

I had an interesting experience in early December of conducting a service for a person who was dying, but wanted to be at their own funeral. I researched this topic and found it intriguing. I have done quite a few services where I have spoken with a dying person about their service, and then performed the service upon their death, but I have never had the actual dying person in the room when the service was being held.

It was very confronting for people to be invited to a living wake, living funeral. I found it personally very challenging myself. The service was similar to a funeral - music, poems, eulogy (delivered by the dying person) speakers and food and drink. It was in a hall not a funeral chapel and his family decorated it like you would for a party.

At first everyone was nervous and not knowing where to look, the room was very still, but it wasn't long before the sharing of stories, laughter and tears filled the room with beauty. I was deeply moved to hear his children speak so beautifully of their father. One of the interesting things I observed was that people could write beautiful stories and read them a little more calmly than a funeral as they whilst they were already grieving, they weren't at that final loss of a person, grief stage. So their heads were a little clearer. Also because they had a month's notice they were able to gather the stories, pictures and thoughts for their talk. The dying gentleman after his eulogy paid tribute to his family and a few close friends, and charged the audience with "living their own life to the full". This gentleman was only 60 years old. He also told them what he had learnt about dying and what he thought may happen next - truly inspirational and cry worthy.

He died three weeks after this service, and only next of kin gathered in the Chapel for a private ceremony. I was asked to attend this, but they didn't need a celebrant, they just listened to a few pieces of music, laid flowers, kissed him and then went home for a private meal together. I asked them why they wanted me to come, when clearly my services weren't needed, they said they saw me as the formal chaperone of the funeral rites and wanted me to be there for the whole process of his leaving. This is something I was amazed at and simultaneously humbled by. I felt like the true "family celebrant". What an honourable profession we have.

I am still thinking through all that I learnt from him and his family, and feel blessed that I was part of this special ceremony. From my research, evidently we may be expecting some huge changes in funeral services as Baby Boomers make very clear instructions on what they want for their services. It will certainly make our profession even more interesting than it already has become.

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