



WHAT FUNERAL DIRECTORS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE HUMANIST FUNERAL AND OTHER FUNERAL RITES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

AS the world continues to shrink and this society continues down the information age road, individual awareness of new and different value systems are affecting the funeral process. No longer is there a “traditional” or “standard” funeral. For today’s funeral professionals to be successful, it is important to understand the wide range of unique funerals and to be prepared for them.

The Humanist Funeral

Humanism as a practice was adopted by a group of Quakers in 1939 after they read The 1933 *Humanist Manifesto*. Deciding to leave the Quaker movement, this group joined the new Humanist movement, seeing the promise of a marriage between science and ethics and creating a new understanding of the word “religion.”

According to Larry Reyka, chaplain of the Humanist Society of Friends, the new group was an educational, charitable, non-profit organization. Humanist celebrants were at the outset and continue to be non-theists, not referencing any religion or god, deity or mystical power.

Much like the increasing popular practice of “individualizing” the funeral rituals,

Humanist funeral celebrants lead a personal and dignified funeral ceremony. They carefully compose a unique ceremony, using words and music that pay proper and adequate tribute to the person who has died.

To do justice to the ceremony and the task at hand, hours are spent in creating the ceremony. A celebrant never imposes any element of a ceremony that the client did not ask for or approve. The current fee for the Humanist celebrant is about \$90 per hour. This fee covers most funerals but is only a guideline. The cost is estimated between \$1000-\$1500.

The typical humanist funeral may begin with music as family and friends gather.

Opening words, which can be expressed by a chaplain, friends or families may be something like this:

“Let us be honest about death. It involves separation and sorrow. But let us also see death for no more than it really is. As long as memory endures, as long as we remember the life that has been lived, the influence of the deceased will continue to be felt. Death does not end love because, as human beings, our need for love is boundless.

It is not an end to joy or laughter because nothing would less honor one so vibrant than to make our lives drab after they have left this earth. Let us be honest with death, for in that honesty we will understand this individual better and ourselves, more deeply.”

A candle may be lit, or each in attendance may light a candle to signify the continuing glow of memory and to show that death is not defeat.

The humanistic address may speak of the life lived but also will speak about death as in the following:

We have gathered in this room to acknowledge the death of _____ whom we have known and loved. When someone we care for dies, we gather with sorrow in our hearts. At times, when we must face death and loss, we need each other for understanding and support. Just to be together, to look into each other’s faces, will take away some of our loneliness, some of our sadness and will draw our hearts together in healing. So, we have gathered here today in grief and sorrow but we also have gathered to



celebrate the life of _____. We come together to give thanks for the gift of knowing this vibrant person, to express our gratitude for the days and years we have shared and to remember and honor a good and caring life. By remembering the best of this person, by recalling her finest qualities and honoring the principles, values and dreams which guided her life, some of her enduring goodness flows into us so that we, ourselves, might be more like her in the days ahead. But our first task is to face life, full and unafraid as we embrace the reality of this death and the grief and loss we feel.”

A reading may then be performed from any favorite literature, followed by a time of personal reflection. At this moment, those attending may want to share memories or stories about the deceased. This sharing is followed by several minutes of silent meditation.

Those attending may be asked to con-

tribute their favorite readings or favorite readings of the deceased. This is followed by a summation of the life being memorialized with this service.

A benediction closes the service, perhaps with these words:

We have come together and have taken this time to bid a loving farewell to _____. We are so glad that she has lived and treasure the times we saw her face and felt the glow of her friendship and love. We cherish the memories we have of her, of her words and deeds and character. We will go forward, carrying her in our hearts, in comfort and peace, assured that even in this difficult time of loss and sorrow, life remains precious and good.

May we also take time, on this special day, to rekindle an appreciation for the gifts of life and the presence of others. Let us honor the life of _____ by living more lovingly in the days

ahead. As you return to the routines of your lives, go in love as you cherish the memory of _____ and may peace always abide with you.

The Adaptive Funeral

For more than a decade, the adaptive funeral ritual has been an option for families seeking to create services that mirror exactly the life that has been lived. In addressing adaptive funeral services, one author called them “fun funerals.”

Carrie Dolan describes one example of an adaptive funeral. The funeral of a popular California politician took place in a hotel ballroom where 3,000 mourners gathered amid bouquets of balloons and mingled around a trio of bars. In addition to the buffet, there was an ice sculpture and a seven-piece band led by a vocalist in a black lace dress singing James Brown’s rock-and-roll classic, “I Feel Good.” In the center of the party resided the host, lying in a flag-draped coffin.

Another example of the “fun funeral” is that of the man who, upon finding that his disease was terminal, planned a yacht cruise for 100 of his closest friends, to sail the Saturday after his death. The cruise featured a jazz band and the decedent’s favorite blues group, refreshments and a brief ceremony in which the decedent’s cremated remains would be scattered at sea as the band played, “I’ll be Seeing You.”

Another adaptive funeral featured the traditional visitation the night before the service with a closed casket. After the funeral service at the funeral home, and after the mourners had moved to a planned luncheon, family members placed the remains of the decedent (they requested that he be embalmed in a sitting position) in the back of his favorite sedan. Then, two of his nephews drove him across country to California, where the remains were cremated and scattered in the Pacific Ocean—all done at the request of the decedent.