# CEREMONIES OF DEATH

*by Kenneth W. Phifer*

My approach to the ceremonies of death as a Unitarian Universalist minister and Humanist leader grows out of several understandings and affirmtions. The first of these is that death is inevitable. It is reported that near the end of his life, Somerset Maugham told a much younger relatived: "Dying is a very dull, dreary affair. My advice to you is to have nothing to do with it." He didn't practice what he preached. Neither will we. We may evade taxes, bills, sorrow, poverty, and suffereing, but we shall not escape death. Hank Williams was right when he sang. "I'll never get out of this world alive." None of us will.

Not that we don't try. Like w.e. Fields, who was found looking through a Bible when he lay sick-a-bed, he thought, though it was not true. A friend who knew he was not ordinarily given to seeking comfort there inquired of him what on earth he was doing. Fields replied, "Looking for loopholes." He didn't find any because there are none. We are "here to day and gone today." Death is inevitable.

Death is also natural. Death is not a punishment we endure because we have committed some terrible wrong. Death is not the result of some original sin our first ancestors indulged and then passed on to us through the generations by means of concupiscence. Death is a natural part of the life cycle, a function of the enormous complexity that is part of the uniqueness and the wonder of our species. There are single cell life forms which apparently do not die, but the tendency of organisms of even minor complicatedness is to run down, to wear out, to die. Death is natural.

Death makes life precious. That life is short and swift in its passage gives a poignancy and sweetness to our days that endless living would not. Meaningfulness in life grows out of our knowledge that we have only so much time in which to accomplish, to savor, to create, to relate, to act before our lives end. Walter Kaufmann once noted that he could not bear the kind of life he wanted to live for an eternity, "a life of love and intensity, suffering and creation, that makes life worthwhile and death welcome." Because all whom we love and all that we care about will pass into dust and ashes, because "parting is all we know of heaven and all we need know of hell," we give ourselves more fully and richly to the living of our days, creating the meanings of our existence and treasuring them in our wiser moments. Death makes life precious.

Though death is ultimately the most isolating experience we can have, it is far more importantly always acommunity experience as well. No person is an island, unknown, uncared for, whose death makes no difference. Each of us belongs to and in one or more communities-a family, a town or city, a church or work place or club, a union or political group or charitable organization. Even the meanest of us is known to someone, maybe not by name but by presence, perhaps only to a social worker or police officer, but someone. To be involved in a community means that we have some sense of where we belong in life and with whom and how. We know in community

that our death will touch others and change the way things are in however small away. In community we share our joys and griefs and burdens. In community we learn how it is that we make a difference. In death we are alone but we do not have to be lonely. Death is a community event.

Death is also a generator of emotions, very powerful emotions, emotions like anger and guilt and fear and puzzlement and loneliness and relief and a sense of loss. How dare my husband die and leave me with all this responsibility! Why didn't I go to see Mary when I thought of it rather than put it off; now she is gone and I can never tell her I was sorry for what I did. That is the fourth death in my family from heart disease-do I have it, how can I prevent it, am I going to die prematurely too? What does death mean, really mean, and where do we go and does it hurt? How can I live without her? He had suffered so much that it truly is a blessing for him to die. The company can never replace someone with her gifts. These concerns expressed in words and in tears, in wrenching feelings in the gut and sudden terrible physical weakness, in sleepless nights and an inability to concentrate on one's tasks-come up in the wake of the death of someone we have known and cared for. We must deal with these emotions or they will surely deal with us-in the middle of a conversation, in the middle of a shower, in the middle of the night. Death is a generator of very strong emotions.

A memorial service is a vitally important ceremony for human beings confronted with the death of a friend or relative. There is a need in all of us for closure: a service of memory helps us accept the unacceptable, believe what we so much do not want to believe, face the finality of our loss. There is a need to focus in some organized way the feelings that grip us at such a time. There is a need to be reassured that when we die some such celebration of our life will take place; will I be remembered. Some kind of ritual at the time of death has taken place since the time of our Neanderthal ancestors; it is a very human thing to do. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a description of the way in which I go about this very human business of planning and carrying out memorial services.

In planning a memorial service with a family I have three aims in mind. First, I think it important to be honest. Humanists do not regard death as a gateway to another (better or worse) world, but as an end of the life of a person. We should be honest about that and honest also about the person whose life is being memorialized. It dishonors the deceased if we ignore who he or she really was: faults, foibles, frustrations as well as achievements, enjoyments, glories should be part of planning and in some way part of the service itself.

Secondly, the service should be spiritual, by which I mean several things. The service should reflect the spirit of the person, in some way lifting up the essentials of his or her personality and bringing them to life for just a moment, like a biography. There should also be a spirit of community and sharing with all those present on that day, a feeling for what it means to be human and to be together.

Finally, a good memorial service should be unique to the person whose life is being honored. Just as no two lives are the same, so should no two

memorial services be the same. Every human being deserves more than to be a name filing in the blanks between words pre-cast and used a thousand times ten thousand times before. Each of us merits reflection and consideration by those we leave behind as they prepare a service of memory that reveals some portion of the truth of our lives, previous and unique.

As best I am able, I try to sense family needs, listening to the various dynamics of personality that engage the family in their mutual relationships and that can have a great effect on how a service is to be done. Giving ample opportunity for people to talk is a valuable part of what Humanist leaders can do to help families come to terms with their grief. Out of listening can come an appreciation of what form and setting the service might best take, and thus what suggestions to begin with when discussing these specifics with the family. I find that where families have not already made up their minds about these things-and in an age of memorial societies and pre-planned funeral and memorial arrangements, an increasing number of people, far less than a majority, do know what they want to do-it helps to have some general discussion without trying to settle on anything, and then go to another topic that is often easier to decide: the date.

My recomendation for a date is usually for seven to ten days after death. This gives ample time for planning and preparation. It allows for family members, some of whom are always scattered to the four winds, to make arrangements to be present. It also, and importantly, lengthens the period of most intensive support from friends and neighbors, a support which in my experience tends to fall off rather quickly after whatever service is held and whenever it is held. It is the family's decision, of course, and I have done services as close to the death as 36 hours and as distant from it as three and a half months.

Returning to the question of the setting and the form of the service, I find these two elements are closely linked. Where a service is done determines in some measure what can be done; what is desired as a service format suggests where it should be held. The setting may be a large auditorium with an organ or a chamber group. It may be a smaller room in the building or a private home or even an outdoor setting known to be a favorite of the deceased. Services can be conducted by the leader alone or by the leader with several participant friends and family members. It can be formal in outline and rather long, or more informal and short. Some services appropriately are spontaneous with a small group of close friends and family letting memories come as they will. There is no one right formula, only endless possibilities which are used or not used depending on the person who has died and the needs and wishes of those who have survived.

Included in the question of the setting is the determination of what shall be hung on the walls or placed on tables by way of decoration and aesthetic rememberance. Flowers chosen by the family and standing alone is the most common of these, but I have also seen paintings, a fly rod and fishing basket with fly ties adorning the display, photographs and a slide show, posters with sayings, banners, weavings, and other things. Such items help to create an atmosphere as well as stir up memories, and it is worth taking thought for them.

After date and setting and form are determined, I share with the family my general approach to the content of the service, namely to make this an honest, spirited, unique celebration of this life by a gathering and sharing of facts and memories. I ask the family to write out for me a statement outlining the highlights of the person's life; to include education, jobs, community involvement, honors, etc. I ask each person to write also a remembrance of the deceased for me as though I had never known him or her, which is sometimes true. Friends are also asked to join in this process. All are urged to select favorite readings, writings, or music of the person. If the situation is such that the writing of such statements is not possible, I will sit with the family and friends and take notes as they tell me about this person they have loved. What am I looking for? Everything. Philosophy of life, favorite foods and colors and sports. Jobs held and liked, jobs held and disliked. ehallenges met and overcome, challenges not well met. Habits. Idiosyncracies. Traits. Tales and anecdotes. Anything and everything. The specialness of a person consists in the amalgam of little things about them that distinguish them from others. At the last possible minute before the service, I will interweave these writings/notes into a kind of tribute or memorial to the deceased, using wherever possible the actual phrases of his or her relatives and friends.

When participation by others is desired, I may only do a brief statement giving a very rough outline of the person's life and my own brief recollections if any. Then several others will share their memories. Sometimes the service is opened to anyone who wishes to speak to do so; I have found it advisable, where this is requested, to "plant" at least one and better two people who will speak first at this point in the service and thus prevent the uncomfortable situation of no one having anything to say! In my experience, where possible, it is better to have others join me in speaking at the service; there is nothing as moving as someone who really knew a person well speaking about that person.

Two other details are handled at this family gathering. One is the selection of ushers, usually close friends of the deceased, who will take care of all the usual ushering duties and any unusual tasks that become necessary. Naming a person who will take charge of the reception after the service is also important. This is again usually a close friend who should be given the names of several people who can help with food and drink preparation and service. Involving as many people as possible in getting ready for the memorial service and in carrying it out is a highly desirable goal.

Before I leave the family at the first meeting I always give them a copy of a little book by Earl Grollman, *Living. . . When a Loved One Has Died.* This is intended as a bedside or pocketbook/briefcase companion, for those moments when you feel wretched but do not want to call your close friend yet one more time, say at 2:00 a.m. It is a short book with just a few sentences on each page. There is not too much to absorb and there is plenty of room to write if that helps the mourning process. I have used this book for eight years and only once has a family not appreciated it. It is in paperback and is inexpensive enough to keep a supply on my shelf for immediate use.

The outline I follow for a memorial service most often begins with prelude music while people are being seated and sometimes a special piece of music after the family has been seated. My opening words, and my closing words as well, focus on three themes: we come to grieve because we have suffered a loss, we come to remember the person as he or she was in the fullness of their days, and we come to renew our commitment to life and the living. People who attend a memorial service are a one-time only community, and commonly will include people of a wide variety of religious and philosophical understanding. Some may never have been inside a Unitarian Universalist church (or Humanist temple or Ethical eulture Society building) before. I think it important to say that it is alright to cry, to laugh, to experience a whole range of feelings; it is what we are all going through.

Following these opening words are some readings, preferably of things written by or known to be favorites of the deceased. Poems, letters, speeches, essays, passages from novels or short stories, the words to a song, a collection of sayings, specifically religious writings if appropriate. If desired, music can follow the readings.

The tribute section includes whatever remarks I might make and comments by family and friends. Given the powerful emotional resonance of a memorial service, I am always ready to read on behalf of those who thought they would be able to speak and then discover that they cannot.

It is at this point in the service, after planned remarks have been delivered, that an invitation might be issued for anyone present to speak who would like to do so. This part of the service is closed with a time of silence-for private memories, for meditation, for prayer, for whatever each individual chooses to do with this time.

The closing words again speak of mourning and remembering and renewing, this time focusing on the last two as in the opening remarks there is more emphasis on the first of these. I always provide for the family to leave first, usually with music to accompany them, and then invite all those present to a time of continued sharing at a reception. These receptions give opportunity for everybody to speak and share their memories, an opportunity the service does not usually offer unless the crowd is really quite small. It is a vital part of the memorial gathering and can sometimes last for several hours. This more informal part of the memorial time is a chance for people to speak of and firm up the memories stirred by the memorial service, as well as to extend a sympathetic hand in person to the family.

The taping or videotaping of a memorial service is an increasingly popular practice. A written copy of what was said is also a nice way of preserving something of the moment, though it lacks the music and the sound of the voices. Some way of transmitting what took place to those who were unable to be present is important as a way of extending the circle of human caring and community of which the deceased was a part.

eeremonies of death are important because they give us a firm framework within which to let go of the tremendous emotions that swirl within us at a time of loss without feeling that we shall fly completely to pieces. They

offer benchmarks in the first few days and weeks to which we can look in anticipation and to which we can look back with appreciation as a way of coping with the changes that death always brings to those left behind. Memorial services remind us that in life we are most assuredly in death, that life is brief and we need to get busy with the tasks of our lives, and that there are those who need our comfort and support. Because as Humanists we regard death as the last event of life, the ceremonies of death we observe inspire us to live our days with as great a measure of justice, truth, and kindness as we are able. The ceremonies of death help us all to do more than just live out our existence; they help us truly to celebrate life.