and tied our sentiments on the rungs of the spirit house with her tags. These belonged to Trixie, and would remain throughout the seasons.

As a parting gift to our four-footed friends in attendance, I divided Trixie’s unused biscuits into gift bags, tying them with green ribbons in whimsical remembrance of her Irish heritage. We even called Trixie’s breeder, thanking her once again for Trixie. We emailed her a copy of the ceremony with hopes that she would share it with other dog lovers.

Our ritual was very special to me. I often think back on that night, watching our circle of friends glow brighter and brighter as each candle was lit and dusk faded to darkness. As the ceremony ended, I shared a self-written Irish terrier blessing: “Fare thee well dear Trixie girl, we see your tail a wagging and hope to join you in the glen once again!”
As a Life-Cycle Celebrant and officiate, Adam Phillips specializes in helping his clients mark all the milestones of their lives. While he puts his heart into every ceremony he performs, he gets special satisfaction from performing funerals and memorial services. These ceremonies allow loved ones and the extended community to note and appreciate the fullness of an entire life, to reflect in a safe, yet focused way on what that life meant, and to say farewell. He is touched and honored when grieving family members tell him, “It is as if you knew him”; “You helped us say goodbye”; or “Your words made it seem like you were a part of our family.”

Adam’s Celebrancy training was received from the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, with special certifications in Funerals and Weddings. He also received a BA from Vassar College with a combined independent major in religion, philosophy and psychology.
About a Life Celebration

As a Life-Cycle Celebrant® and officiant, I specialize in helping my clients to mark all the milestones of their lives. I put my heart into every ceremony I am asked to do, yet I get special satisfaction from performing funerals and memorial services. Those ceremonies allow loved ones and the extended community to note and appreciate the fullness of an entire life, and to reflect in a safe, yet focused way on what that life meant, and to say farewell. I am touched and honored when grieving family members tell me “it is as if you knew him,” “you helped us say goodbye,” “your words made it seem like you were a part of our family.” The following might be helpful when working with an officiant in planning your own loved one’s funeral or memorial service.

Many modes or themes can be effective in a funeral or memorial service, from eulogies, to music and song, poetry, scripture culled from the world’s religions, inspirational readings, even dance. For a well-rounded effect, it is helpful to use as many senses as possible in a ceremony, so frequently candles and even aromas can be used. I have often performed services where the deceased was an artist, photographer or musician. In these cases, it can be moving to have examples of their work for the assembly to see and experience, or to have work that the deceased loved made visible in the program or at the front of the room. If he or she loved a particular piece of music, it can be meaningful to hear it played or sung; a single unaccompanied voice of musical instrument can be powerfully effective.

In my experience, the heart of the ceremony is usually the words and emotions of the people who knew and cared about the deceased, and in as many of the roles as that person played in life. For example, for a man who was a doctor it might be touching to hear about his professional competence and healing warmth from a patient, or a fellow or nurse and perhaps someone who knew him when he was a young intern or resident. Perhaps the same man was active in the local pet shelter, or believed firmly in some political or social cause that demonstrated his values and human qualities, and what he was passionate about. Maybe he was a father as well as a husband and friend. Each role will carry its own nuance and meaning. And while no life can be summed up entirely, the more facets of a person we are privy to, the
more his or her essence can be humbly approached, understood, appreciated and honored by those that gather to mourn.

So it behooves those who knew the deceased best to give the minister or officiant the names of people to interview in a structured and empathetic way. What did that person love? What would make him smile? Is there one thing you could always count on him or her for? What could people count on him never to do? What are three words or qualities that come to mind when you think of this person? What would he or she be wish to be remembered for?

On one level, these talks are so the minister can say something true from his own heart during the service, as he synthesizes and expresses the perspectives and themes and life patterns the conversations have elicited. Not incidentally, these talks also give the bereaved the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and emotions at a critical and painful time, and to put them in perspective in the witnessing of another who did not know the deceased. That’s one place where the “ministerial” side of a celebrant’s job comes to the fore.

For religious clients, carefully chosen scripture and music may express their traditions and provide comfort. Readings can be read by friends or family members during the service. That gives a personal touch, and honors a connection. It can also be a way for someone to contribute to the service when, either out of modesty or emotional “overwhelm,” or other reasons he or she does wish to speak about themselves personally.

Many people describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” or “non-religious.” Ideally, in every meaningful and sensitively thought-through ceremony, all concerned find some clear and authentic expression for their feelings. A limitless wealth of music, song, poetry, scripture and other inspirational literature from around the world is available to draw upon. Often, unique ceremonial elements can be tactfully introduced. For example, mourners can pick one flower from an assortment of types. In outdoor ceremonies, a stone can be placed on the grave, or some special bauble or written phrase can be cast into a body of water as a farewell prayer or wish.
In my experience, it is also good to take a breather and reflect without words. This pause can with or without music or any other man-made sound. Measured silence can indeed be “golden.”

Whatever the culture, personal style, temperament, beliefs or wishes of the bereaved, the constant in any officiant’s job is to set forth the context of the gathering, to bind those assembled into a community, to hold the space safe and sacred, and to offer respectful, compassionate and authoritative guidance.

End-of-life ceremonies are usually solemn, but there is an important place for humor as well—the telling anecdote, the touching memory, the little joke that illuminates a theme, or a characteristic that embodies the deceased, that “could only be him or her.” Laughter also releases tension and balances things out.

Speaking of balance: while it is the modern convention (and one that I welcome) that funerals and memorial services should be “celebrations of life,” in my experience, funeral attendees also often find it viscerally satisfying to directly acknowledge the harsh sting of personal loss and the blunt truth of death during the service, even briefly. Doing so can serve as the gateway for personal reflection, gratitude, and ultimately, a nuanced and full-bodied affirmation and celebration of the entirety of who the deceased was. The whole assembly can then begin to “move on” together.

That “moving on” often takes the form of symbolic words and actions. For example, if time permits, I often invite people at my services to come up to light a candle on the altar or “nature table” at the front of the room and briefly express, either aloud or inwardly, some quality, memory or lesson they are grateful for from the deceased, or to offer some word, thought or prayer that can serve as a leave-taking. This moment can inspire people to ask “what was made possible for me as an individual and for my family and community because that person lived and was among us?” If the proper groundwork has been laid, most participants will take the opportunity to come up and light a candle. As more people do so, the light on the altar itself grows, and bears poignant, silent testimony to the life that was lived, the life that has passed, and the eternal abiding mystery at the heart of our human journey.
Gail Rubin, “The Doyenne of Death,” is a Certified Celebrant and engaging speaker who uses funny film clips to help start serious conversations. Her certification was received from the Insight Institute in July 2011 at the ICCFA summer university. She is also author of the award-winning book, *A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don’t Plan to Die* and hosts a TV program of the same name.

As the author of “Matchings, Hatchings and Dispatchings,” an *Albuquerque Tribune* column on life cycle events, she found the columns on death and funerals elicited the greatest reader response. Obliging the obvious need for information on the topic, she started The Family Plot Blog (http://thefamilyplot.wordpress.com), an upbeat, online resource for inspiration and the tools to pre-plan a meaningful funeral or memorial service. Gail is a member of the Association for Death Education, Counseling and the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association and the Jewish-Christian Dialogue of New Mexico. She also volunteers with the *Chevra Kaddisha*, a group that ritually prepares the bodies of Jews for burial.
A “Jewish” Graveside Service

The family of a 93-year-old man wanted to incorporate Jewish traditions into his graveside service. The only difficulty was that the family was not observant. In fact, they considered themselves atheists. However, they were culturally Jewish—“bagels and lox Jews”—and wanted to do things right for their loved one. A Celebrant was an ideal solution to their problem. Celebrants honor all faiths and practices. We are trained to design meaningful Celebrations of Life, honoring the person’s life, including any religious or traditional rites and readings they may desire. The story below is that of a service centered on telling the life story of the individual—celebrating their unique impact on the world and those around them—while incorporating certain Jewish funeral traditions, possibly forgotten by younger generations.

I’ve broken the ceremony down into eight parts: The Keriah, Greeting and Introduction, Open Comments, Presentation of the Flag, Meditation, Lowering the Casket, Mourners Kaddish, and Parting Words.

Keriah

The traditional Jewish funeral begins with a ribbon tearing ceremony called Keriah. The tradition stems from the Biblical story of the patriarch Jacob, who tore his clothing as an expression of his grief after being told his favorite son, Joseph, was killed by wild beasts. We also see the rending of garments by Job, when learning of the deaths of his sons and daughters.

A common prayer said during the tearing of the ribbon is, Baruch ata Adonai, Dayan Ha-Emet, meaning, “Blessed is the True Judge."

The tearing of cloth gives physical expression to the emotions we may be holding inside after the death of a loved one. As we start the funeral process, this is the time to let those emotions flow. These days, rather than tear a perfectly good article of clothing, we provide ribbons to tear and pin to the clothing. Children wear the ribbon on the left side for a parent. Others may wear the ribbon on the right side.

This typically takes place before the funeral. Afterward, the family travelled to the funeral location where the casket and flag were stationed.
Greeting and Introduction

At the start of all my ceremonies, I ask everyone to turn off their cell phones and other devices out of respect. We often forget to do this, and it can really sour the moment when “Bad to the Bone” starts blaring around the reception hall during Grandma’s eulogy. I continue with an opening, introducing the decedent in a way that reflects their personality. This particular individual loved reading and dancing, so I opened by quoting Voltaire, who said, “Let us read and let us dance—two amusements that will never do any harm to the world.”

From a long discussion with the family, I learned that the deceased was also fond of theater and performing arts. The following piece from Shakespeare’s play, As You Like It, seemed appropriate.

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

For this service I sprinkled in as many Jewish words and phrases as I possibly could, because the family mentioned him using them often. I could watch the smiles spread throughout the crowd as the familiar words brought back a memory or emotion for each of them.

I went on to describe the deceased as a child, where his family was from and what he was like as a young man. I told the story of how he met his wife of 55 years, and how their love lasted through all those years. I talked about his interests, his love of going out dancing and to the theater. I talked about his career, how he started a commercial printing business in the Bronx and did a tour of service in WWII.

I went on to acknowledge his successful relationships after his wife’s passing, and how he’d been forced to endure the loss of these partners as well. I described his love for his children, and his devotion to their well-being and success. The son handling the arrangements had tended to his father during his final years, and I acknowledged the selfless act, acknowledging how loving and devoted the family was as a whole.
One of the grandsons wanted to say a few words. The room was awash with tears long before he was finished.

“When I was just around six or seven years old, I went to New York to see you and Grandma. I remember how you treated me like I was the prince of New York as we got off the plane. I remember how sad and homesick I was when I first arrived, and how you made it all better for me. Before the end of the trip, I didn’t want to go back home.

Grandpa, you will always be that strong and stern man who never let go, ‘til the very end. You had the strength and wisdom that so few others had. You always made me laugh and smile. You had the fortitude of an ox, and the stubbornness to go along with it. Thank you for teaching me and guiding me through my life.

You will be missed Grandpa. “To the world, you were somebody, but to me you were the world.” I love you.

Being a Celebrant is about helping people remember the wonderful moments they shared with their loved one and the fantastic details that made them who they were. This man was funny, sweet, lovable, and sometimes, a royal pain in the butt. He said what was on his mind and could be very stubborn. His sense of humor was with him to the end. His son and granddaughter were with him when he drew his last breath, going gently into that good night.

A popular bible passage for Jewish funeral services comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. From it we learn—

To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under the sun.
A time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
a time to kill and a time to heal ... 
a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance ... 
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to lose and a time to seek;
a time to rend and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak...
Open Comments
At this point in the ceremony, I like to offer people a chance to say something about the deceased. Anyone can come to the front of the room or simply stand and speak. People often have a story they want to share. It’s a relief for people to talk about their loved one, to keep them alive that way. It’s very healing and I’ve seen this part of the ceremony go on for quite a while.

Presentation of Flag
This individual performed military service, so there was a presentation of the American flag to his grandson. This is the most appropriate point in the celebration to insert a tradition like this one. It was short and simple, but moving nevertheless.

“On behalf of the President of the United States and the chief of naval operations, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s service to this country and a grateful Navy.”

Meditation
Our life is a dance to a song we cannot hear. Its melody courses through us for a little while, then seems to cease. A brief pause at this point in the ceremony gives people time to reflect, to sit quietly with the reality of life and death. For this service, I chose the sentiment below.

“Early or late, all must answer the summons to return to the source of being, for we lose our hold on life when our time has come, as the leaf falls from the bough when its day is done. The deeds of the righteous enrich us all, as the fallen leaf enriches the soil beneath. The dust returns to the earth, the spirit lives on in the hearts of those who remember.

“Like the stars by day, our beloved dead are not seen by mortal eyes. They shine on forever. May they rest in eternal peace. Let us be thankful for the companionship that continues in a love stronger than death. We honor the memory of you.”
Lowering the Casket

The Jewish tradition of throwing earth on the casket is almost as well known as the tradition of breaking a glass at a wedding. The sound of the earth on the casket is a visceral experience, driving home the reality that this loved one is truly gone.

The casket is lowered gently into the earth and each person is invited to throw one to three shovelfuls of earth onto the casket. While one is sufficient, three shows intention of burying the dead. It’s important to replace the shovel in the earth, rather than passing it from hand to hand. This symbolizes that pain should not be passed along, but left behind.

Once the ritual is complete, we stand and say the Mourner’s Kaddish together. The Mourner’s Kaddish makes no mention of death. This prayer instead reaffirms life. I like to provide the prayer on a handout transliterated from the Hebrew, as it’s meant to be spoken.

Mourner’s Kaddish

Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba (Cong: Amein).

b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei

v'yam'likh mal'khutei b'chayeikhon uv'yomeikhon

uv'chaye'i d'khol beit yis'ra'eil

ba'agala uviz'man kariv v'im'ru:

Amein. Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam ul'al'mei al'maya

Yit'barakh v'yish'tabach v'yit'pa'ar v'yit'romam v'yit'nasei

v'yit'hadar v'yit'aleh v'yit'halal sh'mei d'kud'sha

B'rikh hu.

l'eila min kol bir'khata v'shirata

toosh'b'chatah v'nechematah, da'ameeran b'al'mah, v'eemru:

Amein

Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya

v'chayim aleinu v'al kol yis'ra'eil v'im'ru

Amein

Oseh shalom bim'romav hu ya'aseh shalom

aleinu v'al kol Yis'ra'eil v'im'ru

Amein
Parting words

I like to remind people that although we gather in sadness, we also gather in gratitude. The decedent, in this case, had lived a long, full life. I asked that they find comfort in the years they had with him. I called on them to emulate his positive life examples, to enhance the lives of others and be a blessing for everyone they meet.

Before ending the service, I remind all of them that a pitcher of water and a basin are provided at the edge of the cemetery and invite them to wash their hands before leaving. The tradition of washing the hands before leaving the cemetery has origins that are both practical and ritual. Practically, if we were called upon to fill a grave ourselves—as families have done before professionals were hired to do the job—we would wash our hands afterward. As a ritual, washing the hands after a burial signifies the cleansing of the spirit after being in close proximity to the dead.

As the service ends, I like to offer a parting gift, a token of the deceased for the family and friends to keep with them. This item is always different for each service, depending on the person being celebrated. It is usually something small, like a polished stone, a silk rose, or a tube of ChapStick. Simply having something real to hold in your hand can be a great comfort, no matter how small it is. In this case, the deceased was known for his insistence on receiving his Coke “WITH the meal,” not before. He was also a lover of chocolate.

Next to the pitcher, I placed glass Coke bottles and bowls of red chocolate hearts. Each person was invited to take one of each as they left, to let them serve as a remembrance of the deceased and his love of food, laughter, and life.

“As we go forth from this place, let us keep his spirit in our hearts. May the Source of peace send peace to all who mourn and comfort to all who are bereaved. Shalom.”

We finished with a selection of big band music, a favorite of the deceased.
Gerald Fierst uses his skill as a professional storyteller to create funerals and memorial services, bringing warmth and connection to the commemoration of life. His work ranges from simple services with a few family members in attendance, to large memorial services with symphony orchestras coordinated with the eulogy. Certified by both the International College of Celebrance, Melbourne, in 2004 and in the U.S. by the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, Montclair, NJ in 2004, Gerry has worked all over the world, telling stories, creating theater and making rituals. He was a featured teller at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, performed at LIMMUD, the EC JE, created rituals and stories for the Hong Kong International School, and shared tales from his Jewish heritage at the Shiwa School on Zuni Pueblo. His recordings received Parents’ Choice Silver Awards, and his Jazz/Storytelling performance MOUTH/MUSIK was featured at the Woodstock Fringe Festival. Gerry’s work as an actor and writer led ABC News to call him “A Master Storyteller.”
Why a Funeral Celebrant?

No one starts out in life knowing they want to create and perform funerals. It’s a profession that arises from a lifetime of experiences, all leading toward a meaningful profession, a method of helping people heal through words.

When my own father was dying, I raced to the hospital—where my mother was critically ill—to ask if she wanted to call him on the phone and say her final farewell. She did so, summoning her strength to say, “Goodbye, my darling. Goodbye, my sweet.” Then, exhausted, she handed me the telephone. I stayed for some time and, finally, said that I thought I should go and check on Daddy.

“Yes,” she said, “go.” I’d started to leave when she called, “Wait, before you do, please... tell me his story.”

I was surprised by the words: tell me his story. Yes, I had worked for years as a professional storyteller, but I thought of that as performance. Here, at one of the most critical and emotional moments of life, my mother was asking me to tell the real stories.

Like the ancient bards who sang the hero’s death song, I turned back, perched stiffly on a padded chair and began to tell all the family stories I knew: of how they met, fell in love, and married; of how they began a business, raised a family, bought a house, made a life; of friends, triumphs, and challenges. Each story ended with my mother saying, “Yes, that’s how it was. That’s how it was.”

At last—when I had told all that I knew—she said, “Now, go. That’s who he was.”

As I reached the front of the hospital, I saw my wife walking stoically toward me.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “He’s already gone.”

I might have regretted not being present at the moment of death but, in truth, I had celebrated his life in the telling of his story. While immersed in the tales themselves, my father’s spirit had filled me, teaching me the continuity of life from within cherished memory.
As a Funeral Celebrant I’ve realized—over and over again—the power of celebrating the story of our lives. Each of us is unique, has a special story, a matchless connection to past and future. At a funeral, we celebrate these cornerstones of life, the connections he or she made with this earth and its inhabitants. Hearing old stories provides a renewed respect for the power of our common experience.

The stories of our lives are both unremarkable and miraculous because of their common attributes. Our stories celebrate this paradox, confirming the need for ceremony and reinforcing the inheritance of a millennia, as a legacy for all who will come after us. They celebrate our individual journey with the recognition of our shared experiences, making us stop, look, and listen to the wonder of the moment.

Let me tell you a brief story about why I am a Funeral Celebrant, why I believe that—in creating a funeral or memorial service—words and stories are so important. My story begins with an ancient Jewish commentary about the common, and always wonderful, image of the rainbow.

On the first day, God said, “Let there be light,” but it wasn’t until the fourth day that God created the sun, the moon and the stars. So what was the light of the first day? It was the light of inspiration, the light of divine creation. From that light, God made heaven and earth. From that light, God made the colors of Noah’s rainbow as a promise that the world would be renewed and preserved.

I was working in Zuni, New Mexico, at the Shiwa School. My host, Flap Murphy (Flapping Eagle Murphy), was to pick me up at the end of the day and drive me to Window Rock where I would work the next day at a Navaho School. The day was rainy and when I got in the truck after school Flap said, “We got time. Let’s go chase rainbows.”

Out in the high plateau of Northern New Mexico you can often see multiple rainbows in the sky. “Sure,” I said, not positive what he intended.

We headed into the desert, off-road and chasing the distant storms and bright arcs of rainbows in the sky. Upon spotting a stripe of color, Flap would push the accelerator down, racing toward the horizon where the rainbow danced on high, leaving clouds of mud and dust in
our wake. The rainbow would invariably leap away as we approached, causing Flap to spin the truck and bound off in a new direction.

Faster and faster we raced across the russet landscape, my hands gripping the dashboard for dear life.

“Relax,” Flap said, laughing. “You’ll never catch a rainbow if you hold on.”

Sensing the symbolism behind the act, I finally let go, letting loose a heartfelt cowboy holler out the open window, “Yee-haw!” surrendering my fate to Flap, to the land, and to the sky.

We never caught a rainbow, but as the sun sank low on the horizon, Flap said, “One more thing.”

Making our way to a mesa—a sheer rock rising from the desert floor—he asked that I follow him. I did so, letting myself be guided up a steep path to the flat top where I saw a low ‘Hogan.’ Ducking down, we entered the six-sided earth building. A drum and a fire pit rested in the center of the room, as though auspiciously awaiting our arrival.

As night descended, Flap built a fire. Taking up the drum, he played and sang softly. “Join in,” he said. “Tell me your stories.”

And I did.

He sang his ancient songs and I told my stories, those of magic and adventure, of love and loss. We conjured the imaginary, making it the stuff of legend.

At last, Flap said, “Time to sit on the edge.”

We emerged to the lightening sky, stretching our muscles and shaking the numbness from our limbs. Dangling our legs over the cliff, we watched the sunrise turn the earth orange and gold.

“OK,” he said, “we did our work. It’s a new day. I’ll take you to your motel.”
Without another word I followed Flap down the path and he drove me to town. “Get some sleep,” he said, his only farewell. I let myself slip away into the comforting familiarity of the air-conditioned hotel room.

That was twenty years ago. To this day I’m still amazed at the light that fills our world and our lives. Sometimes, I wake early just to watch the dawn. I still tell my stories, and I am sure Flap is still singing his songs. Now, I also tell the stories of well-lived lives as I create meaningful ceremonies for others. My aim is that I—and those in attendance—can call up the light from which all life comes, and in that light, expose the divine rainbow, shimmering, fading and returning with the colors of a job well done and the promise of a new day.

Common is the sunrise. Miraculous is the new day. Every life is a rainbow, ephemeral, memorable, leaving lasting impressions on those it touches. During Celebrations of Life, we pause and appreciate the mark someone made in the heavens and the light they added to our own stories.
Holly Pruett is a trained Life-Cycle Celebrant®, skilled in designing creative life ceremonies from cradle to grave. She received her certification through the Celebrant Foundation & Institute. For over 25 years she has worked as a non-profit leader and consultant, helping organizations better serve their communities. Now, as a certified Life-Cycle Celebrant®, she offers her skills as a writer, storyteller, and facilitator to individuals and families. Working with each client personally, Holly crafts comforting, memorable, and completely unique ceremonies that reflect her client’s distinct values and needs. Holly creates and officiates ceremonies that mark the beginning of life, the end of life, and everything in between. Initial, no-obligation consultation is provided at no cost.
Goodbye, Dad

My father died after an eighteen-month battle with cancer, just two weeks short of his 65th birthday. According to his wife, my stepmother, he didn’t want a funeral. She was exhausted from the illness and strain of his passing and didn’t want to go through the funeral process, especially since he’d opted out. But I knew I needed something.

Six months after his death, I created a memorial ceremony. I planned to have it in my backyard and decided the event should coincide with a cross-county visit from my mother. She and my father had been divorced for over 25 years, but she needed to say her final good-bye.

I asked a friend—who is experienced in such things—to help me pick a day that was astrologically auspicious. We determined the ideal day of the week and time.

Tuesday, June 4th—Mars rules Tuesdays and governs conflict, hunting, surgery, lust, physical strength, courage, politics, debate, athletics, war, contests, and rituals involving men. (That all sounded like my Dad—except the hunting.)

9:00 PM: The first lunar hour—Saturn rules the first lunar hour after sunset on Tuesdays and governs building, the elderly, funerals, wills, reincarnation, destroying diseases, terminations and death. (Yes)

We prepared the ceremonial space in my backyard following a set of ancient, sacred traditions. After sweeping it clean, we sprinkled the ground with water and salt to purify it. Laying out twelve rocks—four for the cardinal directions and eight to complete a large circle—I created a safe space in which my ceremony would take place.

I decorated my home with photos of my dad and artifacts from his life. His Veteran’s flag sat alongside his beloved Acrostic puzzles, his favorite coffee mug, and the charcoal gray cashmere beret he’d worn after his brain surgery. I placed index cards among his belongings, displaying words meant to evoke my father’s spirit: devoted doctor, strong, generous, intelligent, athletic, loved good food, opera, fine wine, sweets and ice cream, quick-witted, funny, accomplished, driven, and loved.
My guests entered through this space, talking quietly amongst themselves about the arrangement. Around early twilight we went out to the backyard, taking our places in the circle. A friend led a brief, guided meditation to center our energies before lighting the altar candle and tiki torches.

As an invocation, I placed a portion of my father’s ashes on our small altar table and played the Jim Croce song ‘Operator,’ (“Oh would you help me place this call…”) before calling the names of his family not present: my sister, his wife, his sisters, and his deceased parents. Other participants repeated the words about him written on the index cards.

I’d made a memory book of photos and stories solicited from family members and friends. In the presence of the circle, I bound each copy with a wide raffia ribbon. (Later, I would mail them to my sister, stepmother, and aunts.)

During a pilgrimage to the coast a few days prior, I’d written down some things I needed to say to my dad. I took this time to say those things aloud. We listened to a Bonnie Raitt song, “I’ve been too faithful all my life/ It’s time... to let... you go.”

By the light of the tiki torches, my mother and I each wrote—on small slips of paper—things about my father, our relationship to him, his passing. The things we wished to release we burned in one bowl. In a separate bowl, we burned those things we wished to carry forward. We mixed the paper ashes from the second bowl into my father’s ashes in a Mexican terra cotta planter shaped like a turtle. I nestled several small succulents into the soil and ash.

Then my friend led a closing meditation. Just as the sun set, he asked us to ground and center our energy toward the earth, then called on us to close our eyes and bring our energy upward and out.

“Raise your hands into the air and RELEASE!” he said.

As we threw our hands into the air and opened our eyes, the backyard was suddenly flooded with brilliant, white light. Stunned into speechlessness, we reflected each other’s expressions of shocked surprise. Then—realizing we’d tripped the motion sensor for the security light—we broke into giddy laughter.
We rose, and drank, and feasted together.

* * *

On the 10th anniversary of my father’s death, I invited several friends back to my house for a simple remembrance ceremony. Once again, I laid out my father’s artifacts. I queued up the Jim Croce song on my iPod. This time though, I had a complete eulogy to share.

During my professional studies with the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, I came to see the earlier ceremony as a rite of passage for myself, more than a memorial for my father. As a certified Life-Cycle Celebrant®, telling the story of the person being celebrated is at the heart of the ceremony. With this in mind, I went through the anecdotes and memories I collected after my father’s death, and looked over each photo. Then I wrote a eulogy that embodied the essence of my father and the impact he’d had on others.

I shared it that night—ten years after his death—with a small group of friends as my witnesses. I emailed it to my mother, stepmother, and sister. Two weeks later, on what would have been my father’s 75th birthday, I traveled to the state where he’d lived his last days, meeting up with my stepmother and some of their old friends. We took a couple of bottles of champagne to the nearby wetlands, a place my dad particularly loved. Walking out on the boardwalk in the setting autumn sun, we toasted my father’s memory.
Kevin O’Brien is a skilled, compassionate Life-Cycle Celebrant®, offering meaningful ceremonies and services to the public. He received a Master’s degree in Pastoral Counseling from Loyola University of Chicago, and served as a campus minister there for 6 years. He is a trained mediator, well versed in organizational development consulting, but now focuses his energy on his work as a Life-Cycle Celebrant®. He performed over 60 funerals in the first year and a half after becoming a Celebrant, and continues to find fulfillment in his work. His passion is creating unique, meaningful Celebrations of Life for the families he serves.
Sometimes tragedy strikes without warning. And the blow is no less fierce when the wound is self-inflicted. I once provided the memorial service for a man who shot himself with his estranged wife outside his house. He’d suffered from depression for years and had attempted suicide once before. But whenever the depression became too much to bear, he always wrote a long letter, sending it to either his daughter or his wife. So when his daughter learned of his passing, she frantically searched for a missed letter, but never found one.

This beloved father was a devout biker who, at an early age, was in a motorcycle accident that resulted in the amputation of one of his legs. But it never curtailed his riding habits. Knowing the service wouldn’t be the same without the glossy black Harley Davidson in attendance, his stepson rode it over on the day of the funeral.

Obviously, this was a sudden and tragic loss. Such tragedy often leaves those left behind looking for answers. These are difficult—often impossible—to find. As an officiate, I do my best to provide some modicum of solace, to begin the healing process with appropriate readings, songs, and rites.

I began the service with a quote from President Abraham Lincoln about knowing sorrow. Then I talked about the many feelings each of them might harbor that day: anger, guilt, regret, relief, and certainly grief. I offered a quote from Anne Morrow Lindbergh who wrote, “It isn’t for the moment you are struck that you need courage, but for the long uphill climb back to sanity, and faith, and security.”

I continued by telling stories of his youth; how he had gotten a popular nickname that followed him throughout his life, how he’d traveled the country on his Harley. Most of the stories were endearing and funny so, amidst this tragedy, there were people laughing. I talked about how he lost his leg when he was eighteen, and how he would use it throughout his life to make people laugh. Then we played Bob Seger’s “Roll Me Away”—which talks about a motorcycle ride that segued into the trips he’d made.
But all too soon it was time to discuss the struggles in his life, the loss of his parents and a brother, the battle with devastating depression. The family asked me to relay that, though he didn’t go to church, he would, from time to time, read the Bible and imagine what life could be like.

When the time came to discuss the ‘elephant in the room’ I didn’t shy away from it; I told them about his deepening depression, and how writing a letter often helped ease his pain and get him through it. I made it clear to them that this time there was no letter.

Many of his biker friends attended the funeral, their steel horses screaming down the street with resounding clarity. They didn’t look at all out of place—in their leather chaps, vests and tattoos—among the more pristine groups of family and friends. Toward the end of the ceremony I revealed that underneath their chairs were memorial cards and pens. I asked everyone to write down any thoughts, feelings, wishes or prayers they may have had about their friend and loved one. Music played as they wrote.

When everyone was finished, we went outside for a burning ceremony. The decedent’s daughter lit the flame in a fire-safe container she’d selected to represent her father. The family began the ceremony by placing their cards in the fire, sending them skyward in swirls of smoke and flashing embers. The rest came forward, one-by-one or holding hands, passing the ebony Harley as the fire consumed their words.

The burning ceremony allowed everyone to say what needed to be said about the deceased and his decision to leave them, without anyone needing to hear. Additional memorial cards were made available, and many people took more than one as a memento of their friend and family member. His daughter kept the fire safe container, saying she might use it to light a fire on old nights, as a reminder of him.

When the last card smoldered in the low flames, the man’s stepson mounted the Harley. Without hesitation it roared to life, startling even the most seasoned biker in the crowd. Amidst whoops of encouragement and excitement, he sped away, leaving us laughing and smiling in his wake.
A young and popular elementary school teacher died in a car accident, leaving a wife and two small children, who attended the school where their dad taught. It made the front page of the local newspaper and even the large metropolitan television station. Details about what happened were sketchy, and when preparing for the funeral service, there were still a lot of unknowns. With so many children and community members affected, I knew the service needed to be planned very carefully.

I met with his wife and sisters at the funeral home. They were surprisingly comforted by the gathering, and shared many wonderful stories about him during the hour and a half interview. Knowing the school where he taught would also be devastated, I called the principal, arranging to visit the school and meet with any faculty or staff who wanted to share stories, favorite memories, anecdotes, or the like.

As delicate as the situation was, I did not meet with his children or any of the students at the school. But I didn’t need to. They’d already found a way of expressing their feelings. I discovered this on my visit to the school library to meet with the faculty and staff. In a wing dedicated to music—the teacher’s forte—the students had created a memory chain. It hung from the ceiling in draping folds of multihued construction-paper rings. On the links of the chain, students had written their thoughts, feelings, and memories of their teacher. It was an impressive thing to witness.

In addition, someone from the school had orchestrated a memory wall outside his classroom. Here, more students wrote out their feelings on multi-colored pieces of paper in different sizes and shapes, securing them to the wall with tape, pins, or by stapling them to each other. I took a great deal of time reading and recording a number of these sentiments.

I asked the decedent’s wife if there was anyone else she wanted me to interview. She said his parents were too devastated to talk—that what I had would be enough. With my notebook full and my mind already pouring over the possibilities, I went home to begin drafting the service.
Normally, when I write a funeral service, I write it in the standard, eulogy-type theme, speaking jointly to everyone in attendance. But for this one, I thought I would handle it differently. After talking to both the sister-in-laws and his wife, we agreed that it would be nice for me to give the service as if I were only talking to his two children.

On the day of the service, a large photograph of him rested at the front of the room surrounded with a veritable garden of potted plants, wreaths, and vases spilling over with cut flowers. Next to the picture was the urn containing his ashes. The urn they selected—a nearly perfect replica of an old Crosley Cathedral Radio—was so striking it elicited many comments. His name and life dates were elegantly engraved on a brass nameplate, but few realized it was an urn until told so. The table held even more flowers, as well as candles and several items that represented his personality and preferences in life: a football, a classic model car, a guitar, a pack of cigarettes, and some lottery tickets.

After a brief introduction, I asked the wife to accompany her two children to the front, where they could each light a candle using the flame already burning near the photo. They did, returning quickly to their seats. Then, I asked the audiences’ permission to speak only to the children for a moment, though my words continued to ring out for all to hear.

The tone in my voice changed as I looked into their soft, sad faces. Neither cried, though whether it was because they’d already cried themselves out or were still in shock over the experience, I will never know. Looking directly at them, my own eyes moist, I told them how I’d visited their school and seen the memory chain and the wall. I told them I thought that wall must be the strongest ever built, because it was built by love and could never be torn down.

Leaning familiarly on the podium—my body shifted toward them in their seats next to their mother—I told the children a few stories I heard from the different people I’d talked to, both at the school and within their own family. Some of it was sad, as even happy memories can be on such occasions, but it was uplifting too. Quiet laughter skipped around the room as I reminded them of his quirky traits and idiosyncrasies, cresting as I relayed some of what the students had written on the memory wall.
During the family interview, the mother said her daughter had asked how her dad didn’t fall from heaven—you know, since he was “up” there. Her answer, of course, was that he now had angel wings. That’s the story I used before cuing the song, “May The Angels Lead Into Paradise.”

Then, I asked the children if I could once again talk to everyone else in the room. They nodded impishly, and I smiled back. Turning my gaze back to the assembly, I told them that under their chairs were strips of paper and a pen. I invited them to write whatever thoughts or feelings they might have about the deceased on the paper. These we would add to the memory chain from the school.

As I explained the process, a few of the man’s students started pulling their paper chain from a very large plastic bag, stretching it across the front of the room to the astonishment of those present. The chain was so long it draped along the floor as they extended it to its full length. Several students from the crowd rose from their seats, joining their classmates in lifting the chain off the floor and supporting it between them in a show of acute love and respect.

The action was deeply moving, and while Sarah McLaughlin’s song, “Angel,” played, people wrote and cried. I said a few closing words and invited everyone to come forward to add their link to the chain. I’d supplied two staplers for the students at each end of the chain. As the crowd filed past, the chain grew exponentially, requiring more and more hands to fully support its length. The youth in attendance took great pride in holding the chain.

A small reception followed, and the memory chain made its final public appearance. A hush filled the room as the students walked the chain into the room, displaying its full length. Everyone stared in awe as it twisted around the room in a rainbow of color, draped over the arms, necks, and shoulders of his students. A reed-thin girl with short, black hair came to the front of the room and presented the man’s wife and children with the chain, so that the unique spirit of this man would never be forgotten.
Lois Heckman

Life-Cycle Celebrant®
127 Harmony Lane
Saylorsburg, PA. 18353

H: 570-992-5316
C: 570-350-9514
Web: www.LoisHeckman.com
Web: www.celebrantusa.org

Life-Cycle Celebrant®, Lois Heckman has a diverse background in religious philosophy, music, and social justice. She studied religious philosophy at Temple University from 1967-1971. She continued her education studying sociology at Cedar Crest College in the 1990s. In 2004, she graduated from the Celebrant Institute and Foundation in Montclair, NJ. From 1990 to 2006, she worked as an educator and advocate in the battered women/anti-rape movement, teaching and working for social change. She is well-versed in music, singing, and songwriting, and has performed on stages from New York City to Europe. She honors all philosophies, beliefs, and traditions - secular, spiritual, religious, and interfaith. She is able to create meaningful and unique ceremonies, reflecting your values, your style, and your life.

“My work as an advocate taught me to be a better listener, reinforcing my core beliefs in peace and justice. My experience onstage gave me the confidence to perform any ceremony in a meaningful and clear way. Everyone will hear and understand what is being said.”
My Father’s Funeral

One of the biggest motivators propelling me toward my career as a Celebrant was attending a funeral for the mother of my friend. It was terrible. They’d hardly mentioned her at all, except in reference to the nature of the gathering. It made me feel angry. I knew she deserved a more fitting tribute and I felt sad for my friend, sad that she didn’t get to experience something meaningful to honor her mother. I had yet to discover the Celebrant Institute.

Fast forward several years and I am a busy Celebrant, officiating weddings and funerals. Then, the most important challenge I would face was suddenly upon me: to create a memorial service for my own father.

While my dad was in hospice care, we talked a lot. He was happy to know I would officiate his service and one of the most important things he asked of me was not to say things he didn’t believe. No, ‘better place,’ no, ‘with God,’ business. Dad was smart, funny, interesting, argumentative, and a wonderful father. He was also an atheist.

I promised him I wouldn’t allow religious statements he didn’t believe in to find their way into the ceremony, at least not in reference to him. However, my mother is a somewhat devout believer and he understood that.

When the time came, I decided to ask a nice, very reformed Rabbi to participate, and explained the situation. He happily embraced his admittedly limited role. So I created a ceremony with a beautiful eulogy and a very special ritual. For my mom’s sake, the Rabbi would say Kaddish, the Jewish Prayer for the dead, which I did not feel in any way violated my dad’s wishes.

Writing his eulogy—with help and input from my sister and my mom—was a wonderful walk through the story of his life. A guy who grew up during the depression, married before leaving to serve in the Army/Air Force in World War II, returning after the war and raising kids during the 50’s and 60’s; it’s a classic story. He was a progressive thinker and highly political. He had a profound influence on the way my sister and I see the world. Our discussion encompassed his interests, hobbies, and later life. We pored over photos, delighting in determining what small
personal items of his would be used to create an altar space for him. It was intense, but again, it also felt right.

I’m not saying it was easy. It was deeply emotional and incredibly sad. Despite the difficulty of the task, it was a responsibility I definitely wanted. Remembering that terrible service for my friend’s mother fueled my desire to honor my father in a way that was accurate and meaningful. I honestly didn’t trust anyone else with the task.

The highlight of the memorial was our special ritual. I was inspired by Dad’s own personal ritual of an evening glass of Tanqueray with a little bowl of goldfish crackers every day after work. After he retired, this ritual continued at 4 pm each evening.

I bought little plastic shot glasses and cups, filling tray after tray with shots of gin and a side of crackers. The grandchildren took the trays around the room, serving. They loved having a special job! While they served, I played one of his favorite songs—Sinatra singing “Fly Me To The Moon.” Then, we toasted Dad with the words he always used: Salute!

I concluded with what has become one of my favorite funeral readings, this simple poem.

(Author unknown)
The tide recedes, but leaves behind bright seashells on the sand.
The sun goes down, but gentle warmth still lingers on the land.
The music stops, and yet it echoes on in sweet refrains
For every joy that passes, something beautiful remains.

The experience was truly gratifying. It was an honor to do this for my dad and for my mom... and for me. People often ask how I kept it together enough to actually perform my own father’s funeral, but I honestly can’t imagine it any other way.
Pet Memorials—A better way to say goodbye

When my good friend, Amanda’s Shih Tzu, “Baby Girl,” had to be put down, I watched her painful struggle, empathizing with her grief. I’d been through it too, and began to consider how I might help her and her family deal with their loss.

I’m a Celebrant. I perform ceremonies for people who, for whatever reason, may not have a clergy person, or need something else for themselves or their loved one. My goal as a Celebrant is to assist people in celebrating the cornerstone events in their lives in their own way, respecting and reflecting their values and beliefs. I am highly trained in this field, and though I am commonly contacted for weddings, I have officiated many funerals and memorials.

So when Amanda was grieving over Baby Girl, I not only wanted to help, I knew how. Being a dog person myself, I understood the amazing bond we humans have with our canine partners. And, as I said, I’ve also suffered through the loss of a much-loved pet. Twice. Sometimes people disregard such a loss, saying it’s “only” a dog, and that you should get over it quickly. Nothing can be further from the truth.

I offered to perform a memorial for Baby Girl, and asked Amanda to think about it. After a few days, Amanda came back to me with her answer. Yes.

To prepare, we talked about Baby Girl’s life and I asked specific questions that would help me write the service. What did she like to do? What were her favorite toys? Who in the family also had a relationship with her? What about the other dogs in the family? I gathered anecdotes, took notes, and learned all about Baby Girl. After a few days of mulling it all over, I went about the business of creating a ceremony, spending almost as much time on it as the ceremonies for my human clients; I wanted it to be meaningful for Amanda, her family, and whoever else might be grieving over the loss.

We got together on a Sunday afternoon in Amanda’s backyard. Baby Girl’s ashes were lovingly contained in a soft, ceramic urn. A picture of her was engraved on the front, next to a little paw with a pink gemstone in the center. It so reminded me of Baby Girl; I had to smile. We set up a table with the urn at the center, a few photographs and flowers, her favorite toy (a rubber “screwball”), and her collar surrounding it.
I began by welcoming everyone and thanking them for coming—it was my first animal companion ceremony, and wasn’t sure how it would be received. But my concerns were unnecessary. The emotion was clear on the faces of Amanda’s family and friends—some with their dogs in tow—as I talked about Baby Girl and how much she meant to us. I spoke briefly about the appropriateness of this gathering before giving a traditional eulogy.

I recalled Baby Girl’s wonderful life—how she came to be a part of the family, what her favorite activities were. People laughed as I told them how small Baby Girl was when she first came home, and how Amanda placed a little bell on her collar after losing her in the house for an entire day. I told them how she loved seagulls but hated sand, and how she detested dog beds of all kinds, preferring to sleep in Amanda's bed with a pillow all to herself.

There were more than a few tears, and the dogs—a normally rowdy bunch—sat quietly or slept, obviously judging the atmosphere too somber for roughhousing. I had located a short, heartfelt poem about our relationship with dogs, which I asked Amanda’s daughter to read. Then, everyone shared something special about Baby Girl.

Concluding the ceremony, Amanda and her daughter buried the ashes under her favorite shade tree. They each took a few items from the table to place inside the urn. Amanda chose Baby Girl’s collar, while her daughter selected her favorite toy and a small pink ribbon. This would live on the family’s mantel, a permanent tribute to Baby Girl. Amanda and her daughter hugged afterward, smiling and wiping away each other’s tears. The act was enormously healing. Each of the guests placed a few rocks on the spot, making a natural marker.

I closed with a favorite reading of my own, saying goodbye to Baby Girl. Then I rang a small chime eleven times for each of her eleven years of life.

After the ceremony, I felt a wave of exhaustion and relief. It had been more intense than I imagined, and I quickly realized that even I had failed to understand the absolute necessity of saying goodbye to an animal companion in a meaningful way. The gathering moved inside for refreshments and mingling; the tension drifted away like a wisp of cloud on a sunny day. Before the guests dispersed, I handed out donation envelopes for our local rescue organization. This
was something Amanda and I came up with in our discussion as a meaningful way to honor Baby Girl.

Thinking back, all we really did was say aloud what needed to be said. We acknowledged the special relationship we had with a beloved pet instead of pretending the loss didn’t hurt. We put it out there. We spoke of it, felt it, and it helped us move forward.

Pet memorials are now part of the services I offer as a Celebrant. I’ve developed materials, a brochure, and I’m putting the word out in my community. Despite whether you seek professional assistance or choose to handle things yourself, I hope you will consider a memorial when the time comes to honor your pet. They deserve a personal and heartfelt goodbye, and so do we.
Terry Lieberstein

Terry Lieberstein of Lovingstone Productions is a Certified Life-Cycle Celebrant. Terry specializes in customizing your ceremony to YOU. Whether you prefer it traditional, casual, religious (or not), interfaith or alternative spiritual, each and every detail is designed to reflect your beliefs, preferences, and ideas. Nothing happens without your seal of approval. Celebrate the milestones and loved ones in your life with a unique and personalized ceremony crafted with warmth and caring.

Terry received a BA in Theater Arts from UCSD, became a Science of Mind Practitioner in North Hollywood, CA, and graduated from the Grief Recovery Institute in Sherman Oaks, CA. Terry’s Celebrancy training was received from the Celebrant USA Foundation and Institute in Montclair, NJ.
Selecting Readings for Memorial Services

Every service has a different tone which is reflective of the individual moving on. Meaningful memorials blossom from the fabric of details woven into the ceremony itself. Choosing an accurate combination of readings and music with the balance of words and silences is essential to creating this atmosphere.

When writing a service, I always ask the family if they have any special readings they’d like to include, making suggestions of my own based on what I learn from our discussions. A reading is any piece of written text—a poem, song lyrics, a bible verse, a snippet from a play, and so forth. The following is a reading that can be used for a retired pilot.

**High Flight**
John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew —
And while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high, unsurpassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.
When a suitable reading isn’t obvious, I will often create something original. One such instance was with Jack, a humble but happy shoe salesman. Jack had a garage full of shoe samples, and delighted in giving them away. He was always asking friends and strangers—who soon became friends—what size shoe they wore. He would query his son as to his friends’ shoe sizes so that he could furnish them with new samples. When the family went out to dinner, Jack would invariably ask the server to sit next to him so he could guess their shoe size. He would always ask, and he was always right!

SHOES
Written by Terry Lieberstein in memory of Jack Smith

New shoes, squeaky and tight, straight from the box
Walking unsteady steps while learning early lessons
   Making a unique pattern
   Moving through space and time

The treading becomes more confident
Choosing this road or that, this path or another
   Wearing their way into easy comfort
   Resulting from wisdom gained

Broken-in thoroughly, the creases showing,
Facing challenges with heart and courage
   Walking many extra miles
   To bring comfort to someone in need

Finally, fully worn, ties unbinding, soles scuffed
   Showing the wear of many years
   Always loving, always caring
   Leaving an imprint always upon our hearts
The following is a reading for someone I knew personally. Drawing on that knowledge, I wrote a poem to capture her strength and courage.

Anna

Anna Goldman was born in Munich, Germany during 1925, a perilous time and place for a Jewish family. I first met Anna at the retirement community where she lived, and listened, enraptured, as she surrendered the story of her early life experiences to me. Despite the unyielding danger of her life, her memories were heavily laden with the cherished love of family: her parents; older sister, Sharon; and her brother, Adam, with whom she had a very strong relationship.

Anna relayed her powerful desire to leave Munich during the war, and her desperate struggle to convince her family to leave with her. But—things being what they were—they were unable to emigrate. It was easier for children to escape the coming storm, and at just 13 years old, Anna made the courageous choice to leave behind everything and everyone she knew and loved. Alone, she boarded a transport leaving Germany.

Impressions

Written by Terry Lieberstein in memory of Anna Goldman

Standing firm with spine of steel,
Independent soul so strong.
Stories of the past reveal
Struggles lived so hard, so long.

Withstanding all immoral pain,
Lessons learned yet to impart.
Words of wisdom still remain
Though the living soul depart.
Thoughts of those together times,
Laughter, sadness, joy and tears.
Family within entwines
Cherished still throughout the years.

Imparting courage to us all,
Legacy of strength remains.
Hope and vision when we fall,
Your memory fore’er sustains.

The final example I’d like to share is the Celebration of Life held for my father. He passed on April 2, 2011, and would have despised anything gloomy or maudlin. Therefore, we told old stories and sang his favorite songs. We told jokes and shared tongue twisters that Pop had loved. It was the perfect way to honor him, to express my joy at being his daughter. Below are a few of the jokes we shared. As with any appropriate reading, they represented him well. These we had printed on several different types of memorial cards, each with a different joke and picture of Dad. We placed them on tables around the room and offered them to the attendees.

**Opening Joke: (Dad would have loved this)**

A new business was opening and one of the owner's friends wanted to send him flowers for the occasion. The flowers arrived at the new business site and the owner read the card:

"Rest in Peace,” he read. Annoyed, he called to complain.

"Sir, I'm really sorry for the mistake, and sorry you were offended," said the florist. "But what’s even worse is that somewhere there is a funeral taking place today, and they have flowers with a note saying, ‘Congratulations on your new location.’”
The Pun-ster

There was a man who entered a local newspaper's pun contest. He sent in ten different puns in the hope that at least one of the puns would win. Unfortunately, no pun in ten did.

Undecided Love

A young man was in love with two women and could not decide which of them to marry. Finally, he went to a marriage counselor. When asked to describe his two loves, he noted that one was a great poet and the other made delicious pancakes.

"Oh" said the counselor, "I see what the problem is. You can't decide whether to marry for batter or verse."

Tongue Twister: Betty Botter

Betty Botter bought some butter but said the butter's bitter.

If I put it in my batter, will it make my batter bitter?

But a bit of better butter will make my batter better.

So she bought some better butter, better than the bitter butter,

And she put it in her batter and her batter was not bitter.

So 'twas better Betty Botter bought a bit of better butter.

Closing Joke

Susie and Hank had been married for 56 years. Hank became ill, and things weren't looking too good, but she was by his bedside every single day. One day, when he had more energy and was able to talk, Hank motioned for Susie to come closer. She pulled the chair closer to the bed and leaned in so she could hear him.

“You know”, he whispered, “you have been with me through all of the good times, but you’ve also been with me through the bad. When I was fired, you stuck right beside me. When we went backpacking together, and I broke my leg, you were there. When the tornado hit our house and we had to start over and rebuild, you stayed through it all. And when my health started failing, you were still by my side. And you know what?”

“What, dear?” she said, smiling gently to herself.
“I think you’re bad luck.”

***

No memorial service is the same, because no person is ever the same. But all memorial services have one thing in common: they bring people together to share memories and feelings about their loved one. By carefully selecting or creating the perfect readings, you honor them and create lasting memories of the celebration of their life.
Kateyanne Unullisi

Life-Cycle Celebrant®
The Emerge Foundation
Serving Seattle, WA State and
the Pacific Northwest

Ph: 425-753-5016
Web: www.TheEmergeFoundation.com
Email: Kateyanne@TheEmergeFoundation.com

Kateyanne Unullisi is a trained Life-Cycle Celebrant and owner of the Emerge Foundation, an organization that helps to empower people at the end of life times. She works with clients to create unique funerals, memorials and celebration of life both locally and remotely. She also works as a home funeral consultant, helping to support family-directed funerals for those who want to keep a loved one at home after death for the privacy and empowerment that can bring.

Kateyanne received her funeral celebrant certification from the Celebrant Foundation and Institute in 2011 and serves as the Washington State Chapter co-facilitator.
The Why and How of Working with a Funeral Celebrant

Funeral ceremonies are not for the dead, though they are about them. A funeral, memorial, celebration of life – whatever you may call it – are for the ones who go on living. They are for the mourners.

The dead should not be in charge of their own funerals, especially if it is to say “please don’t do anything at all. Just have me quietly cremated or buried, and call it done.”

These are people who don’t like to make a fuss, are frugal, and think that they are being practical. And maybe they haven’t ever been to a funeral that really helped turn things around or seemed helpful.

Many mourners around the world are part of a growing movement who are asking, “Why bother?” They may think they are honoring their loved ones’ wishes ‘not to bother’; but mostly, I think, they are saying no to inauthentic funeral ceremonies.

Not all people are avoiding ceremony, certainly; many are still well-served by their religious communities. But for others, it’s just not working. So the numbers are dropping: too much bother, travel, time and expense - for too little return. Many secular and ‘spiritual but not religious’ people wonder how to have sanctified ceremony that fits their situation.

They are saying no to ceremonies where sad people leave feeling sadder, diminished and frustrated. “That wasn’t my mother he was talking about up there,” they say. And they go home (often after making a great effort to be there) feeling disconnected and worse than when they arrived.

And I think they are right to reject an old form that isn’t working. They don’t want cookie-cutter remembrances that are plugged into a one size fits all template. They want it just right, in their words and belief system, special and unique for their particular situation.

They want to choose what feels right for them.
**Why Good Ceremony Matters**

I hope that people will reconsider having an end-of-life ceremony, and not throw the baby out with the bathwater. A good ceremony will tell the real story of their loved one’s life in words that speak to the living, authentically. One where every person there leaves feeling they know the dead one better than ever, and understand one another better, too.

Ceremony matters because a profound loss has happened to a group of people. The fabric of the group is torn, and it is important that the group come together to acknowledge that and to begin to mend it. They need consolation, reassurance and courage, which they find from one another. Good ceremony creates the place for this to happen.

It matters because someone we love has died, and taken her particular, one and only specialness with her. How will we go on without her gifts? We need to acknowledge that life, and those gifts – to honor and acknowledge together, and to know, deep down, that when we go, we too will be missed, honored and remembered.

A good funeral has not only the power to console and to comfort the living, it also has the power to heal and sustain the mourning community as it asks itself, ‘who are we now without him or her?’

Good ceremony has the power to turn dark into light, for all the people there, all at the same time. What happens in this kind of ceremony are shifts and connections that are lasting, and a reassurance that life goes on for each and all, connected and held by their community.

It matters because we are lacking in ways to remain connected to our family and community, and a funeral ceremony is one important place to do that. Our hearts are open, we are more apt to feel forgiveness and love, and we are vulnerable. When we come together at a time like that – again, in good ceremony – connection and healing are more possible than usual.
**Why Work with a Funeral Celebrant?**

Having a ceremony is the first and most important step. It doesn’t have to be immediate – you can plan a memorial celebration of life at a time when many people can be there.

One of the first things you should do is talk with a funeral celebrant. Most of them offer a complimentary conversation, and this could be all you need to begin to think about what is right for your situation. The celebrant doesn’t even need to be in your area initially, as he or she will be glad to help you find someone who fits for you in your location. But reach out, and the sooner the better.

Some funeral directors have contacts or may even be trained as celebrants themselves; however, a funeral director’s job is quite different from a ceremonialist, so if you are looking for something unique, you should consider speaking to a funeral celebrant.

The funeral celebrant will listen to your story and ascertain the special needs and wishes of your situation. All kinds of things come into her mind as she considers the differing beliefs, possible venues, and themes, such as:

1. An elderly mother died suddenly. Two grown daughters and grandchildren lived across the country. The mother had been an integral part of the little town as a business owner, local actress, and non-practicing Quaker. I worked with the daughters to plan a celebration of life in the town, with her friends and community who needed to say goodbye. A few months prior to the ceremony, when they came to clear out her apartment, we created a smaller ceremony for her closest friends. They gathered with the daughters for a private remembrance, and then items from that little service were used in the larger ceremony a few months later. This also helped the daughters feel nurtured by their ‘other mothers’ during a sad time.

2. A Native American man, married to a non-native, practicing Catholic woman, died. He was beloved in his community which was neither indigenous nor religious; however, many diverse parts of their families, none of whom understood one another or got along, would be there. There was a lot of pressure to compartmentalize and only focus on one set of beliefs, but in the end we found a way to make room for all to come
together in love and respect for him. This gathering was held outside, in a circle.

3. A young man in his early 20’s died in a motorcycle accident. His large group of friends and family were unsure of how to remember him in a way that suited all of them, as no one was religious or went to church. He was an animal lover and was close to his big black Lab. We held a fundraiser in a local dog park (attended by hundreds of people and dozens of dogs). It began with an hour long celebration of life and public remembrance. Later there was music and dancing. His community wants to hold an annual fundraiser for an animal rescue organization, in his name.

A skilled celebrant can be trained, a clergy member, or even a friend who can work with the group to create an authentic ceremony with elements that fit your situation. Sometimes people who are close to the deceased want to construct and run the ceremony themselves. They should co-create it and participate a lot, but it’s important that the ceremony is facilitated by someone who can give all of their attention to timing, comfort, flow and participation. I recommend that mourners do the work of mourning, of writing the eulogy, and reading poems or speaking, but that it is a teacher or public speaker who is not actively grieving who deliver the event, if you are not working with a trained celebrant.

A funeral celebrant will help you sort through all the options and create an event that is authentic. She will help you ‘break the rules’ if that applies, in ways that really fit with your situation. She will help you to co-create a ceremony that is honoring, interesting, and real.

When people leave that kind of ceremony, they say, “Wow. I didn’t know a funeral could be like that.” I hear it all the time – and see it in the openness, the sharing and the sense of connection among the people there and afterwards.

**How to Work with a Funeral Celebrant**

1. Speak with a trained funeral celebrant as soon as possible. Remember that usually there is no charge for this initial conversation.
2. As much as possible, co-create the ceremony. Don’t let the celebrant work alone, and do follow her good guidance. Stay in close communication.
3. Find the theme, the soul story of the dead one, and help to create the ceremony around it.
4. Have the venue fit the theme. It could be in a museum or school, outside in a forest or park or on the water. It could be held in a home or backyard, or at a local funeral home – as long as it is a place that fits for you.

5. Have something that represents the deceased at the ceremony: a table with her special items on it, photographs, a coffin or urn, a large photograph.

6. Try to have many different voices during the ceremony. If there is a religious person in your group, invite them to read a prayer. Have a child read a poem or letter. The celebrant will be right there to help and support, but the group will want to hear from one another, not just from her.

7. Think about holding a pre-ceremony right before the start of the bigger event. I ask for those who helped prepare the ceremony and those closest to the deceased to meet with me quietly for five minutes to center, ground, and become mindful.

8. Break the rules. Work with the celebrant to explore music, animals, children, theatrical elements. Waltz around the urn. Have a bonfire. Howl like wolves. Sit in silence and meditation.

9. See if you can find a way that mourners can keep the deceased’s memory alive in a meaningful way. You could hold an annual fundraiser for her favorite charity, gather to weed an elderly person’s garden, or plant a tree in her honor.

10. And make sure that after the ceremony, there is time for everyone to gather together to eat, talk and share afterwards. This is when the community begins to assimilate together again, to renew their connection to life and to one another.

How to Find a Funeral Celebrant

The most important thing is to find someone who fits for you, your style, beliefs, and needs.

This publication lists some of the finest funeral celebrants in the United States. Any of them would be able to refer you to a skilled funeral celebrant in your area.

As more funeral directors understand how serious the trends are becoming for people to choose what they want, they are beginning to help connect their clients with funeral celebrants.
The Celebrant Foundation has trained hundreds of certified Life-Cycle Celebrants. In-Sight Books has trained celebrants listed from eight countries, including New Zealand and Australia. For funeral celebrants in the UK, you could start with this search. All of these organizations will help you find someone to work with pieces or with the full ceremony.