

Create a sense of occasion

A funeral begins when you set out with the body of the person who has died on their last journey on Earth.

The writer Thomas Lynch describes the symbolic importance of a final journey, a funeral procession, here:

I think it suggests that we're going to get from one place to the other, whatever it is that we have to do to process this new reality, to get the dead to the edge of their changed role and get the living to the edge of this new changed life that they're going to lead without this person in their lives anymore.

So this pilgrimage, this journey that we go on, replicates in many ways other journeys that we see in life, from infancy to toddlerhood, from toddlerhood to teenagers to adulthood, the journeys we take in life in our heart, in the life of our mind, the life of our spirit. In many ways they're all replicated by this journey that we take between the living and the dead when someone dies, this procession.

In doing this, in accompanying the dead, getting them where they need to go, we get where we need to be. And I've seen it work, I've seen it work. It's a kind of theater, I suppose. ...

You do not have to go straight to the crematorium or burial ground.

You can make this final journey really special by taking a route which takes in and even pauses at favourite and meaningful place— the church where they were married, the football ground where they spent so many Saturdays, a favourite landmark, a favourite shop...

You may have to limit the number of following cars depending on traffic density.

You will need to get your timings spot on.

The final journey

Nothing creates a sense of occasion like a procession. What is a procession exactly? A procession is a ceremonial way of going from A to B, often on foot.

In a conventional funeral procession the funeral director walks the final few hundred yards in front of the hearse, which is followed by the cars—usually glossy, black limousines laid on by the funeral director—containing the chief mourners. It can look very impressive.

It is not a very long procession, though.

And most of the following cars don't reach the destination because, at a crematorium or cemetery, they break ranks to find a parking place. In the meantime, everyone else has got there first, parked and gathered outside the chapel.

There are other possibly unsatisfactory elements. Why should it be the funeral director who walks tall while those closest to the person who has died are huddled, half hidden, in a car? Whose funeral is this, dammit?

If you like the idea of a procession, think about who is going to lead it and where it will start.

Where will the procession start from?

People do not want to walk uncomfortably far in procession. Go at the pace of the infirmest and travel no further than they can comfortably walk. A hundred metres is enough.

It works best if everyone walks, because then everyone can see one another and feel the togetherness.

Choose a route which is free of traffic.

You will need somewhere where people can gather, having already parked their cars—at the gates of the crematorium, perhaps. You will need to do some research. If you live in an urban area it could be tricky, but if you live in a village it could be easy enough, and very picturesque.

You will also need to think about what order people should walk in, and whether you want anyone to walk in front of the hearse.

For a walking procession, the best kind of hearse is a horsedrawn hearse or wagon, or a hand-pulled cart. Horses walk naturally at human walking pace and give the procession a timeless feel. The drawback of a motor hearse is that it seems to go exaggeratedly slowly – to make an effort, impatiently, to hold itself back.

Instead of using a hearse or other conveyance you can carry the coffin yourself (with five others) but together you'll need to combine strength with stamina. Several or many people can take a turn.

The procession into the venue

Once the procession reaches the funeral venue the coffin needs to be taken from the hearse and carried inside.

In a 'traditional' funeral the customary order is: first, the priest or celebrant, then the funeral director, then the coffin, then the chief mourners, then everyone else.

If you think it inappropriate for the coffin to be preceded by two relative strangers, decide on a better order—and get rid of the strangers. You won't be able to do this at a church, where you are the guest of the priest.

Think about what music you would like to be playing as you come in.

There is only one right way: your way.

Create a different sense of occasion—one of tranquillity

If you want to create a serene and tranquil sense of occasion you may want to do without a ceremonial procession entirely.

If so, you can have the coffin brought to the venue before anyone arrives, or bring it yourself.

As people arrive they can simply come in and sit down and be contemplative. The right music will add to the mood. The ceremony can begin when everyone is ready.

This sort of atmosphere may be particularly appropriate in the case of someone who led a simple life and died at a great age.