Ask Anyone You Know 783 words

Kae Chatman June 23, 2020

Over the past twenty years, Americans have made dramatic changes in the ways we ritualize mourning and memorialize the dead. Today’s funeral services and burials still feature some traditional religious, ethnic, and patriotic elements. But the trend in funerals now is personalization. We want to celebrate the individual features of a loved one’s life while limiting the financial burden on survivors and needless damage to the environment imposed by traditional services.

Successful funeral directors in the 2020’s work like wedding planners. They listen. They respect the wishes of their clients in finding the perfect place for a funeral service, arranging tables and chairs, selecting flowers, catering food, displaying personal artifacts, and orchestrating the use of technology—virtual guest books, microphones, music, slide shows, audio and video clips, and printed materials—to tell their loved one’s life story.

Ask anybody you know what sort of funeral they would like. Their answers may surprise you. Even the most conventionally religious Americans prefer a leave-taking party more akin to a family reunion at a park pavilion than a somber service in a darkened chapel.

“I want it to be just like my wedding,” a 50-something woman shared, “with a long table for barbeque and potato salad, and fresh-cut daisies sticking out of soda bottles.” She hoped her son would hire an acoustic guitarist to perform “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” for her guests, so they would linger to sing together long past sunset.

Special requests for contemporary funeral services often take on the timbre of a voice too soon stilled. A dear lady I loved died just after midnight on a chilly Thanksgiving morning. Those closest to her knew that Debbie preferred to be cremated, and the family honored her wish. The local funeral home arranged two memorial services on their site to accommodate mourners of the two religious traditions that were meaningful to Debbie. The two services shared printed programs and a video biography of Deb’s life in photographs, which provoked both tears and laughter. One of Debbie’s poems, “Too Soon Gone,” written when a young friend of hers succumbed to cancer, graced the funeral program. But the most compelling moments of the two services were musical selections that Debbie, an accomplished pianist and songwriter, had recorded throughout her lifetime. She waved goodbye to us with both hands outstretched over her electric keyboard.

Talk to anybody about funerals, and you will hear them recall in detail the services they have attended as milestones in their emotional development. As a child in the 1960’s, I witnessed two funerals occurring in close proximity in time if not in historical significance. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on Friday, November 22, 1963. Our stunned nation sat helpless in front of our televisions as Mrs. Kennedy organized a spectacular state funeral modeled on Abraham Lincoln’s. On November 24, 1963, my mother and I were in church when my older brother motioned for us to meet him outside. There he shared the sad but not unexpected news that my grandfather was close to death in the nursing home where he had spent his last days smiling like a baby at everyone but recognizing nobody.

These two deaths, worlds apart, have remained intertwined in my memory, as do the two funerals I watched at my mother’s side in November 1963. One was for Grandpa at my grandmother’s Gospel Mission Church, which her husband never attended alive, and the other for President Kennedy in our living room, close enough to the 13-inch black-and-white TV to touch the screen as the riderless horse, the flag-draped hearse, and JFK’s veiled, slender widow flickered past us in eternal replays.

Talk to anybody about funerals, and you tap into the life of families, the life of nations, the life of cultures. Contemporary funeral home services reflect the changing character of our lives as we struggle to make sense of loss. They serve us all, the grieving, the guilty, the financially well-fixed or driving on empty, the long-lost cousins, the exes, the besties, the nosy neighbors and former coworkers. We are all words in someone else’s story, and their story is part of our own. In our busy lives and shape-shifting days, we remain scattered. In death, we need somewhere to gather.

Gathering is what I recall most vividly about my grandfather’s funeral. A Greek chorus of old Southern ladies with wavering voices sang every possible verse of “Shall We Gather at the River.” The piano was horribly out of tune with a key or two missing, but whenever I think about funerals, there it is, loud and shrill, the answer to the question those church ladies asked me, and I answered, “Yes, we’ll gather at the river.”