

Making sense of loss

Before you start to create your funeral ceremony you need to understand both the size of the task ahead of you and the scope of the opportunity.

For religious people, a funeral makes sense of death in terms of a shared belief system based in faith. When a religious person dies, everyone knows exactly what to do. The funerary rituals are familiar and time honoured. Everything follows as a matter of authority and custom. Making sense of death is religion's USP.

You have got nothing like this to fall back on. By rejecting a mainstream religious funeral you have to start with a clean sheet. You have to reinvent the funeral.

You may wish the funeral you create to make some sort of sense of what has happened in your own terms according to your own beliefs.

A religious funeral makes sense of life on Earth by proclaiming that it has a purpose which transcends earthly existence. It makes sense of death by proclaiming the comforting certainty that the person who has died has gone to a far, far better place. Religious people look forward to death as a gateway to unimaginable happiness. (That does not mean that they look forward to dying; that's entirely different.)

90 per cent of people in the UK are not active members of faith group. At one end of the scale there are doctrinaire atheists, a minority. At the opposite end of the scale is another minority: those who have developed a personal creed which incorporates belief in an afterlife of some sort. And in the middle lies the majority, the undecideds: all those who die with an open mind, wondering more or less hopefully if they will be reunited in some non-specific destination with people they love who have gone before them. They are content to find out when and if they get there. They suppose that, if there is a judgmental deity, a good life will be rewarded.

If the funeral you create cannot look forwards and contemplate with absolute certainty the person who has died enjoying a blissfest in eternity, how are you going to make sense of your loss? What *can* you do?

A life-centred funeral

The answer is that the funeral can look backwards—and forwards.

The alternative to a mainstream religious funeral is a reflective ceremony which looks back over the life lived and records and celebrates everything about that person which has not been lost: their memory, their values and their example, all of which live on. If non-religious people are to derive any comfort from a funeral it must be in the consideration of how they can look forward their own lives continuing to be enriched by the person who has died. Much as they miss them, they would far rather they had been a part of their lives than not. This is a good pain they are feeling.

A Good Funeral Guide factsheet

A ceremony like this can do exactly what people want a funeral to do: focus on the life of the person who has died and give thanks for that life. It can incorporate that person's wishes, beliefs and values, and those of their family and close friends, so it is much more personal than a religious ceremony, which puts god first and which has a fixed format to which you can contribute very little.

Better still, you, the organiser, have complete control over what happens.

But remember: happy memories and fond feelings do not themselves necessarily help us to make sense of death. They may serve to remind us only of how sharply we miss the person who has died. People who have not adopted or evolved a belief system which explains death have to make sense of it their own way. That is their responsibility, not yours.