

"How Not to Miss Your Own Funeral"

a sermon by
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse

"They say such nice things about people at their funerals that it makes me sad to realize that I'm going to miss mine by just a few days."

-Garrison Keillor

If one of us were capable of a god's-eye view of how the future would ravel out – which blessedly is beyond we mere mortals – it would be possible to place us all in one long single file line in the order in which we will die. The first in line would be the first among us to go, because someone always has to go first, and at the same time, there is one of us here right now, who will outlive every one of us. Think of it. It's something like the scene from "Our Town" where the "dearly departed" residents of Grover's Corners NH who have relocated to the town cemetery keep watch of whose funeral procession is headed up the hill with the latest of life's victims. The order of such a line – a line both imaginary and inevitable – is not dictated by present age or current health. It is beyond our precise comprehension and our most informed prognostication. We just cannot know.

I imagine some of you are looking around, thinking about your relative place in the line. If this collection of souls is anything like most, my guess is that 75% of us figure we're in the last 25% of the line. We'd be happy to let other cut in line and go ahead of us. We all have had our own experiences of loss, of mourning, of grief – and even so – it is something of an entirely different order to imagine our own deaths, to contemplate our own non-being. But friends, the line forms here. The old consolation for death that "his time had come" is not all that far from the truth. I don't believe that "our time" on earth is preordained by some cosmic parking meter ticking off our minutes, but I know that the day will come when some minister will sit at my kitchen table, with people who've loved me – with me (or what was me) in the next room and those folks – not me – will have some hard work ahead of them. The same scenario – or something very similar – is in the cards for every one in this room. Today's

sermon is an offering to both you and those people at that imaginary kitchen table. Because like it or not, our days are numbered.

There are many dimensions to having one's "affairs in order" most of which are just tangential to my focus this morning. I say they are tangential – but they are of equal import, and in some cases, of more urgency. Just briefly, and most critically – have an up-to-date, signed and witnessed Health Care Proxy. Discuss it with your doctor and family. It is the only means you have to guarantee your medical wishes are followed at such a time as you are unable to direct your care. Become a member of the Memorial Society, and in doing so determine the logistics and the budget for the disposition of your body after death. Nancy Clausen and Joyce Homan will have more information for you to consider after the service. Talk to a lawyer. Have a will. Dying is easy. Death is another story.

What I'd like to consider with you, and ask you to consider in your own time, are the kinds of things religion is best suited to attend to: life's rites of passage, the healing of the spirit, and both the celebration of life and the reconciliation of loss. As Garrison Keillor notes, it does seem a shame we have to miss our own funerals by just a few days. I can't find a loophole to get around that. But what I have discovered in conducting a couple hundred memorial services, is that there are ways to shape a service, and also to set a tone for a memorial service. I once did a memorial service where the prelude was Duke Ellington's "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone." Esther Mietz has left me a poem her mother gave her in 1945. At Betty Williams's service a ballet dancer danced here in the chancel – as Betty once did on the stage in New York City. We don't get to go to our own funerals, but there are ways to be present, which are in the end, the next best thing to being there.

People have 101 excuses not to plan for their own memorial services. Here are the top three: The lead excuse is simply that most of us have no intention of dying. A respectable, but delusional thought. The next excuse – in order of popularity – is that people feel modest about their lives and don't really care if there is a service at all. Another respectable but unconstructive thought. The most ordinary life is at the same time remarkable. People love you. Indulge them just this once. And the other excuse I hear most frequently – and most recently from my own father – "You'll know what to do." Wrong. We will not know what to do. We will be busy grieving. Cut us some slack. Leave a few clues. Please.

A couple of years ago, I clipped out an article in which a few literary types offered thumbnail sketches of how they'd like their own last rites to proceed...

Wendy Wasserstein, playwright: "It has to be at Temple Emanu-El – please! – with the overture to 'Gypsy' and Lynne Thigpen singing 'Everything's Coming Up Roses.' Maybe André Bishop could speak in that beautiful voice of his, and my mother could dance. There is the nightmare, of course, that someone will sing 'I Shall Be Released,' and your best friends will get up and say, 'When I first met Wendy, I ...,' and talk about themselves for two hours."

Peter J. Gomes, Harvard University chaplain and author of "The Good Book": "I want the whole nine yards, in church. I want the casket to be on view. I don't want to be cremated, and I want a big coffin, to be carried in by eight sturdy friends. I want the Book of Common Prayer read over me in stirring tones, and a good address, and splendid hymns. And then I want people to go with me to the graveyard and watch me be lowered into the ground. Above all, I want them to know I'm dead. I want no euphemisms, no softening of the rough edges of death. I want them to mourn, I want them to wear black. Then I want them to go have a good party."

Mary Gordon, novelist: "it will be at the Holy Cross Catholic Church on Forty-second Street, across from the Port Authority. I want absolutely nobody saying anything about me. The music should be the 'Pie Jesu' from Fauré's Requiem, a plainsong Dies Irae, and end with Martha and the Vandellas' 'Dancing in the Streets.'"

Not everyone here is a member of this congregation and some of you may be of a different faith tradition altogether. But what I'm talking about today transcends denominational boundaries. There is not a "right" or a "wrong" way to memorialize the dead. For some, ancient ritual and traditions are sufficient to hold a life between this world and whatever follows. For others, there is a need for a means of remembrance that is custom made to suit the situation. And then, there are those of us who crave a blending of timeless traditions and a means to affirm that the person who has died was unlike any other person in creation.

Unitarian Universalist memorial services cannot be generalized easily. I can only really speak to my own particular approach. While I don't relish the opportunity to lead a memorial service, I recognize that they are perhaps the single most important part of my ministry, or perhaps I ought to say, they are the occasions when the most ministry happens. Sometimes that happens in this room with every pew full, and other times it happens at the edge of a hole in the ground with just a handful of mourners gathered. It would be wrong to say it is merely because at memorial services I really have people's attention – even if it is the truth.

No, it has little to do with me. It has to do with people's capacity to receive when grief has their guard down. The context of the occasion allows a kind of ministry to happen. In such moments, folks are looking for clues to their meaning, they are more gentle, they are re-engaged with the wonders and the mystery of life. The hard work is done. All I have to do is acknowledge, or hold up, the validity and the urgency of what they are already experiencing in their minds and hearts and souls.

When I prepare a memorial service I have no book on the shelf to pull down and fill in the names. I have resources I draw upon and images and metaphors I find worth repeating – mostly because at one level – every death is exactly alike. But beyond the universal connections our souls require to endure... there are also the particulars of every life, which deserve affirmation and celebration. And when I say "particulars" I don't mean only the sweet and tender side of human beings, but also the flaws and foibles that are part and parcel of being human. I don't "name names" as it were, to keep the balance sheet even, but rather leave room in people's imaginations to "fill in the blanks." I learned this from my mentor Max Coots. In a eulogy for Phyllis Forbes Clark, a 95-year-old member of the Canton church, Max said this "She loved this community, though she once told me that Canton's primary product was characters – never suspecting that in her own way, she was one of them, one of the best of them." And if you knew and loved Phyllis Forbes Clark, you knew exactly what Max meant.

I think that kind of honesty is what moves so many people to tell me after a memorial service, that it was the most meaningful one they ever attended. Even when I didn't know the person well, if the tone is honest and real, people themselves make the experience meaningful. It's not a trick. It's not even a skill. But somehow, it happens.

You might be surprised at a memorial service I conduct that it has elements that are not often present on a typical Sunday. I have never used the Lord's Prayer during a worship service. I often do it at memorials. The 23rd psalm is a staple, and for good reason... if not for its theology, then for its resonance. I almost always wear my robe. I will accommodate almost every wish – from reading densely sentimental poetry to playing a tape of the deceased telling a story, to a benediction from Winnie-the-Pooh. I have concluded it does not have to make complete sense to me, and that the meaning is made out of the whole in ways I can only trust and marvel at.

During the offertory, I am going to hand each of you a form I have created to help you think about the kinds of things that are going to be important to those who will survive you; those who stand behind you in the line. I'll have spare copies in the literature rack in the coming weeks, so feel free to use what I give you today as a "rough draft." The intent of the forms is not to depress you or force you into a time of anxiety but to invite you, after a fashion, to be a guest at your own Memorial service. **If you don't feel compelled to do it for yourself, do it for others.** It will be one means by which your survivors will honor you. It will put to an end a family squabble about what dear old fill-in-the-blank would have wanted. And to be quite honest, it will make some poor minister's job a little bit easier if you could just drop a few clues.

In the best of all possible worlds, you would all go home today – after a couple good hours of physical exertion at the Work Party – make yourselves a cup of tea, and sit down with the paper you'd folded into your purse or pocket, and start writing –in pencil – your thoughts. I don't believe it **for a minute** that every one of you hasn't given the subject some thought. If you have a spouse, set a time aside to talk about it. (If you're interested in another forum for reflection – come to one of the chalice circles in the second half of the month. It's their topic to discuss then). If you wish, come talk to me about it. The form itself is self-explanatory, and I don't want to say much more about it – other than to come as close as I have ever come to begging you not to drop it in the recycling basket on your way downstairs. Humor me. At least take it home. Give it the same kind of thought you give your tax returns. Decide your own deadline to have it done. Send a copy to church. Last night, on my way to the Mietz's, I stopped at the office to pull Esther's envelope from the file. We pored over it with laughter and some tears. It was her writing. Her expressions. Her wishes. We would have been even more lost without it. One never knows where we are in the ever-moving line.

I wouldn't bother asking you to think about all this if I didn't have my reasons. I'd selfishly like your help, should it turn out I am still the minister here at such a time as a service is required. But far more importantly, and much more essentially, I have learned the unspoken purpose of holding a memorial service... the purpose that is rarely named.

Memorial services are, at least in our tradition, held to be the occasion for a life to be celebrated. Sometimes they are even titled “A Celebration of Life.” That is an accurate and noble aim and ambition for such a service, and in all but the most tragic circumstances, that’s what they end up being. It’s one thing we need as we enter the grieving process. It gives us something to hold tight to; something to fill the undisguisable void. It helps us to go on.

But there is always more going on than just that – essential as it is. It is an occasion for celebration. It is also one of life’s rare, fleeting occasions for reconciliation. Reconciling with what was as well as that which, now, will never be. And here, I don’t mean the reconciliation of hostile siblings or greedy grandchildren. I mean the kind of reconciliation that comes to us in the form of acceptance and trust; the kind of reconciliation, which opens out of forgiveness, out of our encounter with our own finite natures.

Tonight, Yom Kippur begins. A time for remembrance and reconciliation. It is, for Jews, the annual reminder to “make things right” with one another; to heal old wounds, to ask forgiveness, to be forgiven. We have no ritualized holiday in which we do this, but in every memorial service, something of this is at work; bridging those living and death, heaven and earth.

In such times, most of us are doing more than just celebrating the deceased.

We are taking stock of our own lives, our own relationships, our own regrets, and our own intentions for the life still before us.

When you let others memorialize you, you are giving them something astounding that they did not know they needed.

They would, if the could, thank you.

But instead, they shall bless you, as you have blessed them.

(Attached to this sermon is a copy of the Memorial Service Prearrangements document for your use. You may also find the New York State Health Care Proxy Form online at www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/hospital/healthcareproxy/about.htm).

First Unitarian Universalist Society Memorial Service Prearrangements

Please complete this form (duplicate as necessary) and return it to the church office. It is not a legal document, but it raises questions that your survivors will want you to have answered. It would be best to discuss your feelings and responses with family and close friends so that your deepest wishes and convictions will be understood and followed.

Even if you do not answer all of the questions, there are some basic decisions and essential feelings you can establish in the process of considering the questions on this form.

It can always be revised and updated. All forms are held in confidence by the minister.

Name _____ Birthplace/Date _____

Address _____

Spouse/Partner _____ Anniversary Date _____

Children _____

Siblings _____

Others to be notified _____

Who is to make final arrangements (Name and contact info) _____

Occupation _____ SS # _____

If requested, would you allow an autopsy? _____ Organ Donation? _____

Is the body to be embalmed? _____ Do you wish cremation? _____

How/Where would you like your ashes dispersed? _____

Are you a member of the Memorial Society? Where? _____

Specify type/material/price range of casket _____

Location of preferred cemetery or prearranged plot _____

Do you have a current Health Care Proxy? _____ Where is it located? _____

Who is listed to act as your proxy in health care decisions? _____

Additional Comments:

Do you wish to have a Memorial Service?_____ Where?_____

Specify Clergy (by name or church affiliation)_____

Would you want a Grave Side Service?_____ Calling Hours?_____

Open or Closed Casket?_____ Public or Private Service?_____

What kind of flowers would you like present?_____

Memorial Gifts? To Whom?_____

Biographical Information:_____

Special Interests/Accomplishments/Avocations/Delights_____

Please list readings, poems, music, ideas, themes that you would want included in your Memorial:

Other comments/thoughts/hopes:_____

Attach additional sheets if necessary

Copies of this are (circle) : Home Church Funeral Home Attorney Executor

Signed_____ Date_____

Return a copy to the Rev. David S. Blanchard, First UU, 250 Waring Road, Syracuse NY 13224
(_____ I would like to discuss this with the minister)

All forms kept in secure confidence for use only by the minister(s) of First UU.

