



Funerals for the Twenty-First Century

**Spiritually Rich, Non Religious
Funeral Ceremonies**

Susan M. Mumm, MA

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PLEASE NOTE:

This booklet was originally part of larger book entitled: The Rituals Resource Book -- Alternative Weddings, Funerals, Holidays & Other Rites of Passage. Due to a decrease in interest in printed books, I have chosen to not continue making printed copies of the book. All of the material contained in The Rituals Resource Book is now available on this website as free electronic downloads.

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Introduction

Most of the funerals I have attended in my life have been Christian ceremonies. These Christian based funerals have done very little to help me come to grips with, or understand death, because I no longer agree with Christianity's view of what happens to us after our lives on this earth end.* Some of the Christian funeral services I've attended through the years were particularly frustrating because I knew for a fact, that the family who had lost the loved one were not even Christians themselves. Thus, the ceremonies were not only at odds with my personal beliefs, but with the family's as well! It seemed pretty pointless for a family who hadn't been to church in twenty years to call in a Christian minister to conduct their funeral ceremony, particularly when the clergy person did not know the deceased person or their family. I suspect the reason that so many people resort to traditional religious funeral rituals is that alternatives are not readily available. A person is not in an emotional state to design an alternative funeral ritual when they are in the throes of grief and loss. It is too overwhelming a task. It's easier to stick with the familiar, inadequate though it may be.

I ended up writing a book about non-religious funerals, weddings, holidays, and rites of passage; a whole spectrum of spiritually rich, non-religious rituals. This booklet is an excerpt from that book, (now in its fourth edition) called Weddings, Funerals, & Holiday Celebrations for the Twenty-First Century. I wanted to provide a resource book for people looking for rites of passage outside of a Christian framework.

In putting this information about funerals, I ended up doing a considerable amount of legal research. I discovered there are a lot of laws pertaining to funerals that people need to be aware of as they go about planning an alternative funeral for a loved one, or making pre-arrangements for their own funerals. I also became more aware of how much our society tends to push the subject of death and funerals under the rug. I discovered that most people have had little opportunity to discuss their preferences for the disposition of their body after death, or what they might desire in terms of a funeral/memorial service, with their family or friends. As I learned more about the laws pertaining to funeral planning, I came to see how very important it is that people do discuss their preferences with family members. I very much enjoyed, and learned a lot, from hearing about peoples' preferences for body disposition and ideas for funeral services. I have included some of the information I gathered from my discussions with people, so readers can benefit from the research I did.

Lastly, I came to the definite conclusion that a funeral ritual can be a therapeutic and consoling experience if the ritual reflects the values and religious/political beliefs of those attending. I hope this booklet will enable anyone dissatisfied with traditional funeral rituals to design a funeral service for a loved one that they find comforting and meaningful. I also hope this information will help readers to make arrangements for their own funerals which they feel will reflect their beliefs and values.

* If you are interested in reading about my journey from a practicing Catholic to a person with a self-designed spirituality, please download the article [How to Get Closer to God Without Going to Church](#) from my website [personalgrowthresources.org].

Claiming Your Right to Plan a Funeral That Is Meaningful to You

The very first step towards planning an alternative funeral for a loved one, or requesting one on your own behalf, is to affirm your entitlement and power to do so. The funeral rituals in any culture tend to be viewed as sacred. Therefore, you may encounter opposition when you go against the norm. For example, you are very likely to encounter disapproval from funeral directors when you challenge their idea of the "proper funeral." Even friends and relatives are likely to balk if you reject the accepted funeral practices, because they are indoctrinated to accept, without question, what authority figures tell them funerals should be.

For example, if you bury your loved one in a cardboard box because you think the money for a "nice" casket would be better used in other ways, be ready for an onslaught of criticism. If you decide to conduct your own funeral/memorial service (for your deceased loved ones, that is) instead of having a clergy person facilitate, you will probably encounter disapproval from religious relatives. You may also have difficulty with public agencies. You may be given incorrect legal advice, and you may have to be very assertive in order to convince people that what you are demanding is not illegal, just unusual. **Many funeral procedures are customs, not legal requirements**, e.g. the practices of embalming or burial in a casket. Sometimes funeral directors often do not take kindly to the idea of "no frills" funerals.

One of the best ways to insure that you will be able to overcome the social pressures that might keep you from having the kind of funeral you believe in, is to think about funeral arrangements **ahead of time**. Feel free to talk to your family about the type of funeral you would like, and encourage them to share their preferences with you. Many people feel uncomfortable thinking or talking about the details and logistics of their own funerals. Yet a funeral is held in your behalf, and it is therefore logical that you should have some input. I felt more comfortable talking with my family about the kind of funeral I preferred be held in my behalf after reading about the funeral customs of the pioneers of the Appalachian area in a book entitled *Foxfire 2* (Anchor Press, 1973). I learned it was a custom of pioneer Appalachian women to sew the dresses they wanted to be buried in themselves, and for men to make their own coffins. So pre-planning one's own funeral is not a new idea! More and more people are beginning to express their preferences regarding their funerals. Since peoples' religious and philosophical beliefs are becoming more diverse, it is understandable that people will have different ideas about the kind of funeral they might want, both in terms of body disposition and the service itself.

Planning a funeral for a loved one, or preplanning one's own funeral, involves making many, many decisions. There are decisions to be made regarding how the body will be dealt with in terms of burial, cremation or donation for medical research. If you choose cremation or burial there are more decisions to make. Should the body be embalmed and/or viewed by guests? Where should the body be laid out? What kind of casket should be purchased? Where should the body be buried or ashes scattered? Then there are all the issues related to the nature of the service. Who should be the facilitator of the funeral or memorial service, and what kind of religious/philosophical viewpoint should be expressed? How much should family and friends participate in the service? Where should the service be held? Hopefully, this chapter will provide information to assist you in wading through all of these decisions.

Dealing with the Deceased Person's Body

In order to make decisions about how to deal with the body of a deceased loved one or to pre-plan how you would like your own body to be handled after death, it is important to be aware of the laws pertaining to body disposition. These laws vary by state, however I will try to give an overview of regulations that are quite common.

1) **Moving a Dead Body** In many states, only a funeral director can move a dead body. This means that even if you are planning a direct burial or cremation, you cannot transport the body from the hospital or your home to the cemetery or crematorium yourself. Crematoriums and cemeteries will not accept a body without a burial transit permit, and in some states only a funeral director can obtain this permit. Check with your state licensing board.

Author's Note:

In states which do not require a funeral director, people are taking the body of their deceased loved ones to cemeteries or crematoriums themselves and saving money by doing so. In researching this chapter, I read various articles by people who had chosen to deal with their deceased loved one's body themselves, who described the experience as being extremely therapeutic. People stressed how empowering and comforting it felt to care for the body of their loved one instead of delegating this very personal task to a complete stranger.

2) **Where Bodies Can Be Laid Out** It may come as a surprise to most people that you do not necessarily have to have the body laid out in a funeral home. In some states (Michigan, for one) law permits persons to have the body of a loved one laid out in their own homes, instead of at a funeral home, if they so desire. Of course, the law may or may not require that a funeral director transport the body to and from the home.

3) **Embalming** Embalming is not **automatically** required in any state. The circumstances under which embalming is required vary greatly from state to state. Some states do not require embalming under any circumstances. Some states require embalming if there is to be viewing of the body during the funeral service. Some other instances in which states require embalming include: when there is to be a period of wait between death and disposition of the body (the waiting period allowed varies), when the body is to be transported by common carrier, and when the deceased died of a serious communicable disease.

To determine the specific regulations in effect in your state, consult your state licensing board. Be aware that there are documented examples of funeral directors telling people that embalming is required when it isn't, so make sure that you are not given incorrect information. The Federal Trade Commission (F.T.C.) enacted a ruling which states that funeral directors must inform customers that embalming is not required except in certain circumstances. This F.T.C. ruling also prohibits funeral directors from embalming bodies without prior permission from kin.

4) **Caskets** Though state law may require that a body be enclosed in a casket for cremation or burial, the definition of **what** constitutes a casket may be interpreted in many ways. In most states, a cloth bag or cardboard box can qualify as a casket. So if you do not want to be buried in a traditional casket, find out if caskets are required in your state and, if so, what specifically the state law defines as a casket.

Author's Note:

*If you do want to use a casket, but do not want an expensive one, do not feel inhibited about asking the funeral director about plain pine boxes. Funeral directors usually have only expensive, ornate caskets on display, but simple wood ones **are** available.*

5) **Burial Vaults** A burial vault is a box, usually made of steel or cement, in which coffins are enclosed before burial. Whether or not burial vaults are required varies from state to state. However, in many states, it is the cemeteries, not state laws, that require vaults. Cemeteries that insist on vaults do so purely for profit. If a casket is buried without a vault, within a year or two, the grave will fall approximately one foot as the casket and body decay. The cemetery then has to fill in the grave and re-sod. Thus, to avoid the cost of refilling and re-sodding graves, cemeteries require vaults. The cost of a vault can range anywhere from \$600 for a simple cement one, up to thousands of dollars for fancy steel ones.

If you desire to not use a burial vault, find out whether they are required by law in your state. If not, you may be able to find a cemetery that does not require them. Check out small rural cemeteries, or ones that are publicly or cooperatively owned. Unfortunately, if all the cemeteries in your area require burial vaults, you may be required to use one.

Funeral directors and vault companies will, of course, tell you how wonderfully a vault will preserve the body of your loved one (preserve it for what, you might ask), but even the F.T.C. has determined that this claim is questionable.

6) Cremation A modern crematorium is a far cry from ancient cremation methods, a funeral pyre of branches gathered and lighted by family members under the stars. Crematoriums use expensive "high tech" equipment, and there's lots of regulations to go along with it. In most states, no one except clergy members, funeral directors, and crematorium personnel are permitted to observe the actual cremation of the body. Family are completely removed from the process. Family members are sent home, and when they return about twelve hours later, they are simply handed a "shoe box" full of crushed ashes to dispose of. But, you have to be careful where you scatter those ashes -- there may be a law against it! Many states have rules about where ashes can and cannot be scattered.

Author's Note:

I suspect that most people pay little heed to laws about scattering ashes. However, if you think that it might be illegal to scatter ashes where you intend to, e.g. in a national park or waterway, you should avoid making public announcement of your intention. Don't state, in the obituary, for example, that the ashes will be scattered at such and such National Park.

When deciding on a place to scatter ashes, make sure you take into account how the area may change in the future. If, for instance, you scatter your brother's ashes in the back yard under the willow tree, or in a wooded area he walked in every week, you may be disheartened if in a few years, the area is re-zoned and subsequently turned into a strip of McDonald's, 7-Eleven stores and gas stations, or the city dump. That is one positive aspect of cemeteries. They are sacred ground. You can be assured that if, in the future, you want to go to the place where your loved one's physical remains were interred, you will have peace and solitude. Thus, if you scatter ashes, it is probably better to do so in a city, state or national park, or a river or lake, all of which are protected from the ravages of urban development. Just do it discreetly.

So that is a brief summary of the laws pertaining to disposition of a deceased person's body. How does one go about deciding on what feels like the best option, within the legal constraints just discussed? I decided to interview people about their preferences. Since our society has a kind of taboo against discussing something so "distasteful" as what you want done with your body after you die, most people have had little conversations about the subject. Friends and acquaintances responded very positively to my queries. I have included a selection of the interview responses I received, as I think readers will benefit from hearing other people's thoughts about what they want done with their body after death.

Pros and Cons of Various Options for Body Disposition

(Selected Interview Responses)

BURIAL

Pros

"Burial is the most 'natural' method. Returning bodies to the earth for simple decomposition is the way Nature deals with the deaths of plants and animals."

Author's Note:

Unfortunately, many cemeteries have restrictions that require burial vaults. This obviously detracts greatly from the feeling of naturalness in returning ones body to the earth for decomposition. Vaults are made of materials like cement, steel, aluminum, and fiberglass, none of which are very conducive to decomposition. If it is important to you to be able to be buried without a vault, be sure you find out ahead of time if the cemeteries in your area require vaults for burial. If all cemeteries in your area do require vaults, research cemeteries that are in a more rural part of your state. They may be less likely to require them.

"Having a burial site gives surviving family and friends a physical place to go to when they want to communicate with the deceased person."

"Visiting the grave is an excellent way to help work through your grief. I've had very significant conversations at the graves of my loved ones through the years."

"I know some people find cemeteries depressing, but I find them to be a very peaceful. Even Native Americans had sacred burial grounds. My mother is buried in a cemetery where we are allowed to plant real flowers on the grave. It's really beautiful there, like a nice park."

"Burial is much more personal and 'real'. Family and friends can be present with the body the whole time. Some cemeteries even allow the family to help fill in the grave. With cremation, you don't actually see what happens to your loved one's body."

Cons

"Graves are depressing. I do not feel a need to be connected with a dead person's physical remains. The body has no significance once the spirit has left it."

"I tried visiting my father's grave once. I couldn't even talk to him. I wish he had been cremated and his ashes scattered along a river or something. That would be a much better place to connect with his spirit."

"The atmosphere of cemeteries are grossly ostentatious. They reflect our competitive society; Let's see who can buy the largest tombstone."

"I prefer burial, but I do hate cemeteries. I'd like to be buried somewhere where there were no tombstones; just a big beautiful park. I'd have no problem with children playing on top of my grave, or lovers strolling around, or old men sitting on a bench on top of me! Cemeteries are a gross waste of land. There could just be a large stone wall at the entrance of the park with everybody's name engraved on it. All the money spent on tombstones could be spent on swing sets and fountains and trees!

Author's Note:

Due to space problems caused by the population explosion, this is an idea likely to be explored in the future. In fact, the government is considering turning closed cemeteries into parks. (A closed cemetery is one in which the last person was buried at least 120 years ago.)

Donation of Body for Research/Transplantation

Pros

"I like the idea of my body helping to extend or improve the life of another human being. By donating your body to science, you help researchers gain valuable information which can help future generations."

"I'd like my body to be used for something useful, instead of wasting space in a cemetery or becoming useless ashes.

"I want to donate my body for research just to save my family all the costs of a funeral. What a huge waste of money. When I die, Wayne State Medical School will pick up my body at no cost, and when they've learned everything they can from my body, they'll cremate what's left of me. I made this decision when I was twenty-five, and I'm quite sure it's what I want"

Author's Note:

The exact amount to be saved by donating one's body is of course difficult to determine. There are many different options regarding burial or cremation which affect the cost. Please refer to the cost breakdown on pages 12-17 to get an idea of how much savings would result from donating your body for scientific research.

Cons

"I wouldn't give my body to any doctors! I have very little respect for the medical profession of this country; all they do is rip people off. I doubt my body would help a poor, needy person, directly or indirectly. Most of the medical research in this country ends up benefiting the rich. Does it make sense to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on medical technology to keep one eighty-year-old American alive for an extra three years (whose disease was more than likely caused by over-consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and high-fat diet) because he/she is rich enough to pay for it? That money could help hundreds of Third World poor children. No way am I going to let the American Medical Profession use my body to support a health-care system which is elitist, corrupt, and misguided in its values!"

"I like the idea of donating my body for research, but I worry that my body won't be treated respectfully and/or disposed of properly."

Author's Note:

Though there may have been neglect and abuse years ago, I am convinced by a report by The Consumers' Union that these fears are ungrounded at this time. Current day practices are regulated, and as a result, medical schools, etc., are very careful to treat bodies with respect. Institutions using bodies for research also have their own crematoriums now, and when they are done using the bodies, they cremate the remains. The ashes are then buried. Often medical schools even have a chaplain perform a service for the remains, during which they thank the people for their gift of their body for service to humanity.

"I think the idea of cutting up bodies is gross and repulsive."

Author's Note:

Though we are certainly all entitled to our preferences, I have to say that I found this particular comment comical. If I were to worry about what happened to my body after death, I don't find the idea of worms crawling in and out of my body, or my body being burned, any less repulsive than having it cut up.

CREMATION

Pros

"I'm being cremated because I'd rather my wife and kids spend the money on something to make their lives better, than on some silly silk casket for me."

"I want to be cremated. It just seems like the least expensive, simplest way. I have it all prearranged."

Author's Note:

See pages 12-17 for price comparisons between cremation and burial.

"I definitely want to be cremated so my ashes can be scattered somewhere beautiful. I much prefer the idea of my husband or kids going to the mountains, or a beautiful seashore, to think of me, than to a cemetery. Even though they try to make cemeteries look nice, they are disconnected from life. And they are so manicured; they have very little of Natures' beauty left in them!"

"What happens to my body after I die is of no importance to me. So cremation seems like the best thing to me. I tell my family -- just throw my ashes in Lake Michigan, and that's the last you need to think of them. Just think about the fun we had together when I was alive."

Cons

"I don't like the idea of having my body left at the crematorium. Who knows what they really do with it if you can't see them do it! Maybe they sell it to some black market storage place, like in that movie 'Coma.' I'd rather have my family watch them lower me into the ground. Too bad they can't bury me on the family homestead like in the old days."

"Cremation is too 'high tech' for me. Why use up all that natural gas burning my body when Mother Nature will decompose me for free, and turn me into good food for the worms?"

Another Issue To Decide: Open Vs. Closed Casket

Below is a list of "pro" and "con" statements regarding open vs. closed caskets, compiled from the above mentioned interviews.

Pros

"Looking at the body of the deceased person helps me to deal with the idea that he/she is dead. Once I was not informed of the death of a friend who lived out of state, and I therefore did not attend his funeral. For years it was difficult for me to really grasp that he was dead. Though I disagree with the usual ostentatious display of fancy casket and expensive flowers, I do think viewing the body is therapeutic."

Cons

"I think looking at people after they are dead is gross and disgusting. I keep flashing back to how my grandfather looked in his casket, instead of remembering how he looked alive."

"I don't want to have an open casket because I don't want to be embalmed. I don't want anyone touching my body for three days after death because it takes three days for the spirit to leave the physical body. Embalming interferes with the spirit leaving the body. Besides, I've eaten natural foods for twenty years. I don't want anybody injecting chemicals into my body, even after I'm dead."

Comparative Costs of Various Methods of Body Disposition

For some people, cost is a factor in deciding how they want their body to be dealt with after death. Some people want their body dealt with in the most economical means possible. This can be out of necessity, or for philosophical reasons; believing that money spent on the body after death is a waste of resources. Other people are not concerned with cost -- they just have a strong preference for having their body dealt with in a certain way, because that is what feels right to them. Even if cost is not a major consideration for you, there are ways to reduce funeral costs by being an informed consumer. Please find below a breakdown of the costs of various methods of body disposition. These were derived in 2014. I personally visited four funeral homes in southeastern Michigan to obtain these prices, and viewed the caskets and facilities as part of the process.

The least expensive way to dispose of your body after death is to donate it for medical research. Sometimes there is no cost to donate your body to a medical school. If you are approved, the medical school will come and pick up your body at the time of death. Do keep in mind though, that a body can be refused if circumstances of the death make it unacceptable. If it is important to you that it be 100% free, find a school that offers free pick-up of the body. Some medical schools require your body to be delivered to them via a funeral director. The approximate cost for a funeral director to do this (as of 2014) is \$1,000. If you want to have some kind of memorial service, you can rent the funeral home facilities for that purpose for an additional \$650- \$1,300 depending on the funeral home.

Cremation is the next least expensive method of body disposition. If you do a 'Direct Cremation' where your body is transported from the place of death directly to the crematorium, the approximate cost is \$895 -- \$2,495 depending on the funeral home. You can also do it through a Memorial Society and the cost is approximately \$1,170. If you want to have a memorial service, you can rent the funeral home facilities for that purpose for an additional \$650-\$1,300 depending on the funeral home. However, some people who want to be cremated, still want to have a more traditional funeral, and have their body embalmed and two days of viewing/visitation at the funeral home and a memorial service. This increases the bottom line cost to anywhere between \$5,785 to \$7,785 (assuming a low-end cremation casket or rental casket) depending on the funeral home (see breakdown below.) This option is still less expensive than a traditional burial.

Burial is the most expensive option. A Direct Burial into a moderately priced cemetery with no embalming or viewing of the body is approximately \$6,000. If you wanted to rent the funeral home facilities for a memorial service, it would be an additional \$700 to \$1,300, depending on the funeral home. A traditional burial, with 2 day viewing of the body ranges anywhere from \$9,090 to \$13,570, depending on the funeral home, see breakdown below.

If you choose a traditional cremation or burial, there are numerous ways to reduce the costs. The **location of the funeral home** plays a huge factor in the overall pricing for a "complete" burial or cremation, so you may want to consider locale when choosing a funeral home. The bottom line price for a complete burial or cremation in more blue collar cities is considerably less expensive than bottom line prices in more affluent cities. In more affluent communities, the prices are significantly higher for what are called "Basic Services of the Funeral Director \$2,795 versus \$1,950 for performing the same services. Use of the facilities for two days of viewing and a service also varied ranging from \$850 -- \$1,470. This difference makes sense because the funeral homes in the more affluent communities definitely were more nicely decorated, and of course they pay more in property taxes and to purchase their building.

However, what also contributed to the higher bottom line price for a complete cremation or burial in the more affluent communities is the choice of caskets they offer. In more working-class suburbs, there are perfectly nice caskets on display in the price range of \$1,000-\$1,440. In the more affluent suburbs, the cheapest caskets on display start at \$2,600. Furthermore, when I inquired about less expensive caskets in the affluent funeral homes, I was told by the funeral directors that though they could order less expensive caskets, I really

would not like them, and they would look very unattractive for a viewing. When I insisted that I'd like to look at the catalog anyway, I found the caskets to be perfectly fine; less ornate but definitely still attractive. Also, the catalogs of available caskets in the more affluent funeral homes only included about 25% the number of inexpensive caskets that the more modest funeral homes provided, and they were less attractive. The more affluent funeral homes obviously put no effort into finding a good line of inexpensive caskets. So always make sure to ask what other caskets are available if all the ones they show you on display are expensive. Caskets are delivered within 24 hours, so it is not a problem to order one. Orthodox Jewish caskets tend to be natural wood and inexpensive, but attractive. They are appropriate for cremation because they have no metal parts.

There was also a notable difference in price for cosmetic preparation of the body [dressing, washing, makeup & hairdressing] ranging from \$85.00 -- \$415.00, for the same services. Costs for the actual embalming and cremation were pretty standard in all funeral homes. Other misc things were priced \$100-\$200 higher as well in the funeral homes in the more affluent cities. Please see itemized costs below.

Traditional* Burial

(*By "traditional" I mean having the body embalmed, and 2 day viewing and memorial service at the funeral home.)

[At Funeral Home In Affluent City)

\$ 2,795	Basic Services of Funeral home staff
\$ 600	Embalming
\$ 415	Cosmetic Body Preparation
\$ 695	Two Day Visitation at Funeral home
\$ 695	Use of Funeral Home for Funeral Service
\$ 575	Transfer of body to funeral home
\$ 2,600	Casket (Lowest priced of what was displayed without asking for catalog.)
\$ 500	Use of Hearse to transfer body to cemetery
\$ 795	Minimum Burial Vault
\$ 1,100	Grave Opening & Closing
\$ 1,400	Typical Burial Plot
\$ 1,400	Basic Grave Plaque

\$13,570 Grand Total

Direct Burial Package

No viewing of body, cloth burial bag instead of casket.
With memorial Service at Funeral Home.

\$9,840

Traditional* Burial

(*By “traditional” I mean having the body embalmed and 2 day viewing and memorial service at the funeral home.)

[At Funeral Home In Working-Class City]

\$ 1,950	Basic Services of Funeral home staff
\$ 600	Embalming
\$ 85	Cosmetic Body Preparation
\$ 475	Two Day Visitation at Funeral home
\$ 375	Use of Funeral Home for Funeral Service
\$ 155	Transfer of body to funeral home
\$ 1,100	Casket
\$ 325	Use of Hearse to transfer body to Cemetery
\$ 625	Minimum Burial Vault
\$ 1,100	Grave Opening & Closing
\$ 1,400	Typical Burial Plot
\$ 900	Basic Grave Plaque

\$9,090 Grand Total

Direct Burial Package

No viewing of body, cloth burial bag instead of casket.
With memorial Service at Funeral Home.

\$6,500

Traditional* Cremation

(*By “traditional” I mean still having the body embalmed and 2 day viewing and memorial service at the funeral home.)

[At Funeral Home In Affluent City)

\$ 2,795	Basic Services of Funeral home staff.
\$ 600	Embalming
\$ 415	Cosmetic Body Preparation
\$ 695	Two Day Visitation at Funeral home
\$ 695	Use of Funeral Home for Funeral Service
\$ 575	Transfer of body to funeral home
\$ 1,550	Rental of casket with removable insert for cremation
\$ 295	Cremation Fee
\$ 50	County Permit
\$ 300	Transfer of body to crematory

\$ 7,970 Total

Direct* Cremation

* No viewing of body.
4 hour use of Funeral Home for Memorial Service

\$3,345.

Traditional* Cremation

(*By “traditional” I mean still having the body embalmed and 2 day viewing and memorial service at the funeral home.)

[At Funeral Home In Working Class City)

\$ 1,950	Basic Services of Funeral Home Staff.
\$ 600	Embalming
\$ 85	Cosmetic Body Preparation
\$ 475	Two Day Visitation at Funeral home
\$ 375	Use of Funeral Home for Funeral Service
\$ 155	Transfer of body to funeral home
\$ 1,375	Natural pine casket (purchase)
\$ 295	Cremation Fee
\$ 50	County Permit
\$ 300	Transfer of body to crematory

\$ 5,505 Total

Direct* Cremation

* No viewing of body.
Only 4 hour use of Funeral Home for Memorial Service

\$2,600 Total

Direct Cremation Through a Memorial Society

Memorial societies are often able to contract a lower price with funeral homes due to their volume. I was quoted the following price from the memorial society in my area in 2014:

\$1,170

If you wanted to use one of the funeral homes associated with the Memorial Society, it would be an additional \$750 for an hour of visitation (i.e. with an urn of ashes on display and some photos) and then a memorial service of approximately two hours.

Other Misc Costs:

There are of course other misc expenses associated with a funeral. These include: death certificates, flowers, a guest book, cards and programs for the service or a video. There is also the cost of some kind of luncheon afterwards. Though funeral homes have kitchens and lounges, these are just for light refreshments during viewing. They do not allow their facilities to be used for an actual luncheon or wake, as this would be too disruptive to other families using the facilities.

Legal Restrictions On Pre-Planning Your Own Funeral

When I wrote the first edition of this book in 1987, no state had legislation that gave a person the right to determine how his/her body would be disposed of after death.

"Under the early English Common Law, no rights of property in a dead body were recognized. [American Jurisprudence (1988) vol 2, 2nd edition Dead Bodies 4]. From this it followed, quite logically, that a dead body could not be the subject of a testamentary bequest, and that a testator's directions for the disposal of his [her] remains were merely a request without probative effect."

American Law Reports, 3rd Edition, (1966) Volume 7, pp. 748-9.

Though no one was considered to own a dead body, there were laws as to who has the rights of possession of a dead body for the purposes of burial:

"The courts have, however, created a right of possession (as opposed to the right of ownership) for purposes of disposition. A person's next of kin and executors have been held by the courts to have certain rights of possession over his body for the purpose of disposition, which take precedence over the person's antemortem express and contrary wishes."

- 1) Surviving spouse
- 2) Children of proper age
- 3) Parents

4) *Brother or sister*

5) *Or more distant kin, as modified by any circumstances of special intimacy or association with the decedent.*

William A. Neilson and C. Gaylord Watkins (1973) *Proposals for Legislative Reform: Aiding the Consumer of Funeral Industry Products and Services*, Cello Press, p. 14.

Instructions were therefore considered preference and these preferences could be overridden by surviving kin. And there were many, many cases of the preferences of the deceased person being overridden. Particularly in cases of gay couples, unmarried heterosexual couples, or anybody estranged from their birth families. Next of kin were known to step in and override the written wishes of the deceased causing much sadness and distress to long-term domestic partners, or friends of the deceased. Thus, it was not uncommon for people to; end up buried somewhere they would not have felt at all good about being buried; not be cremated when they specifically requested that was what they wanted; not have their cremated remains given to the person(s) they had requested have them; and not having their religious/philosophical principles reflected in their funeral service. There was one exception to this problem of not being able to control what happened to one's body after death: Even twenty-five years ago, a person could bequeath their body for medical research and this instruction could not be overridden by surviving kin.

Thankfully, in most states, directions for the disposition of ones body after death are now upheld by law and cannot be overridden by surviving kin or other people closely associated with the deceased. States vary as to what instruments are to be used for the directions: Some want it put in a will, some states recommend it be a part of an advanced Medical Directive or Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care. Some states have specific documents for directions of body disposition such as a Funeral Planning Declaration Form. For an up-to-date list of the forms required by each state and the corresponding laws and statutes which pertain to directing the disposition of your body after death, see the Funerals Consumers Alliance website at **www.funerals.org**.

So, if how you body is disposed of after you die is important to you, make sure you fill out the appropriate form for your state and have it witnessed and notarized. Give it to a person you trust will see that it is carried out. If you do not do this, your surviving kin may fight among themselves trying to figure out what you wanted. And some will fight to do what they believe should happen, or not happen, regardless of your verbally stated preferences.

In the following table I have listed which states have and do not have legislation guaranteeing a person's right to dictate how his/her body will be dealt with after death. If you live in a state that does not have such legislation, you might want to write your congressperson and perhaps send them a model form from another state to use as a guideline for getting legislation enacted.

Which States Have Body Disposition Legislation?

Name of State	Has Body Disposition Legislation?
Alabama	YES
Alaska	NO
Arizona	Probably -Some conflicting laws)
Arkansas	YES
California	YES
Colorado	YES
Connecticut	YES
Delaware	YES
Florida	YES
Georgia	YES
Hawaii	NO
Idaho	YES
Illinois	YES
Indiana	YES
Iowa	YES
Kansas	YES
Kentucky	Unclear --Conflicting laws
Louisiana	YES
Maine	YES
Maryland	YES
Massachusetts	YES* (Only if arrangements are prepaid)
Michigan	NO
Minnesota	YES
Mississippi	YES* (Only if arrangements are prepaid)
Montana	YES
Missouri	YES
Nebraska	YES
Nevada	YES
New Hampshire	YES
New Jersey	YES
New Mexico	YES
New York	YES
North Carolina	YES
North Dakota	NO
Ohio	YES
Oklahoma	YES
Oregon	YES
Pennsylvania	YES

Which States Have Body Disposition Legislation? (continued)

Name of State	YES
Rhode Island	YES
South Carolina	YES
South Dakota	YES
Tennessee	YES
Texas	YES
Utah	YES
Utah	YES
Vermont	YES
Virginia	YES
Washington DC	YES
Washington	YES
West Virginia	YES
Wisconsin	YES
Wyoming	YES

Designing an Alternative Funeral Service

Introduction

Dealing with the body is, of course, only part of arranging a funeral. Designing the service itself is the other half. I have heard a significant number of people state that they do not want any funeral/memorial service held in their behalf. Though the last funeral service I attended left me feeling that I never wanted to go to another one, I decided to channel my dissatisfactions about the funerals I have attended in my life into designing an alternative.

I felt an initial sense of uncertainty when I set about trying to write a funeral service. I, like most people in our culture, had been to mostly Christian funerals. However, I was so dissatisfied with traditional funerals that I was determined to develop some alternative funeral rituals, despite my misgivings.

I wanted to write a service that reflected something other than a Christian orientation, as I had long ago parted ways with Christianity. Yet I wasn't quite sure what religion I wanted it to reflect. My religious beliefs had no exact title. I had drawn ideas from Buddhism, Witchcraft, Native American Spirituality, Humanism, New Age Spiritualism, and who knows what else. Though I didn't need to come up with a label for my religious orientation to write a funeral service, I did need to decide what religious premises my funeral was going to be based on. Was the service going to reflect a belief in God, or an after-life? What explanation would my funeral ritual put forth as to the meaning of death, or for that matter, life? I knew I didn't like

Christianity's answers to these age old spiritual questions, but, on the other hand, I didn't have any pat answers myself.

After doing a good deal of soul searching, I resolved my thoughts and feelings about these issues enough to write some funeral rituals. I realized I could go on contemplating these questions indefinitely, but that would not get my funeral ceremony written! I decided to write two types of funeral rituals: one which reflected the perspective that there was life after death, and one with an atheist orientation. My "answer" to the question of whether there is an afterlife is never written in stone. I see both possibilities. So, it was not a problem for me to write funeral rituals from both perspectives.

An important part of my designing these alternative funeral services, besides my own introspections, was soliciting feedback and ideas from friends. After I wrote the rough drafts of the funeral services, I handed them out to approximately thirty people, with extensive questionnaires. I was amazed at how enthusiastically people responded to the opportunity to give their opinions about funerals. I used the feedback I received to improve the funeral services, and slowly but surely, I developed some workable alternative funeral services.

In addition to two sample funeral services, I have included a general outline for designing/facilitating an alternative funeral service, which I hope can assist people with the logistics of facilitating a funeral service. I have also included a collection of poems and inspirational readings suitable for funerals. I collected these readings from a variety of books, and also received a poem written by a friend. Hopefully, readers can use these readings to tailor the sample funeral rituals to their particular needs.

These rituals are meant to be facilitated by a friend or family member of the deceased. I do not believe that a person needs a degree in Divinity (of any creed) to lead a group of people in prayers of solace. I see a funeral service as a coming together of people who have known and loved the deceased to share their grief, and help one another cope with the pain surrounding death.

An Agnostic Funeral Service

Facilitator:

We have all come together today to share our sadness over the death of someone we all love very dearly. We also come together to renew our faith that death has a divine purpose, and to communicate our love, appreciation, and hopes to _____ as he/she begins a new part of his/her spiritual journey.

Facilitator:

We know death is but a passage to another existence, filled with more joy and challenges. Yet, we feel grief and sadness at this parting. We feel a pain that reaches into the depth of our being. There are no words that can take away our sadness. It is something we must live with. For our sadness comes out of our ability to love, and it is love that gives richness and joy to our lives. It is our love for _____ that is causing our sadness. Yet, as much as we would like to wish away this sadness, we would not want to wish away our ability to love. Let us seek comfort in our sadness in the words of the poet Gibran. Let us read together:

Facilitator and Guests:

(In Unison)

*When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep,
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his
pinions may wound you.*

*And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams
as the north wind lays waste the garden.*

*For even as love crowns you so shall he
crucify you. Even as he is for your growth
so is he for your pruning.*

*Even as he ascends to your height and
caresses your tenderest branches that quiver
in the sun,*

*So shall he descend to your roots and
shake them in their clinging to the earth.*

*...If in your fear you would seek only
love's peace and love's pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover
your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-floor.*

*Into the seasonless world where you
shall laugh, but not all of your laughter,
and weep, but not all of your tears.*

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***Author's Note:**

I would prefer that this poem did not contain male pronouns, which I consider sexist. However, I think Gibran's poetry is unmatched in beauty and wisdom. It was written in the 1920's before people were conscious of sexist language. When I use this poem in my own rituals, I rewrite it, removing the sexist pronouns. However, for publication, I must reprint an author's work as originally written.

Facilitator:

As we weep and grieve, let us also rejoice that we have known the joys of love. Let us also remember that we would not trade away that joy, even to escape this sadness.

Facilitator:

Though death brings sadness, we must remember that the spirit lives on after death. Let us renew our faith that death has a divine purpose by listening to the words of Edward Carpenter.

Reader#1:

Among the Ferns

*I lay among the ferns,
Where they lifted their fronds, innumerable, in the greenwood
wilderness, like wings winnowing the air;
And their voices went by me continually.*

*And I listened, and Lo! softly inaudibly raining I heard not
the voices of the ferns only, but of all living creatures:
Voices of mountain and star,
Of cloud and forest and ocean,
And of little rills tumbling among the rocks,
And of the high tops where the moss-beds are
and the springs arise.*

*As the wind at midday rains whitening over the grass,
As the night-bird glimmers a moment, fleeting between the
lonely watcher and the moon,
So softly inaudibly they rained,
While I sat silent.*

*And in the silence of the greenwood, I knew the secret of the
growth of the ferns;
I saw their delicate leaflets tremble, breathing an undescribed
and unuttered life;
And, below, the ocean lay sleeping;
And round them, the mountains and the stars dawned in glad
companionship forever.*

*And a voice came to me, saying:
In every creature, in forest and ocean, in leaf and tree and bird
and beast and man, there moves a spirit other than
its mortal own
Pure, fluid as air--intense as fire,
Which looks abroad and passes along the spirits of all other*

*creatures, drawing them close to itself,
Nor dreams of other law than that of perfect equality;
And this is the spirit of immortality and peace.*

Reader #2:

*And whatsoever creature hath this spirit, to it
No harm can befall, for wherever it goes it has its nested home,
and to it every loss comes charged with an equal gain;
It gives -- but to receive a thousand-fold;
It yields its life -- but at the hands of love;
And death is the law of its eternal growth.
And I saw that was the law of every creature -- that this spirit
should enter in and take possession of it,
That it might have no more fear nor doubt, or be at war within
itself any longer.*

*And, lo! in the greenwood all around me, it moved,
Where the sunlight floated fragrant under the boughs,
And the fern-fronds winnowed the air;
In the oak-leaves dead of last year, and the small shy things
that rustled among them;
In the songs of the birds, and the broad shadowing leaves
overhead;
In the fields sleeping below, and in the river and the high
dreaming air;
Gleaming ecstatic it moved -- with joy incarnate.
And it seemed to me, as I looked, that it penetrated these things,
suffusing them;
And wherever it penetrated, behold there was nothing left
down to the smallest atom, which was not winged spirit
instinct with life.*

*Who shall understand the words of the ferns lifting their
fronds innumerable?
What man shall go forth into the world, holding his life
in his open palm --
With high adventurous joy from sunrise to sunset--
Fearless, in his sleeve laughing, having outflanked his
enemies?
His heart like nature's garden -- that all men abide in--
Free, where the great winds blow, rains fall, and the sun
shines,*

*And manifold growths come forth and scatter their
fragrance?
Who shall be like a grave, where men may bury
Sin and sorrow and shame, to rise in the new day
Glorious out of their grave? who, deeply listening,
Shall hear through all his soul the voices of all creation,*

*Voices of mountain and star, voices of old men,
Softly audibly raining? shall seize and fix them,
Rivet them fast with love, no more to lose them?
Who shall be that spirit of deep fulfillment,
Himself, self-centered? Yet evermore from that centre
Over the world expanding, along all creatures
Loyally passing -- with love, with perfect equality?
Him immortality crowns. In him, all sorrow
And mortal passion of death shall pass from creation.
They who sit by the road and are weary shall rise up
As he passes. Those who despair shall arise.
Who shall understand the words of the ferns winnowing
the air?
Death shall change, as the light in the morning changes:
Death shall change, as the light 'twixt moonset and dawn.*

Edward Carpenter, (1949) Towards Democracy, London, England: George Allen & Unwin L.T.D., pp. 151-154.

Author's Note:

I again apologize for the sexism. I had difficulty finding appropriate poems for funerals, and was therefore reluctant to omit good poems because of their sexist pronouns. As I mentioned before, when I use poems in my rituals, I rewrite them removing the sexist pronouns.

Facilitator starts music.

Facilitator:

Though _____ is no longer with us, he/she will live on through the many gifts he/she has given us during her/his lifetime. Let us take time today to share with one another the gifts that _____ has given each of us during his/her lifetime. Please form a circle. Let us share with one another how _____ contributed to our growth and happiness during his/her lifetime.

(Facilitator should instruct guests to break into sub-groups of 10 people. Allow ample time for each person to speak for a few minutes. Crying should not be discouraged. It is part of the grieving process.)

Facilitator:

In order to help _____ in his/her passage from this lifetime to the next stage in his/her existence, let us express our gratitude to _____ for all the gifts he/she has given us in his/her lifetime. Let us join hands and join together in sending a silent prayer of thanks, love, and encouragement to _____ in his/her new realm of existence.

Facilitator:

As we are faced with death again, we are reminded that our lives on this plane will end too. In order to be able to face our own deaths with calmness and serenity, we need to take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to use our lives to the best of our abilities, to further the growth and evolution of our spirits. May _____'s death be a catalyst for each of us to reattune ourselves to our unique purpose in this lifetime. May we leave here today with a renewed commitment to use each day of our lives to manifest our potential as fully as possible.

Facilitator:

Let us remember, in the coming months, to take time in our lives to continue our grieving process, which today has just begun. In order to heal our grief, let us remember not to block, but to fully experience, all of our feelings. In closing, let us remember to share our sadness with one another; for in sharing our grief, each of our burdens are made lighter.

Facilitator:

_____ 's daughter _____ will scatter his ashes in Rocky Mountain National Park as he requested.

Facilitator:

The family wishes to thank everyone for attending. The service is ended.

An Atheist Funeral Service

Introduction

I spent the first ten years of my adulthood as an atheist. Christian funerals were always difficult for me. I found none of the words consoling, because I didn't believe any of the ideas about an afterlife to be true. Since the service was of no help to me, I was left to struggle and grapple with a way to understand and cope with death myself. I think death is much more painful for atheists, because they cannot console themselves with the idea that the deceased is going on to heaven or another life. I am no longer a staunch atheist; I now consider that there might be an afterlife. However, I still prefer to try and make peace with death without consoling myself with the idea that there may be something more. I hope this ceremony will help people who do not believe in God, or an afterlife, find comfort at the time of death of a loved one.

An Atheist Funeral Service

Facilitator:

We have all come together today to share our sadness over the death of someone we all love very dearly. We feel a grief today that reaches into the depth of our being. There are no words that can take away our sadness. It is something we must live with. Yet, this painful sadness is born out of the joy we have felt in knowing and loving _____. As much as we would like to wish away this sadness, we would not want to wish away the joy we have experienced from having _____ as a part of our lives. Let us seek comfort in our sadness in the words of the poet Gibran. Let us read together:

Facilitator and Guests:

(In Unison)

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your
laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your
tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your
being, the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very
cup that was burned in the potter's oven?
And is not the lute that soothes your
spirit, the very wood that was hollowed
with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into
your heart and you shall find it is only that
which has given you sorrow that is giving
you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in
your heart, and you shall see that in truth
you are weeping for that which has been
your delight.
Some of you say, "Joy is greater than
sorrow," and others say, "Nay sorrow is
the greater."
But I say unto you, they are inseparable.*

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Facilitator:

As we weep and grieve, let us also rejoice that we had the joy of knowing _____, and remember that we would not trade away that joy, even to escape this sadness.

Facilitator:

In order to cope with death, we must reaffirm our understanding that each of our lives has a purpose that transcends this physical existence. Let us recite together the poem "Solace" by Susan Mumm:

Solace

*A human being
I am born,
knowing not my origins,
knowing not my fate.
Yet these things I know.
I am part of
a larger whole.
Though someday
I shall die,
In fact,
I am immortal.
For I am part
of
all that came before me,
And all
that shall come after.*

*I
am
a link
in the ever-evolving
family
of all people.
Though I shall
die,
the gifts I give
to others
shall live on.
All that I give
of myself--
the love that helps
others to
manifest their full potential,
And the
bits of knowledge
I add
to the collective wisdom,

Shall contribute
to the welfare
of
humanity
to come.*

*I
am
a seed
of
Nature,*

*Through which
life
passes
from
one
to
another,
in
never-ending
growth.
In this
knowledge,
I
find
joy
in
existence,
and
solace
in
death.*

*Susan M. Mumm
© 1987*

Facilitator:

Let us each take a few moments to share with one another the gifts that _____ has given each of us in his/her lifetime.

(Facilitator should instruct the guests to break into sub-groups of 10-15. This sharing is probably best done sitting in a circle. Allow ample time for each person to speak for a few minutes. Crying should not be discouraged. It is part of the grieving process.)

Facilitator:

May we now join hands and offer a remembrance of thanks to _____ for the gifts s/he has given us.

Facilitator and Guests:

(In Unison)

_____, we thank you for the precious gifts you have given us. A part of you shall live on in us.

Facilitator starts music.

Facilitator:

As we face death again, we are reminded of our own impending deaths. Let us take this opportunity to remind ourselves to live our lives such that we can approach our own deaths with calmness and serenity. May we all leave here today with a renewed commitment to become more loving and giving human beings, that we may in our unique ways, help humankind grow to its fullest heights.

Facilitator:

_____ has donated his/her body to (name of institution) for medical research, so that his/her death will help the living.

Facilitator:

We will now have the closing reading. We will read the poem *Thanatopsis* by William Cullen Bryant.

Reader #1:

Thanatopsis

*To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides*

*Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart.
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around--
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air--
Comes a still voice.*

Reader #2:

*Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist thy image.
Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever with the elements,*

*To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mold.*

*Yet not to thine eternal resting place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world--with kings,
The powerful of the earth -- the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seer of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulcher. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun, -- the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between*

*The venerable woods -- rivers that move
In majesty -- And the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,--
Are but solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man.
The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.*

Reader #3:

*Take the wings of morning,
Pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings -- yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flights of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep -- the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,*

*The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man--
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those who in their turn shall follow them.*

*So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who warps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.*

Facilitator:

The family wishes to thank everyone for attending. The ceremony is ended. Go in peace.

A Memorial Service for the Soul of a Friend

Introduction

This is a small, private ceremony. In instances when a person agrees to have a traditional funeral for a loved one, in order to meet the needs of extended family, having a separate memorial service with a small group of friends can be a great comfort. By dealing with funeral arrangements in this manner, you don't offend relatives of other generations or lifestyles, yet make sure your needs get met by having an alternative service that is a reflection of your spiritual beliefs.

A Memorial Service for the Soul of Our Friend

Note: Guests are sitting in a circle on the floor.

Facilitator:

Let us focus the energy of this group by joining hands. Let us welcome the peace and communion that comes through silence.

Facilitator:

(After a short period of silence)

Let anyone who feels moved to speak, share your thoughts and feelings.

(Pause)

Guest #1:

When someone dies at a young age like _____ has, it's really a challenge to come to grips with it. It really tests your spiritual faith.

Even though I feel like I have spiritual answers somewhere deep inside of me, which will give me the strength to deal with this, it's difficult to find them right now, when it's all so raw and painful.

But I'm just going to try and keep reminding myself that I don't believe there is such a thing as death or grief which doesn't serve some broader Divine purpose. When I set my grief aside for a moment, I hear an inner voice which tells me _____ is gone, because it was time for him to leave this earth, because his soul has a more pressing calling in another plane of existence. I know in time I'll come to peace with this.

Guest #2:

My faith is challenged by this too. I'm feeling a little stronger today than I was yesterday, and I'm hoping the healing process will move me a little more through my grief every day.

Some thoughts I've been using to help me cope with my sadness is to remember all the other people on this earth who are suffering, other people who are coping with situations, which seem just as tragic and unfair as _____'s death.

There are mothers losing eight-year-olds to leukemia and brain tumors. There are people in all kinds of countries who see their loved ones murdered before their eyes every day, and plenty of people in our own ghettos losing their sons and daughters to urban violence every day. When I remember that, I am not alone in my pain. I am reminded that I have not been singled out by God or fate to be made to suffer a tragedy. I then feel challenged to work through my pain and anger, and get to a place of acceptance. I want to get back to that feeling of trust in the Universe again, despite this pain that I've been hit with. I guess I'll just be doing a lot of meditating this coming year.

(Facilitator allows time for anyone who feels moved to speak to do so.)

Facilitator:

Let's join together in a prayer of release for _____'s spirit. _____, we pray that our words will help your spirit to leave this plane in peace and tranquility. We shall all miss you dearly, but we know it is time for you to move on in your eternal journey.

Guests:
(In unison)

Guided After Death Meditation

My friend, listen now, for that which is called death has arrived. So let go gently, gently, of all that holds you back. Of all that pulls you away from this most precious moment. Know that now you have arrived at the transition called death. Open to it. Let go into it.

Recognize the changing experience of the mind as it separates from the body, dissolving. Dissolving now into the realms of pure light. Your true nature shining everywhere before you.

My friend, the clear light of your original nature is revealed now in this release from heavier form. Enter into the brilliance of the light. Approach it with reverence and compassion. Draw it into yourself and become what you have always been.

My friend, maintain an openheartedness, a spaciousness of being that does not grasp. Let things be as they are without the least attempt to interfere. Pushing away nothing. Grasping at nothing.

Enter the essential nature of your own being shining there before you, a great luminosity. Rest in being. Knowing it for what it is. This light shining, luminous. Your true self.

My friend, at this moment your mind is pure luminous emptiness. Your original mind, the essence of being, shines before you. Its nature is compassion and love, vibrant and luminous.

...Let go, gently, gently, without the least force. Before you shines your true being. It is without birth, without death. It is the immortal light seen shining in the eyes of newborns. Recognize this. It is the Evershining.

Let go of all which distracts or confuses the mind, all that created density in life. Let go into your undifferentiated nature shining there before you. You have always been this light now revealed.

Go gently into it. Do not be frightened or bewildered. Do not pull back in fear from the immensity of your true being. Now is a moment for liberation.

...Listen without distraction, for what is called death has arrived. You are not alone in leaving this world. It happens to everyone. Do not desire or yearn for the body you have just left behind. You cannot stay. Indeed to force back into this life will only cause you to wander in bewilderment and confusion, stumbling in the illusions of the mind. Painting wonders that do not exist. Creating terrors that are unreal. Open to the truth. Trust in your own great nature.

...Now is the time for holding nowhere, for melting into the great light of your original nature. Melt, dissolve into the luminosity of being.

...Go forward. Stay nowhere in mind, letting all that arises pass away as it does.

...Float free in the vast spaciousness. Your devotion to the truth will carry you through.

...Move with devotion and openheartedness towards the light. Become the pure edgeless spaciousness within which the flow continues.

My friend, many days have passed now since you left your body. Now know the truth as it is and go on, taking refuge in the vastness of your original nature. Know that you are well guided by your compassion and love. You are the essence of all things. You are the light.

Stephen Levine, Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying, Copyright (1982) by Stephen Levine. Reprinted with permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, NY pp. 284-6, 289.

Facilitator:

We will end this ceremony with a lighting of candles.

[Facilitator passes out a small, (quick burning) candle to each guest.]

Facilitator:

_____, each of us lights a candle to you in farewell. Please hear the loving wishes we send you. The candles before us shall be transformed from matter to energy, just as your essence has moved from body to spirit.

[Each guest lights their candle from the source candle and places it in the candelabra, then returns to the circle. The group sits together in silence, watching the candles burn.]

Facilitator:

I think this ceremony has helped all of us to find comfort in the knowledge of our shared grief. I hope we can continue to support one another in the coming months.

Outline for Designing and Facilitating an Alternative Funeral Service*

I. Introduction by Person Chosen to Be Facilitator

Comment upon the purpose of coming together for a funeral service, and give a brief outline of what will happen at the service. Thank guests for coming on behalf of the family.

II. Acknowledgment of Grief, and Statement about Inevitability and Purpose of Grief

Verbally acknowledging the grief that everyone is feeling is a means of pulling everyone together. Talking about grief as an inevitable part of human existence that everyone goes through will help people feel more confident that they will be able to cope and pick up the pieces. The pain can feel very overwhelming and frightening. Discussing the positive aspects of sadness, i.e. re-asserting that joy cannot exist without pain, is consoling.

III. Renewal/Affirmation that Death Has a Divine Purpose

Because death is such an intensely sad and frightening time, strengthening people's faith in an after-life and a Divine being of some kind (God/Goddess/Great Spirit), is a key component of a funeral service. It is important to help people view their immediate experience with death in a broader perspective, to enable them to see death as necessary to attain a greater end. Viewing death from this perspective makes their pain more bearable, because death is seen as having an important purpose. When faced with the death of a loved one, even people who are not normally very religious feel a strong need to feel connected to God, and to feel themselves to be part of a Divine Plan.

There are obviously an infinite amount of poems and readings that can be used for this part of the service. The selection should be based on the wishes of the deceased and the needs of the people attending the funeral. If there is a great deal of difference in the religious beliefs of family and friends of the deceased, it often makes sense to have several different selections read, even if they totally contradict. Different guests will relate to different readings, and filter out those that do not fit their world-view. In cases where extended family and friends of the deceased are extremely intolerant of one another's religious beliefs, it may make most sense to hold dual services, each one being tailored to the religious preferences of those attending. There is a list of suggested readings and poems on at the end of this chapter.

IV. Playing of Selected Music

"Music is the language of the soul." Thus, music is an integral part of any funeral. I have often heard people say that a given piece of music can move them more than any words. I think music is particularly helpful at funerals, because it often captures the ebb and flow of life. The notes flow together to form a harmonious whole, just as life and death flow together and blend into the whole of human existence. People often use music that was particularly liked by the deceased.

**This outline is for a service which reflects the philosophical premise that there is a supreme being of some kind, and an after-life. Those desiring an Atheist ceremony can make adjustments in content, i.e. defining death as a part of the cycles of Nature.*

V. Expression of Gratitude to the Deceased for Gifts Given in His/Her Lifetime, and Prayers of Love and Encouragement to the Deceased in His/Her New Realm of Existence

[The facilitator should instruct the guests to break up into sub-groups of 10. Allow ample time for this, and explain to people that crying is acceptable and normal.]

This part of the ceremony replaces the traditional eulogy. It allows for participation by everyone attending the funeral, an aspect that I think is seriously lacking from traditional funerals. Each person attending the funeral is given the opportunity to speak about the gifts the deceased has given them in his/her lifetime. Being of a more personal nature than a traditional eulogy, it can bring to light not just the obvious accomplishments of the deceased person's life, but also the more subtle ways he/she enriched and transformed the lives of people he/she knew during his/her lifetime. This sharing helps people to reaffirm that those who die go on enriching our lives far beyond the time they are alive.

This exercise can also serve as an inspiration to those participating, to draw closer to their family and friends. By hearing how the deceased person's life touched the souls of those he/she left behind, participants recognize how important their relationships with one another are. In addition, there are many people who believe that the spirit of the deceased is present at the funeral. So this sharing may also serve the purpose of clarifying for the deceased person how they were viewed in their life by others. Lastly, joining together to verbally send encouragement to the deceased is a tradition that has been part of funeral rituals for thousands of years. It helps to reaffirm that the life of the spirit exists beyond death. Prayers of love and encouragement voiced, as a group, create an amazing positive energy.

VI. Acknowledgment of What Death Can Teach the Living

I've sat through many a fire and brimstone funeral service, with the preacher taking full advantage of a captive audience to implore each and every one in the audience to take Jesus into their hearts right then and there, because death could get them at any time. I do not advocate proselytizing at funerals. However, death does in fact carry an inherent message for the living: that we are mortal and need to evaluate whether we are living our lives as we most want to be living them. I think that a brief, nurturing statement about using this death as a catalyst to make the changes we long to make in our own lives is useful.

VII. Closing Announcements

- 1) Thank people for attending.
- 2) If burial will follow the service, an announcement should be made for last viewing of the casket. Also announce whether the grave-side service will be for family only, or open to everyone. Announce where the deceased will be buried. This is useful for people who may want to visit the grave later.
- 3) If the deceased's body has been cremated, make an announcement regarding the interment or scattering of the ashes. If the deceased requested that his/her ashes be scattered somewhere in particular, that should be announced.

Examples:

- a) "Since John loved the mountains, his wife will scatter his ashes in Rocky Mountain National Park."

b) "Mary has requested that her ashes be scattered in the Mississippi River, for she firmly believed that, as rivers flow onward, so shall her spirit."

4) If the deceased has donated his/her body for scientific research, announce that.

VIII. Closing Reading

This should be something brief. Since these parting words will be what remain freshest in people's minds, I suggest trying to include some specific ideas to help them cope with their grief. For example: "Let us remember, in the coming months, to talk about our grief with one another, for sadness is always made more bearable by sharing it with others."

IX. Closing Statement

Finalize the service so that people know it has ended. Saying something like "The service is ended. Go in peace." prevents the service from ending on an abrupt note.

X. Grave-side Service (if applicable)

I suggest that this be kept fairly brief. People are often cold or hot, exhausted, and the children are restless by this point.

You may want to consider filling in the grave as part of the service. These days, this is rare. The casket is usually lowered, and the grave closed, after the people leave. However, in former days, the grave was, of course, filled in by the family and friends. I think the fact that family and friends no longer participate in closing the grave encourages people to avoid dealing with death, rather than acknowledging and working through their grief surrounding death. I almost had to laugh at the explanation given to me by a funeral director when I asked him why those attending the funeral no longer participate in the closing of the grave. "It's too emotional. It makes people cry." How absurd! Death is emotional, and crying is a healthy human response to sadness! The purpose of a funeral is to provide a supportive environment in which to grieve. The more crying and grieving that can be done at the grave side, the less that will have to be done in the months that follow. Most cemeteries will allow family and friends to at least be present and throw handfuls of dirt, though some will require that the cemetery staff do the major part. You may be able to find a cemetery that will allow you to do the entire grave closing yourself. If participating is important to you, make sure you inquire beforehand, and choose a cemetery that will allow you this freedom.

Putting Your Funeral Instructions in Writing and Discussing It With Family & Other Relevant People

It is very important to put your instructions for the type of funeral you would like in writing. Each state designates what document should be used for funeral arrangements. Sometimes it is a will, but a lot of states have a specific document, other than a will, that is to be used. Please consult the following website for each state's requirements:

www.funerals.org

After you have put your wishes regarding your funeral arrangements into writing, it is important to discuss them with family and other relevant people. By discussing matters beforehand, you can hopefully help avoid there being bad feelings after your death, because everyone will be aware of your wishes ahead of time. Particularly if there is lots of diversity in religious beliefs in your extended family, having discussions about funeral arrangements ahead of time allows people to mentally/emotionally prepare for a funeral service or body disposition that may not be congruent with their religious beliefs. On the following pages is a list of information you will want to include in your funeral instructions.

Checklist for Funeral Instructions

- 1) List the person you would like to be in charge of making your funeral arrangements.
- 2) List any prepaid policy you have, or any special bank account you have set aside for funeral costs.
- 3) List family, friends, and acquaintances you would like informed of your death, and where their phone numbers are located.
- 4) List any requests about costs of funeral.
- 5) List any insurance policy you have, or money set aside, to cover costs of the funeral, and where policy papers/money are located.
- 6) List particular information you would like included in your obituary, i.e. specific accomplishments.

DISPOSITION OF BODY

List whether you would like to be buried.

- a) Do you have a preference for a particular cemetery?
- b) Do you own a grave lot there?

List whether you would like to be entombed.

- a) Do you have a preference for a particular mausoleum?
- b) Do you own a space there?

List whether you would like to donate your body for Scientific Research.

- a) Do you have a preference for a particular school, hospital, etc.?
- b) Have you made any pre-arrangements to donate your body to a specific organization?

List whether you would like to be cremated.

- a) Do you wish your ashes to be scattered? If so where? By Whom?
- b) Do you prefer your ashes to be buried or entombed? Where?
- c) Would you like your ashes given to a particular person (s)?

NOTE: Ashes can be split up into little envelopes and given to as many as twenty people.

SERVICE

- 1) Do you want your body to be present at the funeral/memorial service?
- 2) Do you want an open or closed casket?
- 3) Do you wish to be embalmed?
- 4) Do you prefer flowers or donations to memorial funds?
What organization(s) should memorial funds be donated to?
- 5) a) Do you want your funeral service to be facilitated by a clergy person?
If so, who?

b) Do you prefer for a friend/relative to facilitate?
If so, who?
- 6) List particular people you would like to be given the opportunity to speak at your service.
- 7) List particular selections you would like read at your funeral (i.e. poems, a personal statement from you, spiritual/religious readings).
- 8) List anything you might want omitted from your funeral, i.e., mention of God -- if you are an atheist.
- 9) List any particular music you would like played at your service.
- 10) Where would you like the service held i.e. church, funeral home, residence, other?
- 11) List people you would like to serve as pallbearers. (Both men and women are acceptable.)

Additional Readings for Funerals

My Hereafter

*Do not come when I am dead
To sit beside a low green mound,
Or bring the first gay daffodils
Because I love them so,
For I shall not be there.
You cannot find me there.
I will look up at you from the eyes
Of little children;
I will bend to meet you in the swaying boughs
Of bud-thrilled trees,
And caress you with the passionate sweep
Of storm-filled winds;
I will give you strength in your upward tread
Of everlasting hills;
I will cool your tired body in the flow
Of the limpid river;
I will warm your work-glorified hands through the glow
Of the winter fire;
I will soothe you into forgetfulness to the drop, drop,
Of the rain on the roof;
I will speak to you out of the rhymes
Of the Masters;
I will dance with you in the lilt
Of the violin,
And make your heart leap with the bursting cadence
Of the organ;*

*I will flood your soul with the flaming radiance
Of the sunrise,
And bring you peace in the tender rose and gold
Of the after-sunset.*

*All these have made me happy.
They are a part of me;
I shall become a part of them.*

Juanita de Long

On Death

*You would know the secret of death.
But how shall you find it unless you seek
it in the heart of life?*

*The owl whose night-bound eyes are
blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery
of light.*

*If you would indeed behold the spirit of
death, open your heart wide unto the body
of life.*

*For life and death are one, even as the
river and the sea are one.*

*In the depth of your hopes and desires
lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow
your heart dreams of spring.*

*Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden
the gate to eternity.*

*Your fear of death is but the trembling
of the shepherd when he stands before the
king whose hand is to be laid upon him in
honour.*

*Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his
trembling, that he shall wear the mark of
the king?*

Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?

*For what is it to die but to stand naked
in the wind and to melt into the sun?*

*And what is it to cease breathing, but to
free the breath from its restless tides, that
it may rise and expand and seek God
unencumbered?*

*Only when you drink from the river of
silence shall you indeed sing.*

*And when you have reached the mountain
top, then you shall begin to climb.*

*And when the earth shall claim your
limbs, then you shall truly dance.*

*Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet, Reprinted by
permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Copyright,
(1923), by Kahlil Gibran and renewed (1951) by
administrators C.T.A. of Kahlil Gibran Estate
and Mary G. Gibran, pp. 80-1.*

Soul, Wherefore Fret Thee?

*Soul, wherefore fret thee? Striving still
to throw
Some light upon the primal mystery
Through rolling ages pondered ceaselessly,
Whence thou hast come, and whither thou
shalt go!
Some deepest, secret voice gives thee to
know
How older than created earth and sea,
Thou hast been ever, shalt forever be,--
Unborn--undying! Thy own life doth
show,
Yester, today, to-morrow, but a chain
Of dusky pearls, whereof we seek in
vain
End or beginning, though perchance the
one
We call Today gleams whitest in the
sun.
Ay, Soul, thy very Self is unto thee
Immortal pledge of Immortality!*

*Gertrude Bloede
(Pen-name Stuart Sterne)*

Death

*Death that struck when I was most confiding
In my certain faith of joy to be--
Strike again, Time's withered branch dividing
From the fresh root of Eternity!*

*Leaves, upon Time's branch, were growing
brightly,
Full sap, and full of silver dew;
Birds beneath its shelter gathered nightly;
Daily round its flowers the wild bees flew.*

*Sorrow passed, and plucked the golden blossom;
Guilt stripped off the foliage in its pride;
But, within its parent's kindly bosom,
Flowed forever Life's restoring tide.*

*Little mourned I for the parted gladness,
For the vacant nest and silent song--
Hope was there, and laughed me out of sadness,
Whispering, "Winter will not linger long!"*

*And, behold! with tenfold increase blessing,
Spring adorned the beauty-burdened spray;
Wind and rain and fervent heat, caressing,
Lavished glory on that second May!*

*High it rose--no wing'ed grief could sweep it;
Sin was scared to distance with its shine;
Love, and its own life, had power to keep it
From all wrong--from every blight but thine!*

*Cruel death! The young leaves droop and
languish;
Evening's gentle air may still restore--
No! the morning sunshine mocks my anguish--
Time, for me, must never blossom more!*

*Strike it down, that other boughs may flourish
Where that perished sapling used to be;
Thus, at least, its mouldering corpse will nourish
That from which it sprung--ETERNITY.*

Emily Bronte

Readings From The Bhagavad Gita
(Adapted by Susan Mumm)

*The wise grieve not for those who live, and they grieve not for those who die--
for life and death shall pass away.*

*Because we all have been for all time. And we all shall be for all time, we are all forever and
ever.*

*As the spirit of our mortal body wanders on in childhood, and youth and old age
the Spirit wanders on to a new body: Of this the sage has no doubts.*

Interwoven in creation, the Spirit is beyond destruction.

No one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting.

*For beyond time the Spirit dwells in these bodies, though these bodies have an end in their
time; but the Spirit remains immeasurable, immortal.*

*The eternal Spirit cannot die. The Spirit is never born, and never dies. It is in eternity and is
for evermore. Never-born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, the Spirit does not die
when the body dies.*

*As one leaves an old garment and puts on one that is new, the Spirit leaves the mortal body
and then puts on one that is new.*

*Weapons cannot hurt the Spirit and fire can never burn. Untouched by drenching waters,
untouched by parching winds, the Spirit is everlasting, omni-present, never-changing, never-
moving, ever One.*

*The Spirit that is in all beings is immortal in them all: for the death of what cannot die, cease
thou to sorrow.*

The Eternal Springtime

Remember, in the darkening hour, that the glow of the universe once filled thy heart, and that thou hast acknowledged the magnitude of existence. Hast thou not looked forth into one half of infinity by night, and into the other half by day? Think away the nothingness of space and the earth which is around thee; worlds above, around and beneath, arch thee about as a center, all impelling and impelled; splendor within splendor, magnitude within magnitude; all brightness centering in the universal sun. Carry thy thoughts forward through eternity towards that universal sun; thou shalt not arrive at darkness nor emptiness. What is empty dwells only between the worlds, not around the world....

Remember, in the dark hour, how in the spring of thy life the mounds of earth which are graves, appeared to thee only as the mountain tops of another far and new world; and how, in the midst of the fulness of life, thou didst acknowledge the value of death. The snow of the grave shall warm the frost-bitten limbs of age to life again. As a navigator who suddenly disembarks from the cold, wintry and lonely sea, upon a coast which is laden with the warm rich blossoms of spring, so with one leap from our little bark we pass at once from winter to an eternal springtime.

Rejoice in this dark hour that thy life dwells in the midst of a wider and larger life. The earth clod of the globe has been divinely breathed upon. A world swarms with life, for the leaf of every tree is a land of souls; and every little life would freeze and perish if it was not warmed and borne up by the eddies of life about it. The sea of time glitters, like the sea of space, with countless beings of light, death and resurrection on the valleys and mountains of the ever-swelling ocean....

Never forget the thought, which is now so clear to thee, that the individuality of man [humanity] lasts out the greatest suffering and the most entrancing joy alike unscathed, while the body crumbles away in the pains and pleasures of the flesh. Herein are souls like marsh lights, which shine in the storms and the rain unextinguishable.

Jean Paul Richter

*Those I would teach, and by right reason bring
To think of death as but an idle thing.*

*Why thus affrightened at an empty name,
A dream of darkness, and fictitious flame...*

*What feels the body when the soul expires,
By time corrupted, or consumed by fires?*

*...the spirit, but new life repeats
In other form, and only changes seats.*

*...Then death, so call'd, is but old matter dress'd
In some new figure, and a varied vest.*

*Thus all things are but alter'd, nothing dies;
And here and there the unbodied spirit flies....*

*From tenement to tenement though toss'd,
The soul is still the same, the figure only lost.*

*And as the soften'd wax new seals receives,
This face assumes, and that impression leaves.*

*Now call'd by one, now by another name;
The form is only changed, the wax is still the same,*

*So death, so call'd, can but the form deface,
The immortal soul flies out in empty space*

To seek her fortune in some other place.

Ovid

*Taken from Poetical Works of John Dryden
London, England, 1886 IV, pp. 292-3.*

Last Lines

*No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere.
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.*

*O God, within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life--that in me has rest,
As I--undying Life--have power in Thee!*

*Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds,
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main.*

*To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thine infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of immortality.*

*With wide-embracing love
Thy Spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears.*

*Though earth and man were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And Thou were left alone,
Every existence would exist in Thee.*

*There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void.
Thou--Thou art Being and Breath,
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.*

Emily Bronte

When They Remember Me

*Friends would gather.
Choosing night. Knowing my love of it.
Each person bringing a food to
share, a drink to warm.
Bringing it to the outdoors, gathering
together in the wild,
gathering near water,
gathering under the cover of green,
gathering wood for a fire,
gathering strength, joining hands.*

*Circling with love, upon the land
calling me to mind.
Naming me to the wind.
Sending me to the Goddess.
Releasing me to the unknown.
Calling out to the ancients to the directions.*

*Noises in throats, warmth in the belly.
Cries in the lungs, tears in the eyes.
Letting me go.
Letting me know.
Knowing the weakness of our strength.
The strength of our weakness.*

*Someone would move, moving others.
Someone would laugh, loving others.
Someone would cry, needing others.*

*Someone would sing, healing others.
Someone would talk, soothing others.
Hands would be joined.
Feet would be free.*

*Knowing the earth, sensing the sky.
Knowing my spirit to fly.
There would be dancing.*

*There would be cleansing.
There would be loving.
There would be grounding.
There would be silence.
There, would be me.*

*Julia Bayha, Unpublished poem (1987)
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"Listen, my friend! I am a sinner and you are a sinner, but someday the sinner will be Brahma again, will someday attain Nirvana, will someday become a Buddha. Now this "someday" is illusion; it is only a comparison. The sinner is not on the way to a Buddha-like state; he is not evolving, although our thinking cannot conceive things otherwise. No, the potential Buddha already exists in the sinner; his future is already there. The potential hidden Buddha must be recognized in him, in you, in everybody. The world, Govinda, is not imperfect or slowly evolving along a long path to perfection. No, it is perfect at every moment; every sin already carries grace within it, all small children are potential old men, all sucklings have death within them, all dying people--eternal life. It is not possible for one person to see how far another is on the way; the Buddha exists in the robber and dice player; the robber exists in the Brahmin. During deep meditation it is possible to dispel time, to see simultaneously all the past, present and future, and then everything is good, everything is perfect, everything is Brahman. Therefore it seems to me that everything that exists is good--death as well as life, sin as well as holiness, wisdom as well as folly. Everything is necessary, everything needs only my agreement, my assent, my loving understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me." . . . Bend near to me!" he whispered in Govinda's ear. "Come, still nearer, quite close! Kiss me on the forehead, Govinda."

Although surprised, Govinda was compelled by a great love and presentiment to obey him; he leaned close to him and touched his forehead with his lips. As he did this, something wonderful happened to him. While he was still dwelling on Siddhartha's strange words, while he strove in vain to dispel the conception of time, to imagine Nirvana and Samsara as one, while even a certain contempt for his friend's words conflicted with a tremendous love and esteem for him, this happened to him.

He no longer saw the face of his friend Siddhartha. Instead he saw other faces, many faces, a long series, a continuous stream of faces--hundreds, thousands, which all came and disappeared and yet all seemed to be there at the same time, which all continually changed and renewed themselves and which were yet all Siddhartha. He saw the face of a fish, of a carp, with tremendous painfully opened mouth, a dying fish with dimmed eyes. He saw the face of a newly born child, red and full of wrinkles, ready to cry. He saw the face of a murderer, saw him plunge a knife into the body of a man; at the same moment he saw this criminal kneeling down, bound, and his head cut off by an executioner. He saw the naked bodies of men and women in the postures and transports of passionate love. He saw corpses stretched out, still, cold, empty. He saw the heads of animals--boars, crocodiles, elephants, oxen, birds. He saw Krishna and Agni. He saw all these forms and faces in a thousand relationships to each other, all helping each other, loving, hating and destroying each other and become newly born.

Each one was mortal, a passionate, painful example of all that is transitory. Yet none of them died, they only changed, were always reborn, continually had a new face: only time stood between one face and another. And all these forms and faces rested, flowed, reproduced, swam past and merged into each other, and over them all there was continually something thin, unreal and yet existing, stretched across like thin glass or ice, like a transparent skin, shell, form or mask of water--and this mask was Siddhartha's smiling face which Govinda touched with his lips at that moment. And Govinda saw that this mask-like smile, this smile of unity over the flowing forms, this smile of simultaneousness over the thousands of births and deaths--this smile of Siddhartha--was exactly the same as the calm, delicate, impenetrable, perhaps gracious, perhaps mocking, wise, thousand-fold smile of Gautama the Buddha, as he perceived it with awe a hundred times. . . ."

Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, Copyright, (1951), by New Directions Publishing Corporation, pp. 143, 144, 149, 150, 151. Reprinted with permission.

...Death opens the door to life, to life renewed and re-experienced as a child experiences it, with the dew still on it.

And so comes the next opening--the sense of being part of a universe, of a personal relatedness to all life, all growth, all creativity. Suddenly one senses that his life is not just his own little individual existence, but that he is bound in fact to all of life, from the first splitting off of the planets, through the beginning of animate life and on through the slow evolution of man. It is all in him and he is but one channel of it. What has flowed through him [her], flows on, through children, through works accomplished, through services rendered; it is not lost. Once given the vision of one's true place in the life stream, death is no longer complete or final, but an incident. Death is the way--the only way--life renews itself. When the individual has served his purpose as a channel, the flow transfers itself to other channels, but life goes on. And in this great drama of life renewed, one sees and feels the divine presence, and feels himself one with it.

Bradford Smith (1965) Dear Gift of Life: A Man's Encounter with Death. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 142, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, p. 15. Reprinted with permission.

As I accepted the change of the golden hair of my childhood to the reddish-brown hair of my youth without regret, so I also accept my silver hair--and I am ready to accept the time when my hair and the rest of my clay garment returns to the dust from which it came, while my spirit goes on to freer living. It is the season for my hair to be silver, and each season has its lessons to teach. Each season of life is wonderful if you have learned the lessons of the season before. It is only when you go on with lessons unlearned that you wish for a return.

...If we but knew how short is the earth life in comparison with the whole, we would be less troubled with the difficulties of the earth life than we are troubled now with the difficulties of one of our days...

*Peace Pilgrim, (1983) Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words.
Santa Fe, New Mexico: Ocean Tree Books, pp. 84-5.*

Omega

There is no need to be afraid of death. It is not the end of the physical body that should worry us. Rather, our concern must be to live while we're alive--to release our inner selves from the spiritual death that comes with living behind a facade designed to conform to external definitions of who and what we are. Every individual human being born on this earth has the capacity to become a unique and special person unlike any who has ever existed before or will ever exist again. But to the extent that we become captives of culturally defined role expectations and behaviors--stereotypes, not ourselves,--we block our capacity for self-actualization. We interfere with our becoming all that we can be.

Death is the key to the door of life. It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual existences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and expectations and to devote each day of our lives--however long they may be--to growing as fully as we are able. We must learn to draw on our inner resources, to define ourselves in terms of the feedback we receive from our own internal valuing system rather than trying to fit ourselves into some illfitting stereotyped role.

It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each today is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings.

There is an urgency that each of you, no matter how many days or weeks or months or years you have to live, commit yourself to growth. We are living in a time of uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and despair. It is essential that you become aware of the light, power, and strength within each of you, and that you learn to use those inner resources in service of your own and others' growth. The world is in desperate need of human beings whose own level of growth is sufficient to enable them to learn to live and work with others cooperatively and lovingly, to care for others--not for what those others can do for you or for what they think of you, but rather in terms of what you can do for them. If you send forth love to others, you will receive in return the reflection of that love; because of your loving behavior, you will grow, and you will shine a light that will brighten the darkness of the time we live in--whether it is in a sickroom of a dying patient, on the corner of a ghetto street in Harlem, or in your own home.

Humankind will survive only through the commitment and involvement of individuals in their own and others' growth and development as human beings. This means development of loving and caring relationships in which all members are as committed to the growth and happiness of the others as they are to their own. Through commitment to personal growth individual human beings will also make their contribution to the growth and development, the evolution of the whole species--to become all that humankind can and is meant to be. Death is the key to that evolution. For only when we understand the real meaning of death to human existence will we have the courage to become what we are destined to be.

When human beings understand their place in the universe, they will become able to grow to assume that place. But the answer is not in words on this page. The answer is within you. You can become a channel and a source of great inner strength. But you must give up everything in order to gain everything. What must you give up? All that is not truly you; all that you have chosen without choosing and value without evaluating, accepting because of someone else's extrinsic judgment, rather than your own; all your self-doubt that keeps you from trusting and loving yourself or other

human beings. What will you gain? Only your own, true self; a self who is at peace, who is able to truly love and be loved, and who understands who and what (s)he is meant for. But you can be yourself only if you are no one else. You must give up "their" approval, whoever they are, and look to yourself for evaluation of success and failure, in terms of your own level of aspiration that is consistent with your values. Nothing is simpler and nothing is more difficult.

Where can you find the strength and courage to reject those outer definitions of yourself and choose, instead, your own? It is all within you if you look and are not afraid. Death can show us the way, for when we know and understand completely that our time on this earth is limited, and that we have no way of knowing when it will be over, then we must live each day as if it were the only one we had. We must take the time, now, to begin--one step at a time, at a pace that makes us not afraid, but rather eager, to take the next step, to grow into ourselves. If you practice life with compassion, love, courage, patience, hope, and faith, you will be rewarded by an ever increasing consciousness of the help that can come forth if only you look within yourself for strength and guidance. When human beings "find a place of stillness and quiet at the highest level of which they are capable, then the heavenly influences can pour into them, recreate them, and use them for the salvation of humankind."

Death is the final stage of growth in this life. There is no total death. Only the body dies. The self or spirit, or whatever you may wish to label it, is eternal. You may interpret this in any way that makes you comfortable.

If you wish, you may view the eternal essence of your existence in terms of the impact your every mood and action has on those you touch, and then in turn, on those they touch, and on and on--even long after your life span is completed. You will never know, for example, the rippling effects of the smile and words of encouragement you give to other human beings with whom you come in contact.

You may be more comfortable and comforted by a faith that there is a source of goodness, light, and strength greater than any of us individually, yet still within us all, and that each essential self has an existence that transcends the finiteness of the physical and contributes to that greater power.

Death, in this context, may be viewed as the curtain between the existence that we are conscious of and one that is hidden from us until we raise that curtain. Whether we open it symbolically in order to understand the finiteness, of the existence we know, thus learning to live each day the best we can, or whether we open it in actuality when we end that physical existence is not the issue. What is important is to realize that whether we understand fully why we are here or what will happen when we die, it is our purpose as human beings to grow--to look within ourselves to find and build upon that source of peace and understanding and strength which is our inner selves, and to reach out to others with love, acceptance, patient guidance, and hope for what we may all become together.

In order to be at peace, it is necessary to feel a sense of history--that you are both part of what has come before and part of what is yet to come. Being thus surrounded, you are not alone; and the sense of urgency that pervades the present is put in perspective. Do not frivolously use the time that is yours to spend. Cherish it, that each day may bring new growth, insight, and awareness. Use this growth not selfishly, but rather in service of what may be, in the future tide of time. Never allow a day to pass that did not add to what was understood before. Let each day be a stone in the path of growth. Do not rest until what was intended has been done. But remember--go as slowly as is necessary in order to sustain a steady pace; do not expend energy in waste. Finally, do not allow the illusory urgencies of the immediate to distract you from your vision of the eternal...

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Laurie Braga, and Joesph Braga, (1975) Death: The Final State of Growth. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, pp. 164-7. Reprinted with Permission.

Darest Thou Now O Soul

*Darest thou now, O Soul,
Walk out with me toward the unknown region.
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to
follow?*

*No map there, nor guide,
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes, are
in that land.*

*I know it not O Soul,
Nor dost thou; all is a blank before us.
All waits, undream'd of in that region, that
inaccessible land.*

*Till, when the ties loosen,
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds
bounding us.*

*Then we burst forth, we float,
In Time and Space O Soul, prepared for them.
Equal, equipt at last, (O Joy! O fruit of all!) them to
fulfil O soul.*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

*Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love--but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*

*Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all.
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.*

*Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

*From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee.
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.*

*The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.*

*Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the
prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.*

Walt Whitman, Leaves Of Grass.

Assurances

*I need no assurances, I am a man who is preoccupied of his
own soul.*

*I do not doubt that from under the feet and beside the hands
and face*

*I am cognizant of, are now looking faces I am not cognizant
of; calm and actual faces.*

*I do not doubt but the majesty and beauty of the world are
latent in any iota of the world.*

*I do not doubt I am limitless, and that the universes are
limitless, in vain I try to think how limitless.*

*I do not doubt the orbs and the systems of orbs play their
swift sports through the air on purpose, and that I shall
one day be eligible to do as much as they, and more than they.*

*I do not doubt that temporary affairs keep on and on millions
of years.*

*I do not doubt interiors have their interiors, and exteriors
have their exteriors,*

*And that the eyesight has another eyesight, and the hearing
another hearing, and the voice another voice.*

*I do not doubt that the passionately-wept deaths of young men
are provided for,*

*And that deaths of young women and the deaths
of little children are provided for.*

*(Did you think Life was so well provided for, and Death,
the purport of all Life, is not well provided for?)*

*I do not doubt that wrecks at sea, no matter what the horrors
of them,*

*No matter whose wife, child, husband, father, lover, has gone
down are provided for, to the minutest points.*

*I do not doubt that whatever can possibly happen anywhere at
any time,*

Is provided for in the inherences of things.

*I do not think Life provides for all and for Time and Space,
but I believe Heavenly Death provides for all.*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

*Louisa May Alcott
(In Memoriam)*

*As the wind at play with a spark
Of fire that glows through the night,
As the speed of the soaring lark
That wings to the sky his flight.*

*So swiftly thy soul has sped
On its upward, wonderful way,
Like the lark, when the dawn is red,
In search of the shining day.*

*Thou art not with the frozen dead
Whom earth in the earth we lay,
While the bearers softly tread,
And the mourners kneel and pray;*

*From thy semblance, dumb and stark,
The soul has taken its flight--
Out of the finite dark
Into the Infinite Light.*

Louise Chandler Mounton