

In loving memory

It may be one of life's certainties, but how we say goodbye differs widely. Here, funeral director Sarah Jones reveals how to give our nearest and dearest the best send-off

We have all heard stories about funerals in which the official conducting the service mispronounced the person's name or, worse still, got it wrong altogether. We've heard about services in which the eulogy was cut short because of time restrictions at the crematorium or where the entire day was so generic that the person who had died could have been anybody. For such a profoundly important occasion, it's always sad to hear about services that failed to do the individual and their loved ones justice.

My own early experiences of funerals include important family members being omitted from the tribute, incense so potent it made my eyes sting and framed photographs crashing to the ground in the middle of the service. Having attended several almost identical funerals for people who were wildly different, I was effectively frustrated into becoming a funeral director myself.

A good funeral – one that feels unique to the person who has died, reflects their life and personality and allows family and friends to pay tribute to them – can be an important first step in the grieving process. With some time, support and information, people can personalise the event in the manner that's right for them and I believe this can be a cathartic experience.

According to the 2018 SunLife Cost of Dying report, 64 per cent of funeral directors interviewed reported a reduction in the number of traditional funerals being held and 82 per cent said they had seen an increase in the number of 'celebration of life' ceremonies they were being asked to arrange. Funerals are often split into traditional or alternative options, but when supported in making the choices that feel right for them, it seems most people want a blend of both, with aspects of tradition that resonate with their family and the introduction of personalised elements that reflect the individual.

When we at Full Circle reviewed 100 funerals we helped orchestrate in 2018,

63 per cent of them had been held at the crematorium and 20 per cent in a church, while 18 per cent of wakes took place at a venue that was special to the individual, such as at their home or in a favourite hotel.

But whether you are arranging a funeral for someone close to you or want to understand and express your own wishes, there are many opportunities for making the funeral person-centred.

Before making any decisions, reflect on what you know about the person – or yourself – then use that to inform the choices you make. Consider whether you would prefer something understated, a careful acknowledgment of loss or a celebration of life. Engaging in this process in a meaningful way can be very helpful to you, your family, friends and the wider community.

For instance, you might choose to hold the service in a location that has some personal significance, such as a community centre or in the great outdoors, or you might opt for unusual transport which reflects the character of the person who has died. A Morris Minor hearse would make a lovely touch for a vintage car enthusiast or an electric hearse for someone who cared about the environment.

Coffins can be tailored to personal preferences, too. Wooden coffins come in various shades, wicker coffins can be decorated with flower garlands and it's even possible to have a woollen coffin these days.

Having the opportunity to carry the coffin can be a very important privilege for some people and being able to contribute to or deliver a tribute during the service can be equally meaningful for others.

Music is a way of helping people connect with one another and choosing hymns or music that have some personal significance can be helpful. For those who value photographs, a slide show could accompany one of the music tracks during the service or could be shown during refreshments afterwards.

Flowers can be made bespoke with favourite blooms or colours and arrangements can be created in the shape of airplanes, favourite football team shirts or any other design that feels right. Flowers also lend themselves to adornment with personal, symbolic mementos. Walking boots, crafting materials or gardening tools can all be included in the arrangement or they can be enhanced by glitter or fairy lights for

that special someone who loved a little bit of bling in their life.

Coffins can be topped or surrounded by flags, hats, team shirts, bicycles, guitars, photographs or, for an avid gardener or greengrocer, an arrangement of flowers and vegetables. The addition of a basket of wool, bunting made by loving grandchildren or paintings by the person who has died are a touching and meaningful way to soften and personalise a funeral service.

During refreshments, guests can be invited to share a memory of the person who has died by writing it on a card and placing it in a basket or hanging it on a memory tree. Or they could be asked to bring a photograph of the person who has died to share with their family.

For many people, post-funeral rituals can also be helpful and important and could involve choosing a headstone or deciding where to bury or scatter ashes. For others, they may involve visiting a special place, marking anniversaries with a family meal, organising a commemorative bench or planting a memorial tree. Fingerprint jewellery, donating equipment to a sports club or charity or placing a photograph on the mantelpiece can all be ways of developing a continuing bond with the person who has died.

There are a vast range of options available for ashes and some families find it helpful to split them up so people can make choices that are meaningful to them. Sending ashes into space, including them in a firework display, scattering them at sea or keeping some in a necklace or a photograph-frame keepsake are all possible.

There is no right way to plan a funeral. The priority is to make sure you can create something that reflects the person who has died. That is the best form of tribute." 

Funerals Your Way: A Person-Centred Approach To Planning A Funeral (Authors&Co, rrp £7.99, ebook £4.49) is out now. See fullcirclefunerals.co.uk.

