

BE PREPARED: The Funeral

Different faith traditions, ethnic groups, and regions will have their own particular funeral practices, but some elements are common. (As a pastor in northern Maryland, I was surprised at the different tweaks used by a funeral home in Shrewsbury, PA, just up the road a piece!)

My experience is as a United Methodist, but the comments here are, again, fairly general.

Most of us don't make ALL our own funeral arrangements, though I have certainly heard of (and attended) services that were planned in advance, to the last sentence, by the deceased. Personally, I'm not a great fan of the "total preparation" plan, because the funeral is not for the deceased; it's for his or her family and friends. With that said, some direction is often helpful, as the person making the arrangements is likely to be

- 1) upset and/or distracted
- 2) very busy
- 3) unaware of the practices of the faith or tradition of the deceased
- 4) overwhelmed by the whole array of choices at a funeral home
- 5) unable to agree with others who are participating in the planning
- 6) or, you fill in the blank.

Funeral arrangements are not at the top of anyone's list, and having to do it after a loved one is gone adds to the pressure. The less time we have to do things, the more often we end up making choices we wish could have had more thought.

So, here are a few things that you may want to decide yourself or guide someone else to do.

1. Choose a funeral home/director in advance. Having to find someone in real time means you can't "shop." Not all funeral homes are created equal, and you want to be sure the establishment will help you compassionately and thoroughly, will not thrust costs and services upon you that you don't want, and will charge you reasonably for the services you do want.
2. Buy a burial site now. Don't wait until you need one; they only get more expensive. (The lots my father bought for \$100 each in 1954 in Silver Spring sell now for at least \$7000 apiece. I have four of them and am willing to let them go for less than the going rate!) Keep the deed with your other important documents.
3. Decide with your family on whether to be buried or cremated. If cremated, what do you want done with the cremains? (Be reasonable.) If you are an organ donor or if you want to donate your body to science, that should be decided now, of course.
4. Talk to your spouse, children, or trustee about a cost range. (You will be just as buried for \$10,000 as for \$20,000.) Be honest about the statement you want your

funeral to make: Will it be “you”; that is, in keeping with the values you espoused and lived by?

5. Think about what valuables you are willing to send with you. You may want to be buried with your wedding ring, for example, but a wedding or engagement ring with diamonds or Great Aunt Tillie’s emerald brooch may better stay with a family member. If valuables are a part of the funeral outfit, have the pastor or a friend watch to be sure they are still in the casket when it’s closed for the last time. (Just saying...)
6. If you can, consider designating a “funeral outfit.” Not all spouses are fashion-conscious or thinking well at the time, so deciding yourself what clothes will work may be a big help. Your loved one should also ask the funeral home what clothes they require; some want everything, from the skin out. Others, not so much.
7. Identify the pastor / person who will officiate. If you are part of a congregation, that’s probably not an issue. If not, who has the ‘stage presence’ and other gifts to lead a service of remembrance? Ask in advance if he or she is willing and can be available.
8. Decide if you want a funeral or memorial service. It may be easier to have a private burial and then have a service or other remembrance when it is convenient for people to gather. You may not want a service of any kind, but this isn’t for you; it’s about you. Your family needs to do what they need to do to remember and grieve.
9. Make a list of hymns, poems, prayers, Scriptures, or other elements of a funeral that are meaningful to you. You don’t need everything, and giving the family leeway for what they want or need is helpful. Remember, the service is for them.
10. If there are persons you want to participate, name them. Give them permission to say no. Not everyone can be ‘up front,’ especially at a highly emotional time. If you will have more helpers than can be accommodated, consider how to spread around the duties—ushers, pallbearers, readers, singers, guest book attendant, and so on. Work with your family in advance to decide how to decide.