

The Value of Meaningful Funerals

With a gentle, respectful and hopeful approach funerals can be very meaningful.

“I’ve had the privilege of companioning thousands of mourners who have been willing to teach me about their grief journeys. I also have experienced how my own personal losses have changed my life forever. In these ways I have learned that meaningful funeral ceremonies are one of the most affirming means of helping our fellow human beings to embrace the pain of separation and loss after the death of someone loved.” This is how seasoned grief counsellor and educator Dr. Alan Wolfelt begins his book, Creating Meaningful Funeral Experiences.

Wolfelt’s words ring true to me with my 20 years of journeying with people as a pastor and now in training spiritual leaders. I appreciate the potential of well-crafted funerals. Unfortunately, I could easily come up with a list of funeral pitfalls I have seen, others have shared with me, or I have fallen into myself.

The list could range from minor mistakes to painful stories of incredible insensitivity. Fortunately, there are alternatives

Into the mix of emotions associated with grief situations, authentic funerals help meet six reconciliation needs of mourning described by Wolfelt: “acknowledging the reality of death,” “move toward the pain of loss,” “remembering the person who died,” “developing a new self- identity,” “search for meaning” and “receive ongoing support from others.”

A wise woman once shared with me that she had learned to walk, not run, through the dark valley of the shadow of death. Skilled funeral providers can gently work with families in giving permission, even an invitation, to walk through the mourning process. Gentle funerals can help us share the grief journey.

Whatever the circumstances surrounding someone’s life or death, everyone deserves respect and how we deal with their memories. Respectful funerals can be a catalyst for conversations through sharing at the service, swapping stories at the reception and continuing to remember and retell the memories long after.

Telling stories about the past helps people celebrate life and anticipate what could unfold in the future. Recalling relational dynamics from other chapters, for better or worse, helps mourners consider the storylines that they want to live out in the next chapter.

Whether spoken or unspoken, grieving people often ask, "How can we find hope and strength?" Through careful listening before the service and wise words during the service, funeral facilitators can create hopeful funerals which give opportunities to sensitively explore sources of strength and meaning

Funerals also mobilize support within the network of care and comfort, so no one is alone on their grief journey. For followers of Jesus who have died, funeral services can share the story of their journey toward God, through death to new life in the presence of God and those believers who have gone before.

Whatever the perspectives, hopeful funerals help people find ways to comfort one another.