

# WAYS TO GO

Why shouldn't your funeral be as individual as you are? Penny Rutterford recounts her own experiences of last farewells, and talks to people who want to make their own final exit something special ...



Coop funeral services may not be as traditional as you expect

**T**he day my dad died, England beat Sweden in the quarter finals of the World Cup. I know that because I spent the day with my family at the care home beside his "deathbed" with the telly on. But, to add insult to injury, dad waited until we'd popped out for some fish and chips before taking his last breath. However well we might prepare for our own or a loved one's final passing, it still hurts, surprises and is out of our control. My father was not young, and he had been living with dementia for many years; but even when in possession of all his mental faculties, he wouldn't talk about dying. Just once he remarked that he'd like to be buried with the family dog at the bottom of the garden. But my parents moved and I guess that it would not just be illegal but impolite to bury one's father in a stranger's vegetable patch. So it was my mother who took the initiative to arrange plans for both of their funerals. And what a relief that turned out to be. One might assume that a care home for the elderly would guide you in the event of the death of your loved one, but no. It was the Age UK helpline that talked us through what had to be done.

## GOING OUT IN STYLE

My dad's funeral was the second of four family funerals in as many months last year. Each one included a religious service, which somehow seemed fitting for that generation. Though they were not especially religious, the format was familiar but with more modern add-ons. We entered the church for my father's funeral to Rod Stewart's recording of "These Foolish Things" and dad's coffin left for the committal to "Blue Moon" – a kind of mixture of hymn and swing. I and my friends are now of an age where not only do we have to face the reality of the death of our parents, but also our own mortality. Organising family funerals might help us better understand how we might want our own passing to be marked. I know women who from a young age had extensive plans for their weddings, yet were unlikely to have similar dreams about their funerals. But wouldn't it be reassuring to know that we left this world in style – in a horse-drawn hearse or by Harley-Davidson? According to Sun Life's 2018 "Cost of Dying Report", organising a funeral prompted 61% of people to start thinking about their own plans. However, of those, only 21% had actually done anything to prepare. Procrastinate for too long and you might be dead too soon. The report also found that "64% of funeral directors say they've seen a drop in the number of traditional religious funerals they organise. Attitudes to funerals appear to be changing.

And eight in ten funeral directors say they've noticed a marked difference in the tone of funeral services – which they describe as a 'celebration of life' rather than mourning." My own family's recent experience of funerals fitting some of the classic norms of the Western or so-called "Church of England" model led me to speak to some who are considering – or have put in place – alternatives.

## PLANNING FOR A HAPPY ENDING

Martin Adams is planning his own funeral and says, "I'm 72 and I'm not very well. I know the condition I've got has a ten-year life expectancy. And that's for younger people. I don't want to leave problems for other people. As part of my will I have put in a slip of paper detailing the funeral arrangements that I would like." I don't want it to be miserable. I don't want there to be a service. By no service, I mean not going to a funeral home or having it in the crematorium. I don't want people to have to trudge all the way out to the crematorium and then find the nearest pub which has got no connection to me. "I'd like my funeral in my favourite pub. I'd have some money behind the bar. And I've seen a lovely motorbike hearse. I could roll down the road to everybody cheering and waving. "As my coffin is being carried out the door, we can have the song that I will have recorded.

So far I can't work out which one. I thought of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life", but then I heard it's the most popular song played at funerals, so it's become a bit of a cliché."

## A LIVING WAKE

Anna Alcock's cancer diagnosis had given her pause for thought about her own legacy. And legacy was at the heart of her father's wishes when, given just months to live, he chose to have a living wake in South Africa. Family and loved ones were invited to a "rocking, rolling, rollicking good time" at a party to celebrate his life as well as the lives of his wider family, friends and colleagues who had made his life so rich. Anna describes her father as Zulu in his beliefs, with ancestors and descendants at its core. "Dad didn't want people crying over him when he was dead. He wanted people crying when he was alive! He wanted to feel good and know how he had touched people. So he sat on a chair and people told stories. I guess it was bearing witness to someone's life." Anna smoked grass for the first time at her father's wake. "My dad said, 'Fuck it, I'm going to die' and he liked how we went out and he scored some weed. He had the biggest smile. My dad, one of his close friends and I smoked grass together. That day I think he had his happy moments, he never liked crowds, he liked people telling stories and laughing with him."

## THE WOODLAND FUNERAL

When Paul Lindt wrote his own will, a chance discussion with his parents revealed that they had all opted for a woodland burial. When his mother died earlier this year, it meant that he knew her wishes. "My mum adored nature. Family holidays had almost always been camping, and my parents' favourite escapes in their later years were staying in their motorhome in the New Forest. If we could have buried her in the New Forest, we would. "The celebrant visited and chatted to us about mum's life. We all ended up laughing a lot about how my family is quite unusual and eccentric. He was brilliant, very gentle. The day of the funeral was blustery. At the graveside for the committal, we were all swept by the wind. Being in such direct contact with the elements felt right. We felt alive, if that makes sense. My mum's niece read a poem, 'The Way Through The Woods', a ghost story about nature overrunning a track once used by man. "I like the idea of returning to the earth. Mum always preferred bare feet to shoes, indoors and out, the ground beneath her feet. It was such a beautiful place for mum to be and I love the idea that those infant trees we saw will grow and grow and promise a continuity in life in all its forms."

## A HUMANIST APPROACH

Nick Craig chose to become a humanist celebrant after attending two funerals for friends. "One was religious, the other humanist – I was left with very strong feelings about both," he says. "I was very upset by the religious service which seemed to gloss over her life. It was like nothing she had done mattered to anyone, and the service just felt 'mechanical' with no thought or love put into the content or delivery. "The humanist service was entirely different – full of warmth, love and humour. I was swept along in the story of his life, relationships, adventures and challenges. It was moving in a way I had never experienced before. The humanist approach also matched my own, and I feel could be summed up in a way that was so simple and elegant: 'All we have and all we need is each other.' It was a message that I felt really resonated with me."

## HOW MUCH?

Funerals are expensive. A recent news story told of a woman who turned to crowdfunding to meet her partner's funeral bill. According to Sun Life's "Cost of Dying Report" the average cost of a burial is £4,798 compared with £3,744 for a cremation. And the postcode lottery that might have impacted on your care towards the end of your life is just as harsh for your funeral. If you die in London, the average funeral cost is £5,880. And that's without any "trimmings". Direct cremations hit the news when David Bowie chose to have one. It's one way to keep costs in check. Sun Life says, "A direct cremation is a cremation at its simplest, with no funeral service. The body goes straight to the crematorium to be cremated – usually in a plain coffin. There's no need for hearses and limos, no embalming, no officiant's fees and no extras like flowers and orders of service to pay for. After the cremation, the remains are returned to the loved ones, to be kept or scattered according to their wishes. "A simple, dignified send-off like this is particularly appealing to people who don't feel the need for a formal, ceremonial funeral service – preferring instead to hold an alternative farewell ceremony, celebration of life or memorial service at a later date. It also appeals to people who simply can't afford a traditional funeral service and all the trappings that go with them. And when someone has died abroad, a direct cremation can save the considerable cost of transporting the body home."

**Further information**  
If you have any questions about planning for your funeral or that of a loved one, Age UK's Factsheet 'Planning for Your Funeral' is a step-by-step guide. It covers everything from setting a budget for your send-off to donating your body to medical research.

"As a humanist celebrant I take time to meet the family and get to know the deceased. In some instances, we also get to know and understand someone who is still alive but planning their own funeral. They will share the story of their lives with us – who they loved, what made them laugh, who they influenced. They will suggest and discuss music that they might want to play, or poems and songs to include in the service. "One mourner once said to me, 'I arrived today a wife and left a widow' – which stresses the importance and gravitas of the event and really focuses my mind to create and deliver the perfect celebration and reflection of the person's life." ■

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