



IT'S YOUR FUNERAL

AND YOU CAN DIE IF YOU WANT TO

Funerals haven't always been the cookie-cutter events they often are today. Since everyone who has ever lived has also died, each generation and civilization has put their own stamp on the proceedings. Funerals have gone through fads and fashions, just like all human milestones.

To past generations, many things we now do routinely at funerals would seem offensive, dangerous, uncaring, overly dramatic, or not dramatic enough. But even today, different religions, cultures, and individuals have wildly different ideas about the correct way to lay someone to rest. That's why planning your funeral is so important—because death and mourning are deeply personal, and what seems logical and meaningful even to those closest to you might in no way correspond to your expectations. You can't please everyone, so just worry about pleasing the most important person at the funeral: you.

The point is, there's no right way to have a funeral. When it comes to all the planning considerations in this chapter—from the venue, dress code, and decorations to the readings, music, and interment style—follow your bliss, even if your bliss is unconventional. You won't be around to see your stuffy cousins rolling their eyes, so what's stopping you?

FUNERALS FOR THE LIVING

Death does not always come suddenly. Many of us see it approaching like a freight train, albeit one that's going to hit us in months or years. If you are diagnosed with a terminal disease, or have hit your ninth or tenth decade, you may want to consider having your funeral *before* you die.* It may sound counterintuitive, but living funerals are becoming more common. And people who have attended one almost unanimously say they are beautiful, moving events.

Consider that you're putting all this time (and money) into an event celebrating you, and then you won't even be there to experience it (on a mental and emotional level; physically, you'll probably be there). If you know the end is coming, with a more concrete timeline than the vague "the end is coming" we all face, why not schedule your funeral just a bit earlier so that when people say nice things about you, you can enjoy it?

It should be noted that living funerals are events where *everyone* knows that the person is alive and present. We are not talking about the soap opera cliché of faking your death and then attending your funeral to hear what everyone says about you and finally prove that your nemesis has been having an affair with your spouse (see "My Guest List and Pest List," page 112). Although that too is an option, and it sounds awesome.

* Technically, there's no reason you can't throw yourself a living funeral even if you are young and healthy. It's not common, but fewer Millennials and Gen Zers are getting married, so there's definitely an opening for a new kind of celebration in your twenties or thirties!

BUDDHISM

In keeping with the widespread perception that Buddhists are totally chill, there are no official Buddhist funeral guidelines. A Buddhist monk may lead the funeral, which can take place anywhere but is usually at a funeral home or Buddhist temple. There is often an altar with a large portrait of the deceased, candles, an image of Buddha, and offerings of flowers and fruit. Mourners may wear black or white, but not red, which is the color of celebration in many parts of Asia. Although most Buddhists are cremated, other choices of body disposal are fine as well. Whatever it is, it usually happens directly after the funeral service.

WICCA

The first part of a Wiccan funeral involves laying the body on an altar. A priestess prepares the space and recites a ritual chant, which may be Celtic, pagan, or Wiccan. The priest and priestess will perform another recitation before mourners come forward to speak to the deceased and help them on their journey to the Summerland, the Wiccan afterlife, often described as an idyllic meadow. Then follows the burial of the body (or sometimes cremains). Because of Wiccan beliefs about respecting the earth and its life cycles, these funerals tend to be environmentally friendly, and natural burial is considered ideal. Wiccan funerals are often held outdoors in beautiful natural settings.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Some adherents of this faith, which is practiced mainly in India, dispose of their dead in purpose-built circular stone structures called *dakhmas*, or towers of silence. It is believed that dead bodies are unclean and that cremation or burial can pollute the elements of earth and fire, which are held sacred. The flat roof of the dakhma has three concentric circles, one each for men, women, and children. Bodies are fed on by carrion birds and exposed to the elements, and after about a year, the dried bones are dropped into the pit in the center of the tower, where lime assists with their disintegration. Towers of silence are becoming less common, in part due to dwindling numbers of vultures in India, and in part because residents who live in the high-rises overlooking them complain about the view of decomposing bodies.

SECULARISM/NO RELIGION

The number of people who follow no faith may be increasing rapidly, but mourners are still mourners, and rituals around death are still comforting to some. Secular, atheist, and humanist funerals have complete flexibility but often borrow from religious tradition, with their own spin. For example, instead of prayers, there might be speeches about the deceased; instead of scripture, there might be a reading from a book the deceased loved; instead of hymns, there may be secular songs. Secular funerals often put the focus on celebrating the person's life rather than mourning their death, and there are no constraints surrounding what happens to the body or when.



FUNERAL CRASHERS

No, this is not just a joke in the 2005 film *Wedding Crashers*. There are people who really do show up at funerals for those they don't know, eat the food, chat with the mourners, and (probably) take a selfie with the corpse. Their reasons remain unclear, but you may want to plan for them. Once word gets out that you have planned yourself an amazing funeral, the metaphorical vultures will descend.*

In 2008, the English writer and broadcaster Victoria Coren was organizing her father's memorial service when she received an email warning her about the Jolley Gang. Led by ringleader Terence Jolley, this group apparently devoted their morbid social lives to gaining admittance to strangers' funeral and memorial services. Coren discovered that members of the group had indeed contacted her, claiming they knew her father and wanted invites. She confirmed her suspicions by placing an announcement in the paper for a memorial for the fictitious "Sir William Ormerod." Within hours, she had emails from all the same individuals, claiming they'd known and cherished dear Sir William and that they would love to attend.

In the end, Coren decided it was more trouble than it was worth to keep the Jolley Gang from attending her father's memorial ceremony. And attend they did. One forgot the fake name she'd given and had to be reminded of it by an usher. Mostly they were quiet, but they noshed plenty of food.

So, be warned. Word of your meticulously planned funeral will surely get out. Either tell your family it's a "the more the merrier" event, or budget for security.

* If literal vultures descend, you may be having a Zoroastrian burial (see "Zoroastrianism," page 75).

Choosing the Perfect Venue

When most people think of a funeral venue, they picture a house of worship or a VFW hall or a funeral home. While these locations may seem boring, that might actually be a positive for the still-alive people who will be attending. Since death is so jarring and scary, presenting mourners with an experience they expect can help calm them. Sure, you can request that your funeral be held at your favorite strip club, hot-yoga studio, or mountaintop, but it would also be nice to consider a location that won't give some attendees a heart attack.

With that in mind, here are some of the most common places to hold funerals, memorials, receptions, and other end-of-life celebrations.

- **HOUSE OF WORSHIP** (*even if you're not religious, some faith groups, like Unitarian Universalists, will host secular funerals*)
- **FUNERAL HOME OR CREMATORY**
- **COMMUNITY CENTER**
- **PUBLIC PARK OR BEACH**
- **YOUR HOME** (*or the home of a family member*)
- **BANQUET HALL**
- **HOTEL EVENT ROOM**
- **WEDDING VENUE** (*during the off-season you can get good rates!*)
- **A PLACE THAT WAS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO YOU IN LIFE** (*but maybe think long and hard if that place is a strip club*)

As with any event, you need to double-check that the location can accommodate the number of mourners you expect, that there's enough parking, and that you have the budget for it. If you're being buried in a coffin, make sure the venue has accessible routes to get it in and out, because while that could make for a fabulous mishap in a sitcom, your family probably just wants this event to go smoothly. If your burial or interment must occur shortly before or after the funeral service,

you'll need to choose a location close to your final resting place. If you select somewhere more public, consider that passersby will ogle the funeral, since that's human nature. If you want your mourners to have more privacy in one of these spaces, see about setting up screens or tents.

Even if a venue seems open for everyone's use (like a park, for example), always check to make sure you're allowed to host a funeral there. One, so that your send-off won't run into scheduling conflicts, but more important, so that your loved ones won't find themselves getting kicked out because there's a dead body and they don't have the right permissions or permits. Even venues that seem perfect for a funeral might actually be squeamish about anything connected with death and not want to host one. (People are weird that way. They need to read this book, basically.)

There's also a big difference between the places you can host a funeral where there's going to be a corpse or cremains and the places you can hold a service with no body present. If you're planning a memorial or reception where *everyone* attending will be alive, your options expand to anywhere you could hold any other function: restaurants, historic buildings, private clubs, and so on.

FUNERAL VENUES WITH A BIT MORE "LIFE"

Maybe you're not looking for normal. Sure, an unconventional venue might shock your mourners, but they can deal with it. It's your funeral, after all, and you won't be around for the fallout, so it's really about what makes *you* comfortable. Here are some unusual funeral venue options.

- MOVIE THEATER
- BOWLING ALLEY
- BREWERY, PUB, OR WINERY
- CRUISE SHIP
- MUSEUM
- ZOO
- GOLF COURSE

Assigning Funeral Roles

Enlisting your friends and family to participate in your funeral service is a great way to make your big day more personal and give your loved ones some agency over the event. Ultimately, that may help them feel useful and maybe even pleasantly distracted from the gaping chasm that your loss leaves in their lives.

If you have tons of folks you'd like to include in the service, that's great—there are plenty of jobs to go around. Some traditional funeral roles include eulogist, musician, singer, reader, obituary writer, and usher. But it's *your* big day—dream up as many jobs as you desire. If you want to have a flower girl lead your coffin down the aisle prior to your eternal union with death, I'm not going to stop you.

Two roles require serious consideration: the officiant and the pallbearers. The officiant is one of the biggest jobs there is, so be sure whomever you pick is up for it.* The person will need to remain emotionally stable throughout the event, and they should probably have an organizational mind as well as a talent for public speaking. (This is a difficult trifecta to find, so be on the lookout for new people to befriend who could nail this role when the time comes.) Don't give the role to someone who might be overwhelmed by the responsibility. It's kinder to them, plus you are trying to pull off the perfect funeral here, and your officiant having a breakdown five minutes in will make it that much more difficult.

If you're going out in a coffin, you're going to need pallbearers. Consider people who are strong and of similar height. They will need to be able to carry your coffin on their shoulders or at their waist, depending on your preference. You'll need six to eight pallbearers, depending on how heavy your coffin is. You can also select additional individuals to serve as honorary pallbearers who will follow the coffin but don't need to do the heavy lifting. (If you're being cremated, you can create a similar role for a person who carries the urn.)

There's no one right way to pick pallbearers; some cultures prefer they be non-relatives, whereas others choose from the individuals closest to the deceased, especially family. Members of fraternities or societies like the Masons often select other

* If you have your funeral in a house of worship, you may not have much choice. It may be expected that the resident head holy person will officiate. At least you'll know they won't get stage fright.

members for the job. Buddhist tradition expects pallbearers to eat a vegetarian diet and avoid alcohol for forty-nine days following the person's death.

Alternately, you can hire people to do the job, which isn't a bad idea if you want to be sure to avoid mishaps. In Ghana, a group of professional pallbearers has become famous for adding choreography to their coffin-carrying duties. (Though it's an impressive sight and something you could definitely consider for your own funeral, know that one of the most famous videos of the Dancing Pallbearers is of them dropping the coffin mid-act.) But even if dancing is too risky for your taste, perhaps there are other things your pallbearers could do to make your funeral more meaningful, such as wearing coordinated outfits or singing as they carry your coffin.



Funeral Themes

The theme for most funerals is basically just “grief.” And for good reason, since everyone attending is usually pretty darn sad. But that’s no fun! Some funerals are billed as celebrations of life—for which guests are told not to wear black, for example—but that’s not much of a theme either. We select themes for birthdays and weddings, so why not funerals as well?

This isn’t a new idea. In 1875, the *Albany Register* reported on the odd will of a man in the Netherlands who was known as the “king of smokers” among his friends. The article claims he told his lawyer to invite all the smokers in the country to his funeral, where they would be gifted ten pounds of tobacco and specially carved commemorative pipes. Everyone was to smoke throughout the service and then dump the ash on the coffin. Given the time period, you have to question the story, but it’s a great idea for your own funeral if you also, as the headline put it, “smoked 10 tons of tobacco and died.”

If you insist on a more recent example with video evidence, Dallas’s Golden Gate Funeral Home laid a Texas man to rest with a Christmas-themed funeral in 2012. It was broadcast on the very short-lived TLC reality show *Best Funeral Ever* (which will obviously need to be rebooted to show off the event you’re planning).



Other themed funerals they showcased revolved around bowling, breakfast, the Olympics, candy, Hollywood, horror (which you have to admit is on point), game shows, the Wild West, boxing, Hawaii, and country music. There was even a wedding-themed funeral.

Maybe you're obsessed with some aspect of pop culture, like Harry Potter or Pokémon or K-pop. You could theme your send-off around dogs or cats, a band, a type of booze, your career; anything that feels special and personal is fair game.

The theme might be expressed as simply as your choice of funeral music or a dress code for guests. And what about you? Could you be dressed as James Bond in your coffin, martini glass and all? Even your coffin or urn can be part of the theme. (You'd be hard pressed to come up with a theme for which the perfect urn isn't readily available. For example, a Google search for "Star Trek urns" yields two million results and counting.) But you can go so much further. Ask your loved ones to decorate with themed balloons, bunting, or posters, serve themed food, give out themed gift bags—the opportunities are endless.

It might seem silly, but a theme is a great way to make the commemoration of your death more representative of who you were in life. It can also give the event a less formal, rigidly sad air. With the right theme, your send-off can be something your mourners will remember and talk about fondly for the rest of their lives.



Fashioning Your Funeral

Your funeral is, above all, an event. It's the perfect event, really, because you can organize everything exactly how you want and never get stressed out on the day of. It's a party planner's dream (minus the fact that you won't be paid). Death offers few silver linings, so take advantage of them when you can.

Think of your funeral as an extravaganza where you are not just the party planner and star, but the stylist, decorator, and DJ. The entire occasion revolves around you, not just in the literal sense of your corpse/ashes/fireworks display, but also, more important, figuratively. At the center is the *essence* of you. Who you were, how you want to be remembered, and the manner in which you want people to celebrate and/or grieve are expressed by the choices you make. Here are some elements to consider:

FLOWERS

It's always nice to ask mourners to donate to charity rather than send flowers for your funeral. It helps the needy, it makes you look like a wonderful person one last time, and it means that you control the selection of flowers. There's a "language" of flowers, one almost everyone is unaware of today but that was common knowledge for centuries. Consider the message you can secretly send with some of your funereal floral choices, according to the Flower Expert:

- **YELLOW CARNATION:** *Disdain or disappointment. You are, of course, disappointed you are dead.*
- **YELLOW HYACINTH:** *Jealousy. You are jealous of all the people who are still alive.*
- **PURPLE HYACINTH:** *Sorrow. Everyone better be experiencing this feeling at your funeral.*
- **DEEP DARK ROSE:** *Mourning. For the void you've left behind.*
- **A SINGLE DAFFODIL:** *Misfortune. Everyone at your funeral will also die one day, so don't get too comfortable, jerks!*

DRESS CODE

Should attendees wear black or colors?

Black can be cliché, but it can also send a statement. You are gone; therefore, so is all color and light from the world. Black is slimming, so mourners will look good in pictures, thus making them more likely to post on Instagram. The palette might be muted, but everyone will match. It's hard to screw up all black. On the other hand, colors add to a party vibe. After all, Día de los Muertos would have an entirely different feel without the bright palette.

Should attendees dress comfortably or to the nines?

There are not often events where dressing up in fabulous formalwear is acceptable, so asking your guests to go all out marks your funeral as particularly important. But don't be afraid to set a casual dress code. The more casual the better. By asking your mourners to wear sweatpants, you are saying to them, "I am beyond pain now, as are you in that cotton fleece. Also, you're probably so sad I'm dead that you can't even pull yourself together enough to put on a belt. I get it. I truly was that awesome." Plus, a casual dress code could guarantee you are the best dressed person there, even if you do need assistance putting your outfit on.

FOOD

Mourning is hungry work. In most cultures, there's an expectation that the people who show up to remember you will at least get some good grub in return. Here are traditional funeral foods from various countries and religions:

- **INDIA:** *fruit and samosas*
- **MORMONISM:** *funeral potatoes, a cheesy hash brown casserole*
- **JUDAISM:** *hard-boiled eggs or hamine eggs, which are cooked for up to 18 hours*
- **SOUTH KOREA:** *yukgaejang, a spicy beef soup*
- **IRELAND:** *wake cakes, made with cream cheese and fruit*

But there's no need to confine yourself to tradition. Your funeral food can express a theme, represent your favorite dishes, or be catered by your favorite restaurant.

ACTIVITIES

There are plenty of ways to get your mourners involved in your funeral beyond just sitting there and crying. Some meaningful activities include:

- Invite guests to **SIGN YOUR CASKET**, like the ultimate senior yearbook.
- If you're being buried, guests can **BRING THEIR OWN SHOVELS** and each drop a shovelful of dirt into your grave.
- Have guests **DECORATE YOUR CASKET**, like one would a car after a wedding, but with 100% fewer condom balloons.
- **GIVE A SMALL FAVOR** to each guest, like a copy of your favorite book or a packet of seeds to plant. They'll be reminded of you every time they look at the favor.
- Guests can **PLACE AN OBJECT** that reflects their relationship with you in the coffin, urn, or grave.
- Since everyone will be flooded with memories, it's the perfect time to set up a **MEMORY BOARD** for mourners to fill with their happy recollections of you, like photos, notes, or ticket stubs from concerts you went to together.

"You can't choreograph death, but you
can choreograph your funeral."

—MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, PERFORMANCE ARTIST



The Eulogy

The eulogy is a speech meant to revere and honor the deceased. Since that's you, in this case, the eulogy is obviously all-important. Assume that all those funeral crashers who will show up because they hear your funeral is going to be the event of a lifetime won't know you well (see "Funeral Crashers," page 77); the eulogy is their chance to understand who you were. They might be so touched they start crying, in which case your family could save some cash by sending the paid mourners home early (see "Rent-a-Mourner," page 106). For those who *do* know you, the eulogy can help put into words the complicated emotions they are feeling. Hearing someone else describe how special you were and verbalize their grief can assist others with the mourning process.

The eulogy does not have to be—and in many cases isn't—given by a close family member. The funeral might be too painful for your nearest and dearest, and getting up and talking about you could cause them to break down. What good is a speech full of anecdotes about how amazing you were if no one can understand it because of all the wailing? For that reason, a friend or officiant is a perfectly acceptable choice to give your eulogy.

Although there is no official structure for a eulogy, you might want to let your chosen eulogist know that it's best to keep anecdotes in chronological order, stay respectful (but funny is fine!), and be sure not to rush. If the person needs help organizing their many endearing thoughts about your beautiful existence, share this basic outline.

1. Opening remarks ("Hi, I'm so-and-so. This is the deceased. Hi, deceased. Sorry you're dead," etc.)
2. Thank everyone for coming, especially if they traveled a long way.
3. If you choose a friend or distant relative to give your eulogy, they should offer condolences to those who were closer to you (your spouse, family, etc.). This is a good place to mention the special relationships you had with them.
4. The main bit: Talk about the deceased (you) and just spread on the praise and compliments so very thick.

5. Some personal anecdotes about you. They might want to highlight your personality, strength of character, and important values or political leanings.
6. If you're religious, they should mention how good you were at being religious, whether it's true or not.
7. Wrap it up with some comforting words. Thank everyone again. Drop the mic. Get out of there.

Important note for Catholics, Episcopalians, and Anglicans: eulogies are technically verboten at funerals. The idea is that the church service is the most important thing, and a eulogy would distract from it. These rules apply only to the service, so if you want to remain a good Christian but also want a glowing eulogy, plan to have the speech given at the graveside or scattering ceremony or reception.

“A funeral eulogy is a belated plea for the
defense delivered after the evidence is all in.”

—IRVIN S. COBB, U.S. JOURNALIST AND HUMORIST



EULOGIZE (BUT DON'T PLAGIARIZE)

If your chosen eulogist needs inspiration to craft their speech, there's plenty of material out there to draw from. (We're talking structure and themes here, not straight-up plagiarism. Your mourners will probably give the claims in your eulogy the benefit of the doubt, but they definitely won't believe you were the first person to scale Mount Everest.) Following are excerpts from some of the best eulogies of all time. Why can't yours be one of them?

ROSA PARKS's eulogy by Oprah Winfrey was a powerful tribute from one incredible Black woman who helped change the world to another.

After our first meeting I realized that God uses good people to do great things. And I'm here today to say a final thank-you, Sister Rosa, for being a great woman who used your life to serve, to serve us all. That day that you refused to give up your seat on the bus, you, Sister Rosa, changed the trajectory of my life and the lives of so many other people in the world. I would not be standing here today nor standing where I stand every day had she not chosen to sit down.

GRAHAM CHAPMAN's eulogy by John Cleese is exactly as side-splitting as you would expect for a eulogy from one Monty Python member to another.

Graham Chapman, co-author of the "Parrot Sketch," is no more. He has ceased to be, bereft of life, he rests in peace, he has kicked the bucket, hopped the twig, bit the dust, snuffed it, breathed his last, and gone to meet the Great Head of Light Entertainment in the sky, and I guess that we're all thinking how sad it is that a man of such talent, such capability and kindness, of such intelligence should now be so suddenly spirited away at the age of only forty-eight, before he'd achieved many of the things of which he was capable, and before he'd had enough fun.

Well, I feel that I should say, "Nonsense. Good riddance to him, the freeloading bastard! I hope he fries."

CRAIG SAGER was a famous sports reporter. When he died in 2016, his daughter wasn't afraid to tell it like it is in her hilarious (yet touching) eulogy.

Over the past couple years, and especially in the last few days, I've been overwhelmed by all the lovely things that everyone has had to say about my father. And I just keep thinking to myself, "Have any of these people ever even met him?"

I heard that he lived his life with grace. Grace? Really? We are talking about a man who hopped a fence while streaking at the Kentucky Derby and tore open his... whatever the church-appropriate euphemism for balls is. Hardly graceful.

STEVE JOBS's eulogy by his sister Mona Simpson reminds us that no matter how much we accomplish, there's always unfinished business we'll leave behind.

None of us knows for certain how long we'll be here. On Steve's better days, even in the last year, he embarked upon projects and elicited promises from his friends at Apple to finish them. Some boat builders in the Netherlands have a gorgeous stainless-steel hull ready to be covered with the finishing wood. His three daughters remain unmarried, his two youngest still girls, and he'd wanted to walk them down the aisle as he'd walked me the day of my wedding.

We all—in the end—die in medias res. In the middle of a story. Of many stories.

I suppose it's not quite accurate to call the death of someone who lived with cancer for years unexpected, but Steve's death was unexpected for us.

What I learned from my brother's death was that character is essential: what he was, was how he died.

"If you carefully consider what you want to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success."

**—STEPHEN COVEY, AUTHOR OF
THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE**

My EULOGY

The best parts of every eulogy are the stories about the deceased. In a lot of ways, a eulogy is like a best man's speech, but hopefully with fewer sex jokes.

Don't count on hope, though. What are the anecdotes from your life that you'd like to be included in your eulogy? They can be big triumphs or small, personal moments. Think of what really captures the essence of you. What are the key things you want people to know about you after you're gone? Use the space below to describe the top three anecdotes, messages, or accomplishments you'd like to be relayed in your eulogy.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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