



PLANNING A MEANINGFUL FUNERAL DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING:

Getting Facts & Feelings Right

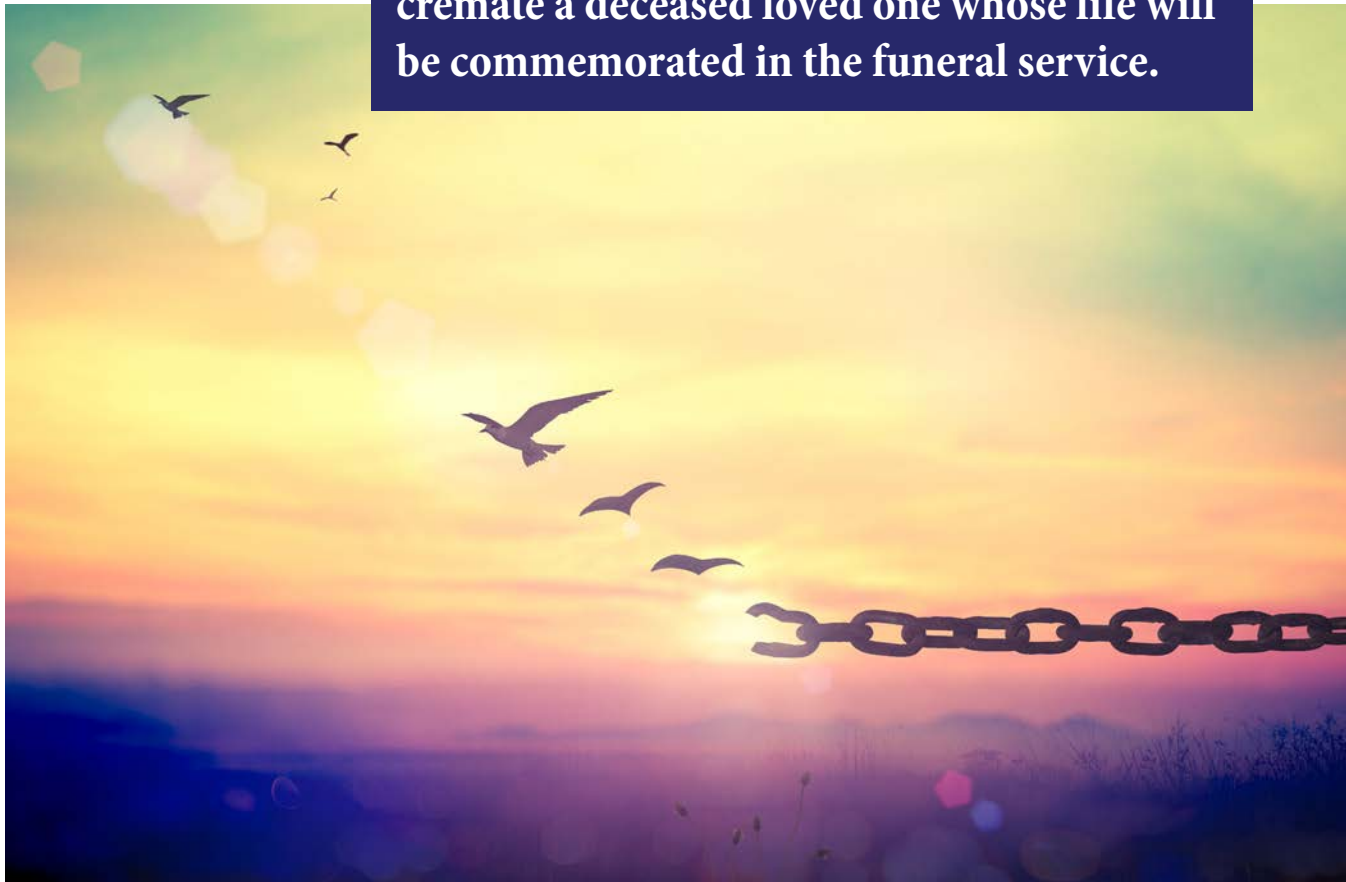
Meaningful: Having a serious, important or useful quality or purpose; communicating something that is not expressed directly

Memorable: Worth remembering or easily remembered, especially because of being special or unusual.

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Every family's situation is unique and personal, so just as there are strong traditions involved in any kind of funeral planning, there are many different ways to approach the decision of whether to bury or cremate a deceased loved one whose life will be commemorated in the funeral service.



Having a funeral service in the age of social distancing

Social distancing has changed many things about our world. One thing it hasn't changed, though, is that loved ones will pass away and we will feel grief from these losses.

When a loved one passes away, funeral services are an important part of the grieving process. They allow us to mourn our loss publicly.

It can seem like having a funeral service during these times is too difficult, which can lead families to put off having a funeral service entirely.

With so many changes and uncertainties, the ritual of a funeral service can be a source of great comfort. In fact, it may be more important than ever to have a funeral service as it allows us to feel a sense of closure and control in what is otherwise a time when we likely feel very out of control. Even if you decide on cremation, you can still have a funeral service for your loved one.

There will be some differences to funeral services during this time. Due to social distancing, family and friends may not be able to travel to the location of the service. In addition, group gatherings are limited in size.

However, this does not mean that it is impossible to hold a funeral service. On the contrary, the age of social media has made it possible to include just about anyone who wants to be part of the service. These days, it is possible to securely and safely live stream the funeral service so that friends and family can be a part of the service no matter where they live.

Funeral homes are also making accommodations, such as allowing a rotation of mourners to come through during visitation hours, provided they follow social distancing protocols.

While this may not be the ideal situation, it is important remember that this time of mourning is important and delaying it entirely can magnify your grief and delay the healing process.

It is important to remember that these social distancing protocols are not permanent. For now, you can hold a small, family-only service that is live streamed to others. Then, once this time is over, you can hold a second, larger and more fitting farewell on a later date – perhaps on a birthday, anniversary or holiday.

Burial or Cremation? The First Decision

Sometimes the decision of whether to be cremated or buried is made by the person beforehand, and sometimes it needs to be made by the family. But many other important decisions about the funeral proceed from this first decision. It isn't always an easy choice.

Burial has immense emotional and spiritual appeal to many families. A funeral followed by a burial is a familiar process that gives many families a feeling of closure and a feeling that they are part of something bigger than just their own sorrow. For many, viewing their loved one in a casket before burial gives a feeling of having said goodbye in person. Having a traditional gravesite to visit, perhaps surrounded by the graves of other family members, is an ongoing source of comfort and remembrance for many people. Some religions require burial and prescribe exact timing and procedures to be taken. For other religious traditions, burial is a natural and sanctified way of dealing with death. For some families in special circumstances, burial holds open the possibility of future exhumation, perhaps for genetic investigation. Finally, since burial has always been the way that most people in most ages and cultures have chosen, creating a meaningful funeral service in the presence of a casket with the body of the loved one calls on thousands of years of tradition for inspiration and creativity.

Families can still have any kind of funeral they choose with cremation, and many families choose burial along with cremation. Many people think of cremation as an earth-friendly option because it takes less space and uses fewer resources. Cremated ashes are very transportable, and having the ashes of their loved one with them allows the family more time to plan and decide what to do. Cremation can be less costly overall and there are often fewer decisions to be made. Finally, there are so many options for what to do with cremated ashes that creative approaches abound, from turning the ashes into gemstones to seeing them become part of an ocean reef.



What makes some funeral services so meaningful?

The act of friends and family coming together to remember the life of a beloved person who has passed can be a powerful, fulfilling experience. Creating a funeral service together is one of the most positive ways that a family can navigate this difficult experience. Grief and mourning are emotional states that naturally search for a pathway to closure and healing, and from time immemorial sharing and celebrating memories of our loved one with friends and family in a funeral service has helped create those pathways.

Memories and love, along with grief and sadness are at the heart of every funeral and memorial service. Since every person at a service has a different relationship and history with the person being honored, the challenge for those planning the service is always to encompass everyone's memories. When this is accomplished all who come to the service, and those who hear of it later, are able to hold the departed person most dearly in their memories and their hearts.

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What questions should family members ask each other to help prepare the most meaningful funeral service?

The most important part of the process of gathering personal, in contrast with factual memorial information about a person, is to reach out to all the people who they cared about and who cared about them. That means as many people as can be reached because they are all part of the life that was lived. Whoever is in charge of gathering such personal memories will be talking with friends, co-workers, distant relatives, colleagues, past spouses and partners, children from one or more families – so many different people in the life of the person being remembered.

Unlike the facts of a person's life, there's no checklist that will cover all the personal information that is there to be gathered, but experienced funeral directors know that you can often get memories flowing by asking a few basic very human questions such as:

- Tell me how long did you know (name) and how did you first meet?
- Did your friendship begin immediately or develop over time? Tell me how that happened?
- Is there a particular story you remember that says it all about (name)? Something they would want us all to remember about them?
- How did the life of (name) inspire your own life and the lives of others?
- What do you value most about your memories of (name)?
- What do you think (name) would want you to say about them to other friends and family?



Why have funeral services with a cremation – isn't the whole idea to keep it simple?

Simple and affordable doesn't mean not meaningful and memorable. In fact, the cremation option doesn't exclude having any type of funeral service, traditional or contemporary, or any other format family may choose to enshrine the life of the person they have loved and now lost in their collective memory.

Many people who choose cremation in advance of their death also choose the kind of ceremony they want, so the funeral director may be in the best position to provide guidance where everyone is following the "last wishes" of the departed. In addition to burial or inurnment in a columbarium, many funeral homes and cemeteries offer other options. For example, a special field where ashes are scattered; assistance with making arrangements like dispersal at sea; offering new "green" and environmentally friendly options. From traditional to highly unusual ceremonies an experienced funeral director is often the best place to turn for advice on your available options for honoring both the person's last wishes and the family's preferences.

Even if there hasn't been any advance planning, there are a wide range of sometimes simple, sometimes intricate but always meaningful options for honoring and placing the ashes of a loved one. Funeral homes and cemeteries are seeing increasing numbers of families who want to be deeply involved in the creative aspects of remembering their loved one, and many funeral directors welcome this opportunity to go beyond the traditional and create new, more meaningful funerals.

Where can we find inspiration for a meaningful funeral service?

The internet is full of stories and pictures of ways that families have found to honor their loved one. For families facing the challenge of coming up with a meaningful, personal tribute to their loved one, the shared experiences of others can be the best guide.

Many families use the services of experienced professionals to help find the right balance of ceremony and simplicity. On sites like Pinterest and Instagram there thousands of photos and videos of funerals and celebrations from across the spectrum. Facebook has a new "Tributes" section with a broad selection of memorial options. Spend an hour or two searching for key phrases like "personalized funeral" and "creative cremation" and you'll find hundreds of stories and photos of creative, thoughtful, beautiful ways people have honored the passing of one they love.

People choose to remember their loved one with events and expressions from intensely personal to boldly patriotic, from devoutly green to plainly political, from traditionally sacred to new age spiritual, and from most solemn to most unusual, and beyond. What makes any funeral service, memorial, or celebration meaningful is how well and truly it helps everyone remember and honor their love for the person who has now gone, not whether it is traditional or creative, simple or elaborate.

What's the best way to create a meaningful obituary?

Family members who find themselves needing to plan a meaningful funeral service for a loved one who has passed away need to know certain factual information as well as the understanding the personalized side of the upcoming memorial.

Every newspaper that prints obituaries has guidelines readily available that are essentially “fill in the blanks” guides for writing obituaries, and funeral directors are always able to be helpful in ensuring that things are done right.

A famous obituary writer offered great advice for any family member struggling with the factual part of writing an obituary:

“Ask a professional for help – the newspaper staff and funeral home are always ready, and they don’t make mistakes or leave out anyone or anything important.”

However, the key to a meaningful obituary just doesn’t lie in proper recitation of facts, although it’s important to get those right. The real meaning of a person’s life lies in the memories that live on in the hearts and minds of those who love them. Getting at those memories, recording them in some way, and incorporating them into the obituary is the key to writing a meaningful summation of a beloved life.

That same great obituary writer summed up the single most important point in writing an obituary:

“The aim is to make your obituary a lasting memorial worthy of a scrapbook – a tribute that gives family and friends something to be proud of long after the upheaval of loss.”