WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT
THE FUNERAL
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foreword

From the moment you start reading this book you think, ‘Why on earth didn’t someone think of writing this years ago?’ It genuinely satisfies a long felt want because we are far too squeamish to discuss or even think about our own deaths.

The Victorians were much wiser. They knew the good of thinking about death well in advance and took interest in every detail. They saved money to pay for their funerals, sometimes finding it hard to afford it, but feeling a sense of security when they had actually done so. This splendid book will offer you all the options and all the possibilities you might want to think about, give you a guide on costs and, above all, will make life much easier for your family and friends. What could be a better legacy for them than that?

Claire Rayner

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green fuse was launched with a brave vision in 2000 and is indebted to Ruth Jenni, Rachel Laine, Rebecca Barnstaple for their pioneering spirits, Don Thornford, Phil Thornford for their extraordinary talents with flowers and photography. For sharing the vision, John Fox and Sue Gill of Welfare State International, Mike Jarvis of the Natural Death Centre, Dr Tony Walter of Reading University, James Roose-Evans of Beddifa, Prof. Malcolm Johnson of Bristol University, Rupert Callender, Mahesi Caplan Faust, Carol Aston, Paula Rainey Crofts, Hazel Selina. For support, encouragement, and harsh and exciting comments throughout the project, Wild Geese. For giving us feedback on the drafts of the book, Jim Jervis, Sophie Banks, Dr Jonathan Shaw, Georgina Tisdall, Annie Mitchell, Ruth Binney. For vision and encouragement, Miranda Spicer our publisher, and our design and production team, Susan and Andrew Sutterby, and all who have helped and advised us over the last six years, we appreciate you. Special thanks to Annabel Miln, John Haggar, Debbie Carnegie, Hannah Nutbeam, John and Nikki Spurr, Claire Ballard, Rod Nelson, Jane and Jon Dunn, John Evans, Fred Christopher, Andrew Lithgow, Dr Linda Durman, Brian Perring.
introduction

What do you do when someone dies? How do you arrange a funeral? You may have more idea about what you don’t like about funerals than what it is you would like and we have brought together 101 practical points to give you information and to help you make choices.

The funeral rites and ceremonies of your religion are part of worship and may offer you great comfort, but if you do not attend a place of worship on a regular basis, like four out of five people in the UK, you may be looking for a more individual approach to funerals. All the ideas in this book have come from our work with clients over the last six years, to give you enough information to take charge to the extent that feels right along with the necessary reassurance to help you fulfil your wishes.

There is no expectation to hold a ‘perfect funeral’, but rather an appropriate, heartfelt one. Families, friends and communities can move away from convention to reclaim choice over how to hold a funeral and experience how important this is for grieving and remembrance.

As part of our work as funeral conductors we hold discussions and talks about death, funeral arrangements and ceremonies. We meet people who have a desire to talk candidly about death and what funeral directors do. We have heard a powerful voice demanding more participation by the bereaved in caring for the body and in the funeral ceremony, to bring in more heart and soul to complement the already efficient procedures. It is refreshing to see more women becoming involved with funerals in the roles of clergy, funeral directors and conductors.

Our main objective is to give a perspective on funeral arrangements that is rarely heard, enabling you to find your own way to think about and achieve what you want. We suggest a starting place to think about how to choose poetry and music specifically for the person who has died and we recommend existing anthologies. We do not examine the funeral rites of specific faiths, but offer ideas and perspectives, which might appeal to anyone looking for a funeral that does not adhere strictly to a tradition. Our intention is not to create a rival to traditional religious practices but to be inclusive of tradition and innovation. A personal, open-hearted and memorable funeral serves the spiritual beliefs of the person who has died – and the bereaved.

Our experience has shown that small gestures can improve a funeral and make it more personal and heartfelt, which is why some simple ideas, which can transform the whole experience, are included. Alternatively, you will find here what you need to create a wildly unconventional funeral if you wish.

We appreciate enormously the courage of all the individuals and families who have engaged in the challenging process to find the right place, music and words in order to create a heartfelt ceremony at times of overwhelming grief. Their persistence to give their loved ones the best possible funerals and ceremonies they could has been an inspiration to us personally and professionally, and provided the basis for this book, which we hope will inspire more people to do the same. We particularly thank those who agreed to share their stories and photographs as a way of passing on their experiences.

This book is designed and organised into sections and numbered points so you can easily access the information you want. It is a book to dip into and therefore it has been necessary to repeat some information in different sections, for clarity.

Jane Morrell & Simon Smith
C's mother died at home. C decided she did not want her mother's body to be disturbed for twenty-four hours. She helped the nurse make the body secure and comfortable, and left her lying peacefully on her bed in a cool room. Friends and relatives came to visit and sit with her body. As this arrangement worked well, C kept deferring the funeral director’s visit to collect her mother. In the end, she kept her at home for three days, surrounded by those who loved her. Many felt that this had helped C's mother to make the transition from this life to the next, and they gained great comfort and a sense of completion from spending time with her body.

You may feel that you would like to participate in caring for the body of the person who has died during the time leading up to the funeral. You have choices as to how they are looked after. Until relatively recently, it was commonplace to bring them home, as is still the case in many countries and religious traditions. Now that the dead are so neatly and quickly tidied away, many people have become unfamiliar with them and fear them.

Some who spend time with the body, tending and caring for them, praying for them and sitting with them, find their view of death is profoundly changed as they gain a sense of the life or soul leaving, perhaps to continue its journey. Being faced with an empty shell that once held the life of the person, in its stillness and final peace, can be a profoundly moving experience, particularly if the person had suffered pain or injury before dying. Fear of the body dissipates and an understanding of what it is to die, grows.
Natural burial and green burial are terms used for returning a body to the earth in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Natural burial grounds may be in nature reserves, flower meadows, woodlands or fields being turned into new woodlands or meadows. These burial plots are often in beautiful surroundings.

In 1995 Ken West, the bereavement officer for Carlisle, set up the first woodland burial site in the UK. The three main objectives were to:
- provide an alternative, more natural environment for the bereaved
- reduce ongoing management costs of burial grounds
- use the land to provide a wider range of environmental benefits

Through the process of organising these woodland funerals in Carlisle some families realised that they could create much more personal and satisfying funerals by participating in making the arrangements and organising the ceremonies themselves. These family-led woodland funerals are often referred to as ‘green funerals’. The initiative has proved extremely popular and now there are over two hundred natural burial sites across the UK and around five thousand burials each year, with new sites opening all the time.

Over the years the people who have come to us asking about ‘green funerals’ do not necessarily want a woodland or natural burial, rather they are asking for information about how they could participate more and do things differently. They do not want to repeat the dreary experience of their aunt’s twenty minutes at the crematorium when the officiant even got her name wrong. They want to participate in the funeral arrangements themselves to make it more personal and more representative of the person they love and have lost.

Some of the woodland sites are owned and managed privately and some by local authorities. Many are small, a few acres, but some are much larger with planning permission for thousands of burials. Only a few have buildings on them in which funeral services can be held, but they are generally set up with good vehicular access.

Headstones are often not allowed in order to keep the integrity of the natural site. Often, instead of a headstone, a tree will be planted close to the grave. If headstones are allowed they are usually small and laid flat on the ground. Increasingly the grave is being marked with a microchip or GPS coordinates so that the graves can be identified. Once the site is full it is left to nature.

The sites are not usually consecrated and therefore are open to people of any or no religion. There is no reason why you should not have an individual plot blessed by a religious minister if you wish.
The cost of a plot is usually in the range of £500–£800 including the cost of digging the grave and interment.

To find a site near you contact the Association of Natural Burial Grounds at the Natural Death Centre at www.naturaldeath.org.uk or telephone 020 7359 8391. Clothes must be of natural fibres; materials for coffins, coffin liners and shrouds must be completely natural and biodegradable such as:

- plain untreated wood
- bamboo or willow
- papier mâché
- wool, hemp, linen or cotton shrouds
At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is permissible to say that many of the traditional religious ceremonies have lost their power and impact for many of us, because they are out of step with contemporary thought and philosophy. At a time of crisis, the old liturgies and well-established sacred spaces provide a great sense of continuity and comfort, but less than one in five people in the UK is actively connected to a church or other religious institution.

Vibrant and relevant ceremonies, wherever they are held, manage to integrate both traditional and new, religious and secular. This is not about choosing between them, or replacing one with the other, but finding a place where they can unite.

Within a family it is very likely there will be a wide range of beliefs so a funeral ceremony that can combine the comfort of the old and be inspired by the new is possible and often appropriate to commemorate the life of the person who has died.

A ceremony which reflects the diversity of spiritual views and beliefs of the person and their family can be put together and held by an independent funeral conductor, a friend or family member, and this would most likely be held in a non-religious location.

If you would like a ceremony in your place of religion, but also want the ceremony to include secular influences, it is always worth asking your minister what they will allow outside the normal traditional service. Some of them are quite flexible.

Crematoria are not denominated and so are available for all types of services. Most have Christian religious icons, but you can ask for these to be removed, if you wish, and bring in items which have meaning for you. The British Humanist Association provides celebrants for wholly secular services with no religious references at all. There is no law to say you have to have a minister of religion.
A family-led funeral in church – Simon’s story

S, like many of us, held a complex weave of interests, including her own eclectic spirituality, with interests in yoga and Buddhism as well as respect for her Christian roots. She enjoyed Mozart and The Doobie Brothers, flamenco and Queen. She loved living in the buzz of London, but had a need for nature and the countryside. She worked in medical science, but was also a trained herbalist. She enjoyed both meditation and a good night out at the pub. The blight of her life was her depression. Sadly, she committed suicide at the age of 42.

I had never organised a funeral before and depended on the services of the funeral director, but I was determined to organise the ceremony itself. Her funeral needed to reflect her personality, but also be accessible to her parents, and her many friends and colleagues who were in shock. It was held in the church in which she had been baptised and married. The non-stipendiary priest, who had known her, was happy for the service to be broad in its scope and for others to lead parts of it.

We sang hymns but also a song she loved. We read from Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet and some modern poetry. A dramatically performed piece by Ben Okri about a flamenco dancer, in terror preparing for her dance in which she risks everything to ‘stamp the dampness from her soul’, brought in thoughts about depression and suicide. Family, friends and colleagues spoke about what S meant to them and wished her well. We had prayers. At the end, we released a homing pigeon as a symbol of her journey back to her spiritual home, wherever that may be.

By combining different spiritual and secular beliefs, by including her suicide, we captured her essence, at the same time as giving comfort and inspiration to those who mourned her. The atmosphere of the service was one of celebration of her as a person, as well as reflecting the sadness and futility of a life cut off in its prime.
organising the flowers yourself

It is lovely to organise and arrange as many of the flowers as you feel able to.
• a good way to involve the family is to form a group to organise the flowers the day before the funeral. This brings people together to chat, tell stories and share memories
• using a mixture of flowers from the florist with garden flowers and foliage helps you with colour and impact
• pick garden flowers early in the morning. Leave to drink in a bucket of water in a cool shady place for twenty-four hours and they will remain fresh. Wild flowers are more delicate
• the flower pieces do not have to look perfect. You will foster a sense of connection to the person if you do what feels natural to you and gives you pleasure
• flat-backed sprays of flowers are easy to carry and put into position

If you have early access to the venue you can prepare the space in advance. If time is tight at the crematorium it is fine to take the flowers in with you and place them on the coffin or around the room.

If the funeral is held in church at a time when no flowers are allowed, Advent and Lent, you need to talk to the vicar to make sure some flowers will be allowed.

weaving flowers into the coffin

In the crematorium the coffin is traditionally placed at a distance from the mourners. Often people respond very positively to the chance of moving close to the coffin, and if it is a woven coffin, bamboo or willow for example, they can place a flower stem into the weave. Encouraging people to gather together like this helps to break the formality of the occasion and brings feelings of comfort and inclusivity for those who want to participate.

Roses, tea tree, camellia, eryngium thistle, heather and herbs are good choices because they have woody stems which are not too thick.

The weave of a coffin is close and stiff so flowers with thick fleshy stems are not suitable. These types of flowers are better placed on top.
67 taking the coffin to the funeral

When you think of transport for funerals, you probably think of the big, black hearse to transport the coffin and one or two limousines for the family. They certainly look dignified, but also rather formal and foreboding.

It is possible to hire a vintage hearse, or a stagecoach pulled by black horses with plumes, which looks dramatic. But if you want a more down-to-earth look you could see if you can find a local farmer with horses and a flat-bed cart, which you could decorate.

If you really want to be informal there is no reason why you should not drive a vehicle yourself or ask a friend to do it.

One young man arrived at the church in the organic vegetable van. If you have a large estate car or Land Rover, you can use that. People have taken the passenger seat out of a hatchback or people carrier to get the coffin in, used a VW Microbus or other leisure vehicle. We recently helped a family to process the coffin from the funeral director’s premises near the central car park through the small town and down the country lanes to the burial site.

The most important factor to take into account is that the transport should be fitting to the positive character of the person who has died – not a joke or denigration.

68 timing the arrival of the coffin

Decide whether to have the coffin in the room before people arrive, or wait until everyone is settled and have the bearers process it to its resting place.

If the coffin is already in place on the catafalque, or bier, when they arrive, people have time to settle, focus or go up to it, touch it and place their flowers.

It is much more dramatic for the bearers to enter with the coffin when everyone is present and there are many occasions when this may be highly appropriate.