

Planning Your Funeral

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My husband and I talk fairly regularly about what we want to happen when we die. And while we have a generalized agreement on each of our preferences, I've recently begun to notice that we haven't actually sat down and documented anything. We've done our wills, powers of attorney and even have a living will for each of us. But the actual planning of our 'funeral' is something we have allowed to float around the edges of our awareness without actually making anything concrete. Now I use the term 'funeral' in a generic sense, a word to capture the idea that we might want something to mark the end of our lives. We are clear that neither of us wants a traditional 'funeral'. You know, that ceremony involving funeral parlors, churches or secular chapels and a fairly glum, grim structured ceremony that is supposed to help with the transition.

Now that I think about it, our lack of planning seems pretty odd since my first husband and I had done just that when we were 26 years old ...a mere 6 weeks before he was killed in a plane crash. So it isn't like I am not aware of just how powerful a process this pre-planning is. It saved me enormous anguish and many disagreements with his family to have access to a document where he described his final wishes.

How about you? Have you given any thought to the topic? Do you have even the most rudimentary idea of how you'd like to leave this mortal plane? Do you think the whole topic is morbid or irrelevant? I assure you, for those who get left behind your willingness to look past your discomfort with the topic will feel like a huge blessing. There is nothing worse than to be dealing with the trauma of a lost loved one (especially if it is sudden and unexpected, like most deaths are) and to have to try to anticipate what their preferences would have been for a funeral and all the trappings that accompany it. You'll also minimize the amount of in-fighting that develops amongst families who have conflicting customs and rituals, especially if you are the one in the family who is different than everyone else.

As this topic has been swirling around in my awareness for the past 24 hours or so it has struck me that the more unconventional a life you've lived the more important it likely is that you have your demise planned. In my experience, someone's death is one of those times when social conformity quickly takes over and people respond in ways that are not aligned with or congruent with how the deceased lived their lives.

How many people who didn't believe in god, for example, have ended up with a religious service simply because those who survived them couldn't imagine another type of send off? How many people who lived flamboyantly have ended up with staid, boring funerals because their survivors were too stunned or shocked to think outside the box?

So I've decided that it is time I put some serious thought to this topic and developed some ideas so that I get a send-off that, for me, is in keeping with how I lived.

If I had to pick a short phrase that encapsulates the intention that I am in this world it would be 'irrepressible possibility'. I know that no matter whether I live for another week or for another 60 years I will always be an expression of irrepressible possibility in this world. So, for me, whatever celebration is held for me, it feels crucial that that is the context within which a celebratory event is shaped and framed. It just dawned on me that before now I hadn't even been certain that I wanted 'an event'. But clearly I do! And I want it to be a celebratory one, nothing earnest or pompous or overly reverent. I'm a pretty irreverent chick and would like to see that reflected in my send-off.

My core belief is that space is critical: physical space, emotional space, psychic space – space in relationships, space in living, space in ideas. Therefore, whatever is developed needs to have lots of space for expression, for creativity, for uniqueness. Perhaps something in a park, an amphitheatre or some other outdoor setting.

Other key beliefs that would need to be accommodated in my celebration include:

Growth is the human imperative: how can an end-of-physical-life celebration become a growth experience for all?

I have no religion or religious affiliation: no clergy or clergy-substitute or any form of quasi-religious ceremony is desired or desirable

Music is important: live or recorded music would be integral to any celebration. See Appendix I for a list of critical music pieces and those that would be fun if time allows

I have thoroughly relished my life and would like to be remembered through stories that hold meaning for friends and family: a story-telling dynamic, especially telling about the naughty bits would be a lot of fun for everyone

I cherish my 'chosen' family: I think this means that I need to write, and keep up-to-date a document that honors those people who have been important in my growth and evolution as a human being

I have made friends with my 'cheap bastard' streak: whatever happens, I would be uncomfortable with money being spent on useless stuff like caskets, plots, headstones, flowers. I'd rather see money invested on a great venue, good & exotic nosh, planting a tree or a garden, buying some woodland to allow it to take nature's course, perhaps spreading my ashes or burying them there (clearly I have a preference for cremation).

Each of us is the artist of our life: what might come out of a celebration that included the creation of a collaborative mural or a collage representing all the people that have filled and fulfilled my life?

Time is a construct of our minds: whatever celebration occurs needs to happen in the fullness of time. I would rather the details of any celebration get developed over time rather than to rush through some event in the days immediately following my demise. Stop, take time to reflect, allow time for ideas to blossom and come to full expression. There's no rush: I was around for a long time and I'll be gone for a much, much longer time! As I was wont to say most of my later years "*we have all the time in the world.*" Fall would be a lovely time of year when the leaves are changing and nature is getting to rest ...it feels so organic.

So that's it for me, folks. That's what feels really important to me about planning my 'funeral'. You'll see that there aren't a lot of details, and yet I hope that those who survive me will find my thoughts helpful to them in creating a send-off that is a reflection of the life I've lived. I must remember to forward this to my husband and step-daughters who are the most likely ones to be carrying out my wishes.

Once again I ask: what about you? What's important to you? Who needs to know?

Here's to a long and productive life. And when it finally comes to a close, here's to a relevant and meaningful closing to a wondrous life.

*"Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more
than it ceases to be serious when people laugh"*

George Bernard Shaw

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