



Appendix F: Planning a Simple Funeral or Memorial/Celebration of Life Service

Below is a simple but by no means definitive way to structure a memorial or celebration of life service. This is to give you a beginning idea that you can then shape, adapting to fit your cultural, ethnic, religious/spiritual, or personal needs. This document has three parts:

1. A simple outline
2. Description of each of the elements in the simple outline
3. A worksheet to fill out and share with the appropriate loved ones or to be kept in your personal “death file.” If you are a member of a religious community, you can choose to share it with your religious professional.

A Simple Outline

- Welcome
- Eulogy
- Remembrances by friends and families
 - Planned (by pre-selected friends/family/colleagues)
 - Open time
- Music
 - Transitional pieces
 - Selections that reflect personal identity
 - Collective singing
- Readings
 - Call and response
 - Single voice
- Prayer/meditation
- Closing

Description of Outline Elements

Welcome – Officiant

If Unitarian Universalist, this is typically where a lighting of the chalice happens, which can be done by the officiant or a member of the family. This is a perfect form

of participation for someone who does not want to speak but wants to be an active part. It is also something good for young (but not too young) children to do.

Eulogy

Different from a chronological story of the deceased, marking major milestones (that tends to be the obituary), this is a chance to speak to the person's life story or character or what was meaningful to them, typically told through a story of personal connection with the person giving the eulogy. Rather than hitting every milestone, you can think of it as skipping stones on the water—connecting a few important aspects of the deceased's life, including their absence and legacy.

Choosing the person to give the eulogy is personal and highly subjective. Some choose family members, feeling that it is a final way to honor their loved one. Others opt to let family members receive the gift of the eulogy by listening, rather than leading, which can be a gift. Some family members may want to give the eulogy but worry they might “choke up” and not be able to deliver the eulogy properly. This can be addressed by ensuring the officiant has a copy so that if the family member breaks down so much that they can't continue, the officiant can move into that role.

Some choose the officiant to give the eulogy, allowing others to offer remembrances that are smaller in scope.

Remembrances

There are two ways for remembrances to be shared. One is planned; the other is an open forum.

- **Planned:** In advance of the service, specific people are asked to share a brief (two to five minutes) memory of the deceased. These are often reserved for folks who had a special relationship with the deceased, whether friends or family or coworkers. One way is to choose someone from specific parts of the deceased's life—along the life span or from different realms (professional, hobby, volunteer, family, education, etc.). These folks are asked ahead of time and agree; often their names are included in the printed program, if there is one.
- **Open Forum:** In some services, after the eulogy and perhaps one remembrance, the “floor is opened” to anyone in attendance to share a memory. Such an open space has the potential to be wonderful, with unexpected stories and connections revealed. It also has the potential to be upsetting, with unexpected stories and connections revealed.

It can also get awkward if at the beginning no one volunteers to speak, or if at some point someone rambles on and on with no easy way to bring their remarks to a close. One way to avoid the former is to identify ahead of time one or two “plants”—people who agree to share. This can help get the ball rolling and inspire others. One way to minimize the impact of the latter is to

have a professional or skilled officiant who may not be able to work miracles but may be able to gracefully create a way for the speaker to bring their comments to a close.

Music

Music creates space for our spirits to rest in the present moment and to process either what we are about to take part in or what we have just taken part in (for example, a beautiful eulogy). Music helps bring necessary balance to all the words that will be spoken. Music also adds time to the overall program, so you must consider how much you choose to include. There are three ways to think about music selections for a service.

- **Transitional Pieces:** This is music chosen to help bridge transitions during the service, such as when people gather, when they leave, and/or possibly between service elements. It can really help bring all the different parts into one whole piece.
- **Selections to Reflect Personal Identity:** The deceased may have said about a piece, “I want this played at my funeral!” Or they might have been known for their rendition of a particular song. If so, finding a way to include it can feel good on many levels. Perhaps it is included as an interlude in the service, or as the gathering or leaving music. Perhaps it is part of a soundtrack played during the reception (with a story of why it was included printed in the program or shared by the officiant). Perhaps someone near to the deceased performs it as their good-bye gift.
- **Collective Singing:** Creating ways for those gathered to participate can be helpful for processing grief. One way is to have all assembled sing a song (or hymn if the service has religious qualities). Perhaps the deceased had a favorite hymn or song; include it if it is suitable for this setting. Such services tend to bring folks from all different parts of a person’s life, so you can’t count on everyone knowing all the words; be sure to provide printed lyrics, even with music for reading, to be as inclusive of as many people as possible.

Readings

Readings are another common element in a service. Whether religious/spiritual or poetic/prosaic in nature, brief to medium-length readings can add beauty or humor or profundity to the service. Perhaps it is a reading that was important to the deceased—a favorite poem or passage. Perhaps it feels right to a surviving loved one, offering comfort at this time of mourning and loss. Professional officiants typically have a list of readings that they recommend for this context. An internet search will also result in many (likely too many) options. There are two ways to think about readings for a service:

- **Call and Response:** Just like with collective singing, creating a way for those gathered to participate can be helpful for processing grief. A call and response

reading is just that—the officiant reads aloud one part and those gathered respond back, either with the same phrase repeated or following along with a printed text.

- **Single Voice:** This can actually be multiple voices if the piece lends itself to that. The point here is that a reading is chosen, as is the person (or people) who will speak it aloud to all gathered. Sometimes, the person is chosen because they would like an active part in the service, and then the piece is found for them.

Prayer/Meditation

Finding a way to include a prayer or meditation or moment for reflection that balances honoring the deceased and those come to mourn can be a delicate business. Perhaps the deceased had no religious affiliation or left one behind at some point in their life or returned to aspects of it in their dying days. Perhaps the deceased was a part of a spiritual or religious community, either actively or on the margins. If there is no religious tradition or spiritual practice, a non-dogmatic prayer or meditation can still be of comfort to those present (who may represent a wide variety of traditions) who are mourning. There are ways to deliver prayers that honor the interfaith context of more and more memorial services and funerals, explicitly naming god or not.

Closing

The emotional closing might be a meditation. It might be a call and response reading (such as “[We Remember Them](#)” by Sylvan Kamens and Rabbi Jack Riemer, a reading that fits well in many memorial settings). It might be a musical selection. Ideally it is something that brings the emotional journey of the service to a close. In addition, those in attendance need to know what’s next—the logistics. Is there a structured way to greet the family (such as a receiving line)? Is there a reception? Is it on site? Is it back at the house? Is it at a restaurant? Is there a slide show or memorabilia table that they can visit? Is there a guest book to sign? This information might be in the printed program, if there is one, but folks might not have read it. What do folks need to know so that they can leave with as few questions as possible?



Worksheet for My Funeral/Memorial/Celebration of Life Service

Full name as I want it to appear: _____

Other important names (last names, previous names, nicknames, etc.) and information that is meaningful to me about them:

Date of birth: _____ Birthplace: _____

Surviving (chosen/given) family members (with relational role):

Family members (with relational role) already deceased:

Digital photo(s) for use can be found here: _____

I would like to have a:

- Traditional whole-body burial
- Traditional cremation
- Green burial
- Other: _____

I have already been in communication with this funeral home: _____

I would like (check as many as apply)

- Funeral
- Graveside ceremony
- Memorial service
- Celebration of life
- Scattering of ashes
- Whatever works best for my survivors

If cremation: I would like my ashes scattered here (feel free to share the meaning of choice):

If there is a need for a casket, I would like: _____

I would like my service to take place at:

- My house of worship: _____
- Funeral home
- This location: _____

Preferred officiant:

- First choice: _____
 - I have spoken with them about this: yes no
 - Contact information:

- Second choice: _____
 - I have spoken with them about this: yes no
 - Contact information

Please notify the following people (name, contact, relationship):

Possible pallbearers (names, contact info):

Ideas for who gives my eulogy:

Music I hope might be included:

Readings I hope might be included:

Thoughts about adorning the environment:

- Flowers
- No flowers
- Living plants
- Nothing harmful to the ecology (no balloons/paper confetti; rice, seeds, flower petals, bubbles are okay...)
- Memorabilia: _____
- My favorite... _____
- _____
- _____

Causes/charities to which I'd like people to donate in my memory:

Other considerations:

