

## **Planning a Funeral as a Healing Ritual**

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Death is not a single event. The body goes through a process by which various functions of the body “let go”. Gradually the spirit departs and lets go of the physical world.

Grief is also a gradual process by which those left behind slowly let go reorganize their identities and their world, and reenter their family and community as a separate (and more often than not changed) person. Virtually all cultures throughout time have used ritual and ceremony to aid in letting go and working through the loss of a loved one. Flowers, sympathy cards, and caskets or urns of ashes are visible signs of a very powerful inward experience.

It is important to understand this in order to take advantage of the healing grace that a funeral can offer when a loved one is lost. The funeral is an opportunity to acknowledge the events that led up to the death, the painful separation that has occurred, and the intense feelings that accompany the experience. It provides a safe place to express those feelings, connect with others who are also feeling the loss and celebrate the life of the person who has died. Often it is also an expression of one’s spiritual experience and beliefs about the death and its meaning. The service is also a rite of passage for the bereaved. The ceremony recognizes the transition in one’s identity. Status changes from wife to widow, from parent to childless, from best friend to one who is alone. Finally, the funeral allows for the stage to be set for the bereaved to again join their community and discover a meaningful life.

The extent to which a funeral can accomplish this is dependent on the loved one’s willingness to actively participate in the planning and experience of the service. Clergy and funeral directors today are sensitive to the power of this ritual and are eager to help the bereaved use it to gain comfort and heal. As you anticipate a funeral in your life the following are important things to reflect on and incorporate into this rite of passage.

1. What can be done to signify that we are facing the death and giving permission for our loved one to pass on? Prayers, scripture, and parts of the eulogy can open our hearts to this difficult task. Viewing the body, or simply touching the casket or urn can symbolize this. Letters of farewell and reconciliation and/or mementos placed in the casket can also be helpful.

2. How does the service celebrate the deceased life? Displaying pictures, dressing the deceased in his favorite clothes, even the American flag draped on the casket are good examples of this.
3. Is my loss of old identity and my new emerging identity being recognized? The family sitting together with the widow and special music symbolizing the lost relationship or burying the loved one with both wedding rings can signify this profound transition period in your life.
4. Does the funeral staff give ample permission for myself and others to freely express their feelings in safe and comfortable ways? Are there going to be people there who will listen to our pain, anger, confusion, and/or guilt? Can we cry and comfort one another? Are there places we can go to be alone if we need to?
5. Does the service express and/or celebrate my spiritual beliefs? The Christian funeral often celebrates Holy Communion as a way of recognizing the saving grace of Christ and the fulfillment of God's promise of an afterlife.
6. Will I have a sense of family and community during the service even if I feel I can not join in with that community at the time? Your church, work colleagues, family, and/or friends will want the opportunity to let you know that they are standing by to receive you when you are ready. Condolence cards, flowers and charitable donations in the name of the deceased are all symbols of your loved ones presence.
7. What can I do to let myself fully experience the healing power of this service that I have so carefully planned? Finding the courage to express your feelings, seeking the support and comfort of friends, and keeping your heart open to the experience are not easy. But these things will allow you to grieve in a healthy way and provide you with a memory that you can use for comfort and strength in the days and months to come.

Grief is a very personal and unique experience each time it happens. The funeral ritual is an opportunity to share that uniqueness and through it, begin to heal.

