

Stories from Funeral Celebrants



Celebrating the Life
While Mourning the Death

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As a Life-Cycle Celebrant and officiate, Adam Phillips specializes in helping his clients mark all the milestones of their lives. While he puts his heart into every ceremony he performs, he gets special satisfaction from performing funerals and memorial services. These ceremonies allow loved ones and the extended community to note and appreciate the fullness of an entire life, to reflect in a safe, yet focused way on what that life meant, and to say farewell. He is touched and honored when grieving family members tell him, “It is as if you knew him”; “You helped us say goodbye”; or “Your words made it seem like you were a part of our family.”

Adam’s Celebrancy training was received from the Celebrant Foundation and Institute, with special certifications in Funerals and Weddings. He also received a BA from Vassar College with a combined independent major in religion, philosophy and psychology.

About a Life Celebration

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Many modes or themes can be effective in a funeral or memorial service, from eulogies, to music and song, poetry, scripture culled from the world’s religions, inspirational readings, even dance. For a well-rounded effect, it is helpful to use as many senses as possible in a ceremony, so frequently candles and even aromas can be used. I have often performed services where the deceased was an artist, photographer or musician. In these cases, it can be moving to have examples of their work for the assembly to see and experience, or to have work that the deceased loved made visible in the program or at the front of the room. If he or she loved a particular piece of music, it can be meaningful to hear it played or sung; a single unaccompanied voice of musical instrument can be powerfully effective.

In my experience, the heart of the ceremony is usually the words and emotions of the people who knew and cared about the deceased, and in as many of the roles as that person played in life. For example, for a man who was a doctor it might be touching to hear about his professional competence and healing warmth from a patient, or a fellow or nurse and perhaps someone who knew him when he was a young intern or resident. Perhaps the same man was active in the local pet shelter, or believed firmly in some political or social cause that demonstrated his values and human qualities, and what he was passionate about. Maybe he was a father as well as a husband and friend. Each role will carry its own nuance and meaning. And while no life can be summed up entirely, the more facets of a person we are privy to, the

more his or her essence can be humbly approached, understood, appreciated and honored by those that gather to mourn.

So it behooves those who knew the deceased best to give the minister or officiant the names of people to interview in a structured and empathetic way. What did that person love? What would make him smile? Is there one thing you could always count on him or her for? What could people count on him *never* to do? What are three words or qualities that come to mind when you think of this person? What would he or she be wish to be remembered for?

On one level, these talks are so the minister can say something true from his own heart during the service, as he synthesizes and expresses the perspectives and themes and life patterns the conversations have elicited. Not incidentally, these talks also give the bereaved the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and emotions at a critical and painful time, and to put them in perspective in the witnessing of another who did not know the deceased. That's one place where the "ministerial" side of a celebrant's job comes to the fore.

For religious clients, carefully chosen scripture and music may express their traditions and provide comfort. Readings can be read by friends or family members during the service. That gives a personal touch, and honors a connection. It can also be a way for someone to contribute to the service when, either out of modesty or emotional "overwhelm," or other reasons he or she does wish to speak about themselves personally.

Many people describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious," or "non-religious." Ideally, in every meaningful and sensitively thought-through ceremony, *all* concerned find some clear and authentic expression for their feelings. A limitless wealth of music, song, poetry, scripture and other inspirational literature from around the world is available to draw upon. Often, unique ceremonial elements can be tactfully introduced. For example, mourners can pick one flower from an assortment of types. In outdoor ceremonies, a stone can be placed on the grave, or some special bauble or written phrase can be cast into a body of water as a farewell prayer or wish.

In my experience, it is also good to take a breather and reflect without words. This pause can with or without music or any other man-made sound. Measured silence can indeed be “golden.”

Whatever the culture, personal style, temperament, beliefs or wishes of the bereaved, the constant in any officiant’s job is to set forth the context of the gathering, to bind those assembled into a community, to hold the space safe and sacred, and to offer respectful, compassionate and authoritative guidance.

End-of-life ceremonies are usually solemn, but there is an important place for humor as well—the telling anecdote, the touching memory, the little joke that illuminates a theme, or a characteristic that embodies the deceased, that “could only be him or her.” Laughter also releases tension and balances things out.

Speaking of balance: while it is the modern convention (and one that I welcome) that funerals and memorial services should be “celebrations of life,” in my experience, funeral attendees also often find it viscerally satisfying to directly acknowledge the harsh sting of personal loss and the blunt truth of death during the service, even briefly. Doing so can serve as the gateway for personal reflection, gratitude, and ultimately, a nuanced and full-bodied affirmation and celebration of the entirety of who the deceased was. The whole assembly can then begin to “move on” together.

That “moving on” often takes the form of symbolic words and actions. For example, if time permits, I often invite people at my services to come up to light a candle on the altar or “nature table” at the front of the room and briefly express, either aloud or inwardly, some quality, memory or lesson they are grateful for from the deceased, or to offer some word, thought or prayer that can serve as a leave-taking. This moment can inspire people to ask “what was made possible for me as an individual and for my family and community because that person lived and was among us?” If the proper groundwork has been laid, most participants will take the opportunity to come up and light a candle. As more people do so, the light on the altar itself grows, and bears poignant, silent testimony to the life that was lived, the life that has passed, and the eternal abiding mystery at the heart of our human journey.