

## Changing world, changing funerals

*The following is adapted slightly from an address given to the July 1999 conference in Hamilton that led to establishing the Celebrants Association of New Zealand. These remarks were aimed particularly at experienced marriage celebrants who were considering starting to take funerals.*



Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena kotou katoa!

Some of you may have considered taking on funeral celebrancy. And I guess the most important thing for me to say to those of you who are considering moving into this work is—try it! If you can do a marriage—and if a funeral director or a bereaved family has confidence in you to do a funeral—then you *can* do it. It's very satisfying work. It can be draining. You deal with heightened emotion, and you sometimes deal with great pain. But there is very often a sense that things are far better than they would have been without you.

Work doesn't come much better than that.

So, how do you prepare a funeral?

There is one thing above all else to remember. Make sure—whether you do it yourself as celebrant or friends or members of the family do it—that there is lots of talking about the person who has died. And make it real.

There was a woman in her early fifties who died of a heart attack, the mother of three young women. For a long time, as I asked about her, I found nothing at all. She hadn't worked. You couldn't say she was a great cook. She didn't have any interests particularly. I was starting to feel very frustrated. Eventually one of the daughters said: "Shall we tell him?"

The story was that her functioning had been made very difficult by schizophrenia. I was able to say to the daughters that we had two options for the funeral. We could hide the schizophrenia, and tell the story of a boring uneventful life. Or we could talk openly about the schizophrenia, and the struggles against its effects, and the way this mother had brought up three fine, successful young woman in the face of severe disability.

These daughters did not regret that their decision was to tell the truth.

So the rules are—make sure there is talk about the person who has died, and make it real.

I suppose I could actually stop right there—and perhaps that's exactly what you'd like me to do—but it might be useful to reflect some more on funerals in New Zealand at the end of the twentieth century.

There are considerable changes going on in New Zealand funerary culture. We have been through a period in which the prevailing view was that when someone dies there should be as little fuss as possible, and that after a death everyone should get over it as quickly as possible and get back to their ordinary lives. The no-fuss funeral was nurtured on the difficulties of colonial life in this country, and kept alive by a couple of world wars. No-fuss funerals did not dominate for long in the general sweep of history, but in terms of ordinary human memory this has been quite a long period.

The no-fuss funeral was associated with a culture in which the fact of death and its presence in our lives was, as much as possible, denied. But because ultimately death cannot be denied, our fears about it festered.

But now this is changing.

Death in fact is a hugely important thing, and it deserves a fuss. A death is extraordinarily difficult to adjust to for those who are close, and a profound event even for the broader circles that have surrounded someone in their life. It is an important transition, and it is a transition that is not helped much by the rote reading of a prayer book at a no-fuss quick funeral. And so, as other rituals are being revised and refined, so we are developing a new kind of funeral to fit our needs in this society and today's circumstances.

I don't know if you're aware of this but in New Zealand almost all bodies are embalmed. That is a relatively new development, dating from about the Second World War. Embalming does not happen to nearly the same extent in Britain or Australia, where they use fridges much more. This is something we have adopted from the Americans, and it has actually freed us up to make some other alterations in our funerary customs.

I don't know why we adopted the custom of embalming in this country, but I rather suspect that it fitted together with the demands of Maori culture to spend time with the body in the days before the funeral. [Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand.]

In any case it would seem that the arrival here of embalming has over a period of time helped this society move to a greater degree of acceptance of death as a part of life. "Viewing" the body, has become much more widespread here, not only by immediate members of the family but also by the extended family and friends. And

more and more families bring the body home for a couple of days before the funeral. Besides the matter of embalming, it seems to me there are three broad trends involved in the changes going on in New Zealand Pakeha funeral customs—secularisation, the “post-modern condition”, and the impact of Maori culture. [The majority white settler community in New Zealand is known as Pakeha.]

Let us look first at **secularisation**. The widespread use of celebrants in New Zealand is one indication that this has become an unusually non-religious society. It looks like this trend will continue. Churches are simply not as important for us as they used to be.

People tend not to plan funerals, and things that are unplanned tend to stick longer to traditional patterns. People get to plan marriage ceremonies rather more, and so in some ways it is inevitable that this trend towards secularisation showed itself first in weddings. But it is also inevitable that the changes in this culture over the last twenty years are increasingly expressing themselves in the larger number of non-church funerals.

This does not necessarily mean that people coming to a celebrant don't want any religion in the funeral. They don't want a church involved, but it might well be that they want a few words of conventional religion. On the other hand, perhaps what they don't like about the churches is precisely those conventional words. Perhaps they don't want any prayer, or Bible reading, or talk about God whatever. However, even if they don't want conventional words of religion, they might still want a sense that person who died continues to live on in some different realm. Many people like to have the reassurance of eternal life.

There is a reading by Henry Scott Holland that is extraordinarily popular in secular funerals, although it is actually a very religious reading. It starts off: “Death is nothing at all. I am I, and you are you. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. I have only moved through into the next room.”—I can hear you joining me in reciting it.

Now those rather beautiful words sound like a lot of nonsense to me. Death is a hugely important thing. But people like this reading, and it is one that I use often—very often.

We've got to give people the funeral they want, and the important point is not to make any assumptions about the religious needs people might have. You've got to find out what they want. Many practising funeral celebrants make assumptions, with disastrous results. One of the main complaints you hear in this business is about religion appearing where it is not wanted. Many funeral celebrants are former ministers of religion, or have other strong church connections, and some of them cannot resist the temptation to introduce a bit of religion inappropriately. Some even quite consciously see funeral celebrancy as an appropriate vehicle for their ministry. That seems to me to be seriously unethical.

Now turning to “**postmodernism**”. This is a cultural trend that means all sorts of

things, and I, for one, have some reservations about it. But for practical purposes in funerals it seems to mean two rather useful things.

The first is a rule of funerals: don't worry about inconsistency.

You've seen those modern buildings that mix together arches, and classical columns, and walls of glass. That's postmodernism. It is sometimes done badly—but mixing things is OK—showing contradiction. People have many different sides to them. It is OK to say someone was both wonderful and a pain in the butt. People cannot be understood in terms of a single story, or a single set of ideas. It may be quite OK to say she was an atheist and also to sing the Twenty-Third Psalm.

And it is almost obligatory in a funeral to both emphasise the sense of closure, to emphasise the funeral as marking the end of a life, *and also* to emphasise the sense in which there is a continuing connection with the person who has died.

Contradiction is fine.

And the second thing about postmodernism relevant to these purposes is linked to that. Remember: No summary does justice. Life is in the details.

We live in our stories—we live in the things we do and are done to us, in the ways we connect with other people and so on. Memories—stories—are our most precious possessions. Stories are what define us as individuals, and they are what tie us together as groups, as families, as friendship networks.

Untold stories shrivel and die. But retelling a person's stories when their body dies keeps something of them alive.

And sometimes this story-telling can be transformative.

I have in mind an old man whose only son rather thought of his father as a hard, unattractive and unaffectionate personality. It's not an unusual situation. But as I was talking to him, gradually the son told of the brutality of his father's rural upbringing, and the extreme poverty of his background, and then he talked of his father's struggle to achieve a modest economic security for his family. These were stories that made sense of the sort of bloke his father was, and they were later retold in the funeral. And through the telling and the retelling the son came to have a slightly different perspective on his father: there were things to be proud of which he had not been very conscious of before.

Funerals are a time for retelling and strengthening the stories, keeping the stories alive, thickening them, giving them more detail. The more stories, the more different words, the more different sides of someone that you can build pictures of, the more richly the person will be brought to mind.

Use the family's words; use the family's metaphors.

The better the story-telling the easier it will be for people to satisfyingly reassess their relationships with the person who has died. In fact through this storying and restorying new relationships can be built between the bereaved and the dead person—relationships in the mind and the imagination.

A funeral is always a time for reassessing relationships, and an important part of that process is right at the beginning when the family are discussing things with the celebrant. It is important to do a lot of listening about the person who has died. A lot of what we do in the funeral is to simply feed back the things we hear. Don't just go and talk to the family for an hour. Get telephone numbers for friends, workmates, neighbours, more distant relations. Spend a couple of hours on the phone asking questions.

And at the funeral try to describe aspects of the relationship of the person who has died with the important people who remain—the widow, for example. Talk about how much he hated politicians, or about the times he lost his false teeth. Mention that fishing trip with his teenage son thirty years ago. Repeat what he said when he first met his future daughter-in-law.

Sometimes the extracting of those stories and then retelling them can have a profound impact.

The third broad trend affecting Pakeha funerals—and it fits together very closely with postmodernism—is the impact of **Maori culture**.

Most cultures have a special language for ritual and ceremony. Traditionally in English culture that has been Latin. The special language of ceremony and ritual in New Zealand is now Maori. There are many families with whom it would not be appropriate, but more and more in this country the use of a few words in Maori claims a specialness for the proceedings and gives them an extra dignity.

But the words of Maori that might be used in many Pakeha funerals are the smallest of the Maori contributions to our funerals.

There are three more important influences of Maori culture.

Firstly it seems clear that our greater contact with the body of the deceased between death and burial or cremation borrows something from the Maori people. Secondly, we seem to be adopting—and there is doubtless Maori influence on this—the custom that there should be an opportunity for quite a number of people to talk at the funeral. Very often these days there is an opportunity for anyone at all to get up and say a few words. Many people of the older generation are still uncomfortable with it, but it is becoming the norm.

Celebrants can be nervous about it, but actually I have only once had to stop someone from rambling on too long. It was just a matter of a hand on his shoulder

and the question: “We’re going to run out of time—Can you just tell us your strongest memory of Joan?”

There is no doubt that these funerals, where anyone may speak, are the most appreciated funerals.

Finally, we are learning from Maori that *it is good to speak ill of the dead*. It is important that a funeral capture all the key elements of personality and character of the person who has died, and the way they are seen by the people close to them. Don’t dress sinners up as saints.

I have a cautionary tale. One of my colleagues—a very able practitioner, and in fact the man I was once apprenticed to in this trade—was once knocked out cold by a blow from the angry brother of the deceased at the end of the service. My colleague had just delivered a glowing eulogy for a young man who we’ll call Joe, who was killed in a road accident. But Joe’s brother was angry—angry at Joe really—because he thought Joe had abused their parents and was a bit of a scum bag. So the funeral celebrant who had failed to address that side of Joe found himself out cold on the chapel floor. On reflection he thought it might have been wiser to find some way of hinting at the brother’s reservations in the funeral.

I have a theory that even if there is really not much wrong with someone it is useful to find a flaw—it somehow makes the person more real and their qualities stand out, rather in the way that Michelangelo’s statue of David works so well in part because the hands are oversized. Everyone you do a funeral for had their oddities, their flaws, and it was often in fact their flaws that made them real and human.

I did the funeral for my primary school headmaster a couple of weeks ago—the best teacher I ever had and a man I tremendously admired. It was hard to find a flaw. But it is clear that when his children were young they had a bit of a hard time for a while dealing with his headmasterly habits at home. It is one of those kinds of things that is most often edited out of a funeral, and I guess there is also the possibility of making too much of such a thing. A brief mention was enough: “when they were kids it sometimes seemed a bit tough to have a headmaster as your father”. It brought back some times of conflict, but it made the whole funeral more real for them.

Of course there’s a bit of an art to presenting in an appropriate way the dark side of someone who has died, and the more serious the flaws the harder it can be. It is fairly easy to say about someone who was widely loved: “Sometimes he could be a grumpy old bugger.”

The most difficult funerals are when everyone dislikes the person who died. It seems important to find some of the good things about someone to tell at their funeral, as well as the bad, and sometimes that can be quite difficult. I did a funeral once for an old bloke whose wife was really pleased he’d died at last. He’d been terrible to her for years. Selfish and uncommunicative. I spoke to family. I spoke to neighbours. Nobody had a good word. Eventually I rang a sister in Australia, and she said that

yes, he had a bit of a difficult personality, but that he had been really nice when he was a little boy.

One rule of thumb I have is always to mention drinking if I find out it has been a problem. A funeral for a drinker that does not mention alcohol is not a funeral for that person at all. Alcohol has been a hugely important influence on them and on all the people close to them. And it is healthful for people to contemplate this fact and its impact on all the lives that are tied together around this person.

But there is a limit to how far you can go, and the celebrant must check things out. Often, although the drinking will be touched on lightly, it won't be mentioned as a *problem*. Perhaps it will just be in a list of the things the person enjoyed: "Tom really enjoyed his grandchildren, he enjoyed his garden, and [grin] he enjoyed his scotch." Even if a drinking problem is covered with no more than that—"he enjoyed his scotch"—this can be enough to bring the alcohol to mind, which makes the funeral seem more real, more honest, and make people realise... "Yes, this funeral is for *Tom*."

One of the times when it is most important to talk about the things that it is hard to talk about is in the case of suicide. Suicide should always be talked about openly. If suicide is not clear but suspected, then the suspicion should be discussed. Children in particular, need to know, and need to talk about it.

I once failed to convince a family of that. The mother had suicided. It was never discussed with the teenage son. And the funeral made no mention of suicide. A few months later I did a follow-up call—not something I do so very frequently. The son looked pretty depressed to me. I discovered he was seriously suicidal himself. He still didn't know his mother had suicided. Of course he *more or less* knew. He had *sort of* guessed. But it was an unmentionable topic. There was nobody he could talk to about the things that were most important to him.

We got him past that point, but the bad instructions, which I accepted, and the funeral which resulted, nearly killed this boy.

So try to get a license from the family to say the tough things. There is a paradox. If you say the tough things, people will hear the good things. But if you say only the good things, the thoughts about the tough things which are there in people's minds will get in the way of their hearing about those good things.

There's a lot more that might be said about funerals, of course. One thing's for sure. Funerals in this country are going secular. It is a field that will grow. Things are changing.

And secular funeral celebrants have a huge social responsibility. We are leading a process of change. We have a responsibility to make sure that we help set up patterns that help people come to better relationships with death, and better relationships with their memories of the important people in their lives who have

died.

*[Acknowledgments: The approach of this paper is informed by the writings of David Epston and Michael White. Particularly important is Michael White's paper, "Saying hullo again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief", in White, C., and Denborough, D., Introducing Narrative Therapy: A collection of practice-based writings, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide, 1998. Also highly valuable has been Klass, D., Silverman, P., and Nickman, S., Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief, Taylor and Francis, Washington, DC, 1996.]*