

Do you really have to have a funeral?

Every culture from earliest times has cared for its dead and created its own funeral ceremonies and rituals. They have no practical value. They mark the significance and the magnitude of the passing of a life.

One way of looking at it is to say that how we value our dead says a lot about how we value the living. That is why, traditionally, important people have been given very elaborate funerals and the worst criminals none at all.

There's an opposite way of looking at it. When the playwright Arthur Miller was asked if he'd be going to the funeral of his ex-wife, Marilyn Monroe, he replied, "Why should I go? She won't be there." A funeral is pointless, he reckoned, both for the dead and for the living. It's not the body that's important, but the person whom it embodied—the vitality which animated it. When death comes, that's it.

Attitudes to funerals are changing. Increasingly, people want simpler, cheaper funerals. A lot of people these days say funerals are too expensive and they don't do them any good. But old customs die hard and most of them still go ahead and have a conventional ceremonial funeral anyway. Increasingly, though, people who can't see the point of a public ceremonial funeral aren't having one at all or they're doing something else. There's nothing wrong with that.

The public ceremonial funeral

A conventional funeral is customarily a public event – anyone can come.

It is ceremonial inasmuch as the person who has died arrives at the funeral venue in a hearse followed by a procession of cars. It is a formal inasmuch as it has a predetermined format and concludes with a final farewell to the person who has died.

A funeral like this, with the person who has died present, enables all those people who knew them – family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, members of recreational clubs, care home staff – to come together to pay their respects and say a symbolic goodbye. People feel a strong need to do this. It enables them to come to terms with the absence of the person who has died and to understand that they must go on without them.

How do you feel?

There's no point in going through the motions just because people you know expect you to. Unless the experience is going to be valuable and of lasting benefit to everyone who comes, a funeral really is just a waste of time, money and emotional energy.

How you feel will depend on

- The age of the person who has died
- The circumstances of their death
- Your feelings towards the person who has died
- Your feelings about whether it is necessary to have the person who has died present at the funeral
- The expectations and needs of the people who knew the person who has died

- Whether a conventional funeral can achieve what you are hoping to accomplish, or whether an alternative sort of farewell event would do that better

You may even conclude that you don't want to mark the death in any way at all if, for example, you were estranged from the person who has died. That's perfectly okay.

This is the age of the long goodbye

Good diet and medical science have added years to the (wrong) ends of people's lives. More of us are living to great old age than ever before. The last 11.2 years of most people's lives are now blighted by intensifying and multiplying severe chronic and degenerative illnesses.

Death is increasingly a lingering business of fading away, petering out, often in great discomfort. Dementia is on the rise. Leave-taking these days is turning into a very, very long goodbye and, more than ever, death is received, when it finally comes, as a blessed and merciful release.

This is influencing the way that those left behind feel about the need to hold a public funeral – at which there may be no more than a handful of people present. What more to say? What more to do?

It is quite different when a young person dies – or someone dies prematurely or tragically. People feel quite differently about deaths like these.

Is it really necessary to have the body at the funeral? #1

It has always been the custom to hold a funeral with the body present. This derives from Christian belief that a) the soul, which is immortal, is an integral part of the body and b) the dead are raised to everlasting life in their earthly bodies. It's therefore more than just logical to have the body at the funeral, it's absolutely vital.

Do you believe that, or do you believe that the soul or spirit separates from the body at death? Many people look at a dead person and feel that whatever it was that made them *them* has gone -- which is why people say that a dead body is "only a shell".

If you believe that the spirit or soul survives the death of the body, and that's what you want to focus on, the spirit or the soul, you may reckon the dead body to be an irrelevance and a distraction.

When John Lennon was killed, Yoko Ono wanted no focus on his bullet-ridden corpse. She had it cremated unceremoniously, unwitnessed. She held a memorial ceremony instead, to take place everywhere and anywhere. "Pray for his soul from wherever you are," she said. And people did. Presumably this is what John wanted, too.

If you feel like Yoko, you'll not want the body at the funeral. If you are an atheist, you may feel that the body is just so much old clothes; there's no need for it to come.

Bodies are important

When you are alive, who you are is very much tied up with what you look like. Your body is the embodiment of all that you are, an essential component of your identity. By your body others know you. It is you made manifest. And just as your body is precious to you, so are the bodies of those you love.

When someone dies, even if you think their soul or spirit has gone from their body, it may take you a while to get your head around that. Death is not a good time to get logical; you need to give your feelings time to catch up with what has happened.

If it is your strong feeling that the body is precious and is still, in some way, the person you knew, then you'll want it to come to the funeral and you'll want to say goodbye.

Given our feelings about dead bodies, nothing concentrates the mind like being in the same room as one. It brings home the reality of the death and greatly enhances the drama of the occasion.

Is it really necessary to have the body at the funeral? #2

Perhaps you feel that a funeral with a body is unnecessarily upsetting, morbid, even, especially if the person who has died was young. In that case you could organise a small funeral for close family and friends and then follow it with a celebration-of-life party at a venue of your choice to which everyone else is invited to eat, drink, listen to music and share happy memories.

A drawback here may be that those not invited to the funeral will feel that they can't enter fully into the jollity of the life celebration because they never got a chance to express their grief and say goodbye first. They may even feel cheated or patronised. It can be hard to do the fun bit if you haven't done the sad bit first. If people are hurting, you probably need to address those feelings before moving them on to happy memories. A death is exactly as sad as it is and there is nothing you can say or do to make it otherwise.

So a funeral without a body may feel like a diluted event. It may lack focus and substance and reality. It may lack power. A baby naming or christening wouldn't be the same without a baby and a wedding wouldn't be the same without the happy couple. If that logic extends to funerals, you need a body.

What is a funeral for?

If it makes no difference to a body if it gets a funeral or not, what is a funeral for? Consider the following statements. Do they say what you think? Take a pencil and tick the statements you agree with.

- Letting go of someone's body with love and care is the last thing you can do for them in this world.
- A funeral is a precious gift to the person who has died.
- A funeral is for all those people, family, friends and neighbours, who were not present at the death. It is their time to pay their respects and say goodbye.
- It is a time to express sorrow.
- It is a time when people can comfort each other.
- It is a time to take stock of what the person who has died means to you and others and, more important, will go on meaning.
- It is a time to say thank you to the person who has died.

It's your choice

Taking into account what you have ticked above, you may now have a better idea what sort of farewell event you favour. Here are your options:

- No funeral, nothing. See the heading [What is direct cremation](#) on the webpage
- A funeral at which the dead person is not present – usually called a memorial service
- A family-organised farewell event with or without the ashes present. You can hold this anywhere you want – home, a special place – at any time you choose.
- A private funeral to which only certain people are invited
- A conventional funeral on which you set your stylistic stamp – eg, alternative hearse, colourful coffin, dress code, theme, 'different' music, etc
- A conventional funeral with all the traditional trappings