"The Value of a Funeral – Why we do the things we do"

Introduction

US poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch describes a good funeral as one that "…gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be." (Lynch, 1997). Not all funerals achieve this goal. So, what makes a funeral good, and what makes a funeral not-so-good? Where is the value in a funeral?

A reflection of changing societal mores, the funeral of today is a very different affair to the funeral of fifteen or twenty years ago. It is more personalised, and less ritualised, than ever before.

In contrast, more and more people are opting to forgo the funeral service. The focus becomes the disposal of the deceased – "according to their wishes".

We have more "personal choice" than any other generation.

Church attendance has steadily declined in our lifetime, and personal religious affiliation has died with it. The world has become a smaller place, giving wider access to alternative religions and a new view of spirituality.

We are living longer, but less collegially. Community has been superseded by individuality. We often live a long way from where we grew up, and pride ourselves on being "self-sufficient".

We embrace new things, and discard old things.

It is no wonder then, that we have, almost universally, rejected the traditional, generic funeral in favour of the highly personalised "life celebration". But what causes the pendulum swing to the opposite extreme, the don't-go-to-any-trouble-just-bury-me-in-a-cardboard-box view?

Oscar Wilde (2011) famously wrote "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing." It is hard to believe he originally penned

those words in 1890, as they ring so true today. So, is the cost of the funeral causing us to lose sight of its value?

In her critique of the American funeral, Jessica Mitford (2000) cited cost as a reason to do away with the funeral. But to discard the funeral, rather than reform it would seem to be, as my grandmother would put it, “throwing out the baby with the bathwater.”

US pastor Paul Irion (1966) acknowledged that *some* funerals lacked meaning, but warned against the summation that, by extension, all funerals do.

So what is the value of the funeral?

Irion (1966) saw clearly that the value to an individual of a funeral was as personal and variable as the funeral itself. He believed that the degree of helpfulness depended upon the relevance and importance to the individual of culture, society, economy and religion. He considered the funeral to be of value when it met the religious, social and psychological needs of the mourners.

Similarly, Manning (2001) sees value in offering a safe place to grieve both individually and communally; acknowledging the significance of the life of the deceased; and using symbols and ceremony to reinforce the reality of the death.

Wolfelt (2001) observes that the loss of a loved one disconnects us from ourselves, and from the world around us. He too believes that a meaningful funeral is vital to regaining our balance - emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He describes six needs of the bereaved, which the funeral can satisfy - acknowledging the reality of the death; moving toward the pain and the loss; remembering the person who died; developing a new self-identity; searching for meaning; and receiving ongoing support from others.

Let’s examine these in detail.

Reality Check

Wolfelt (2001) said, “Grief is not something you overcome, it is something you experience.” The first step on the journey of grief is to accept the reality, and the finality, of the death.

We need to understand the death intellectually, to “get our heads around it”, before we can experience it emotionally. We often hear family members speak of “feeling numb” until some time after the funeral. The emotional, or heart grieving is necessary to begin to let go of the person who has died. Leming and Dickinson (2007) also see the move from intellectual understanding to the emotional experience of grief as a vital first step in reconnecting with the living.

Funerals can help us with intellectual understanding through the things we must do at the time of the death – from contacting a funeral director and choosing clothes through to the many decisions we make in arranging the funeral service. In carrying out these tasks ourselves, we cannot avoid the reality of the death.

Irion (1966) warns that delegating all the responsibility to the funeral director may lead to detachment, and therefore delay grieving.

In the community I work in, such detachment is relatively rare, perhaps due to our high Maori population and the wide influence of that culture locally. Maori culture has a strong sociological mindset, and places value in spending time with the body of the deceased. Maori customarily dress their loved one and the healing power of this is abundantly evident in their mood once this is done.

Viewing of the body is often recommended as a way of reinforcing the reality of the death. (Irion, 1966; Leming & Dickinson, 2007; Manning, 2001; Wolfelt, 2001). Viewing the corpse is not always therapeutic however, and must remain a matter of personal choice. Valentine (2008) reminds us that viewing does not necessarily “provide unequivocal evidence of social as well as

biological death", and I agree. When my best friend died, I found it difficult to reconcile the bright and bubbly person with her lifeless corpse. I ran into a lady some weeks later who didn't realise my friend had died. Instead of thinking she'd missed the news, I decided (albeit briefly) that she hadn't died at all. Obviously the heart understanding wasn't yet there.

As well as reinforcing reality, the funeral should support the finality of death. The visual impact of having the casket present, and witnessing the disposition assists in this – ably summed up recently by a bereaved husband immediately following the burial of his wife, "Well, that was final."

Search for Meaning

The finality so aptly communicated in that comment seemed brutal in the cold, harsh light of day. Is it any wonder then, that so many of us look for evidence of an afterlife to reassure us in our grief?

With traditional religious worship becoming less and less popular, does spirituality still have value in the modern funeral service?

The traditional religious funeral followed a precise structure, and was heavy on ritual and symbolism. It was possible to get through it without hearing mention of the deceased in either name, or nature. There was little solace to be gained from such a service, unless it reinforced personal faith and reassured the mourner in their own belief that "dying is going home to God".

Today's funeral brings together a congregation with a myriad of different beliefs about life and death. But its theosophical value endures, as it encourages us to question the mystery and meaning of life and death. A funeral forces us to deal not only with the death of someone close, but to reflect on our own mortality.

To heal in grief we must explore the questions we are faced with – why did they die… why did they die at this time… why did they die the way they did… where are they now – to decide *why* we should go on living before we can get to *how* we will go on living. Though the funeral cannot provide the final answer

to this question, it can place death within a context of meaning that is significant to those who mourn (Leming & Dickinson, 2007; Wolfelt, 2001).

The search for meaning engages the heart, and helps us on the journey of emotional understanding of the death.

Value can also be found in retaining structure in the funeral service. Like a good story, a funeral must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is reassuring to mourners in an emotional state to find familiarity. If we reflect on our own times of crisis, it is evident that reassurance is found in familiarity and routine. When we are feeling vulnerable, we don't like surprises. When we are trying to find our feet, we need the ground to be stable underneath us, and not shifting.

Redefine the Relationship

"When he died, a part of me died too." We hear this comment from time to time, and have probably felt it too. It describes a sense of loss, not only of our loved one, but of our relationship with them.

The funeral has a role in assisting those most closely affected by the death in their change of status, and in reinforcing that change amongst those who have gathered to grieve.

Wolfelt (2001) calls this need the development of a new self-identity. The transition from wife to widow, husband to widower, child to orphan. He observes that the funeral helps us to reorient ourselves, and make the transition from life before the death, to life after the death.

Death disrupts relationships and social networks, and the funeral can assist in recreating and reestablishing ties between family, friends and colleagues. The death of a group member alters the dynamics of the group and their shoes must be either filled or removed.

Barnes (1991) sees the funeral as a catalyst for change through considered reference to the passage of time. Acknowledging that time takes on an altered quality for the bereaved, she encourages us to consider past, present and

future. The past, reflecting on the life of the deceased and our relationship with them; the present experience of grief and the isolation it brings; and eventually optimism for the future and what life has yet to bring.

Leming and Dickinson (2007) observe that while change is an overt value of the funeral, it is often also an unintended consequence of it, resulting from the renewal of family ties and reunion of social groups.

Irion (1966) describes three phases in the grief journey which the funeral can help with - separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation of the deceased from the bereaved is an obvious part of the funeral as a whole. Separation of the bereaved from the wider community has also occurred at the time of the death, and the funeral has an important value in reintegrating the mourner with the community. This transition phase is also significant in encouraging a diminishing relationship with the deceased. The ability to picture the deceased in a new state of existence usually follows the disposition of the body, and the recognition by the community of the changed status of the bereaved, is what Irion refers to as “incorporation”.

Community Support

Community involvement in the funeral can be seen as a valuable means of welcoming the bereaved “back to the fold”. It is also a way that the wider groups of friends and family can offer physical, emotional, and practical support to those closest to the deceased.

This support takes many forms – practically, from calling in with food, to helping organise aspects of the funeral. Physically, a comforting hug or an arm around the shoulders. Emotionally, a phone call, a message, a listening ear. All of these things let us show those we know well that they are not alone.

A lack of understanding of the value of community support at the time of a death can lead some families towards a private service. While there are times when this is an appropriate choice, it can deprive the wider circle of family and friends by preventing them from showing their pain, their respect, and their

support. They might also feel rejected, and that their grief is not valid (Barnes, 1991).

Irion (1966) urges us to consider that a funeral is not intended as a public display of grief, but a way for a group to share their sorrow at the loss of one of its members. He believes that group participation – through singing, reciting of a poem or prayer in unison – assists all mourners in the grief journey. Particular community groups in which the deceased was involved can both give support and draw consolation from a shared tribute – a song, a eulogy, a reading, or a guard of honour.

A funeral can also be a family reunion in its own right, reuniting the extended family and the immediate. It can reunite estranged family and friends, healing old wounds and providing a forum for the honest expression of feelings.

A funeral provides a place for the wider community of mourners to gather together and grieve.

A Place to Grieve

For some, the funeral is the only place they feel free and able to show their grief. Funerals are an accepted place for us to grieve openly, confront our sadness and provide an outlet for our pain. They give us a forum and an opportunity to release authentic feelings. They encourage and allow us to dwell on the deceased and their importance to us personally (Irion, 1966; Wolfelt, 2001).

This is true not only for the immediate family, nearest and dearest, but for neighbours and business associates. The funeral also provides an outlet for disenfranchised grief, the grief of the ex-wife for example, that is often overlooked or not sanctioned.

Grieving as a group can also be more cathartic than grieving alone - “a problem shared is a problem halved.” People need the support of others during times of intense emotion.

Leming and Dickinson (2007) observe that all of the groups associated with the deceased will grieve to some extent over the death of their relationship with them. The funeral provides for them not only an accepted atmosphere in which to grieve, but a network of support from others in the group.

Attending my first tangi at the age of nine, I remember being overwhelmed at the rawness of emotion and sorrow on such a large scale - the intense wailing, the open and unselfconscious display of sadness and grief. These people were *grief-stricken* – it was hard to picture them being able to recover from their loss. I felt confused when this gave way to joking, storytelling and laughter following the burial. My grandmother explained simply that there is a time and place for everything.

Remember the Life

George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1906 that "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh" (Shaw, 2012). (Wish I'd known that when I was nine).

Today's funeral, in remembering the life of the deceased, is often as full of laughter as it is full of tears.

Manning (2001) suggests that the sharing of memories at the funeral affirms the worth we have placed on the deceased, and in doing so legitimises our feelings. He believes it there is great value in sharing the significance of the person who has died - that we find consolation in the knowledge that they were also important to others, and that their life made a difference.

There is no doubt that knowing how valued their loved one was by the wider community brings consolation to the family. Listening to tributes from others, whether as a formal part of the funeral service, or as part of the story-telling at the "after-match function" helps the bereaved to remember with a smile.

Once again, group participation in the funeral helps us to gain a comprehensive picture of the person who has died, as each of us are different things to different people.

Barnes (1991) supports this, underlining the value of the celebratory, life-appreciation part of the funeral. Commemorating a life in eulogy, music, photographs, and other things of meaning to the deceased makes the funeral a unique tribute to a unique person. We are acknowledging not just the life and achievements of the deceased, but the importance of that life to those closest, and the significance of the loss to them.

Wolfelt (2001) believes that to heal in grief we need to move our relationship with the deceased from the physical realm to the realm of memory. The funeral has value therefore when it invites us to share our own memories of the deceased, and to focus on our past relationship with them.

Personalisation of the funeral can also provide a source for later reflection. Recordings and slideshows can be a physical memento or keepsake – a lasting and tangible memory.

Conclusion

There are many ways we can enhance the funeral ritual to make its value evident.

Personalisation of the funeral doesn't mean the same thing for everyone. The degree and form of personalisation is as diverse and varied as people are themselves.

The important part is to encourage the bereaved to grieve by recognising those things that help people on the journey that is grief. To experience grief instead of avoiding it, to express it rather than suppressing it, and to embrace life again by looking to the future rather than living that life in the past.

As Manning (2001) so aptly observed, "The funeral, done right, is vital to the healing of broken hearts."

And that, is the value of the funeral.

[2834 words]

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