



FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

A Tale of Two Funerals: How Pre-Planning Can Help Families Grieve Better

Living requires planning, and so does dying. Probably the worst time to resolve all the things that need to be settled after someone dies is after someone dies. As difficult as it may be, it is a wise family that ensures everything is in place BEFORE the death occurs, because the emotional upheaval of coping with a death is enough to bear by itself without having to make all the difficult and usually permanent decisions that are required. Standard words to articulate the need for pre-arrangement so far, right? But one family had two opposite experiences that illustrate the point.

Doug Jones, a man in his 70s, in spite of knowing he was very ill with cancer and ignoring encouragement from family members, stubbornly resisted making any final preparations. He refused to make funeral arrangements or talk about a will, and gave no indication of what his wishes would be. His argument was that if he did all these things, it “would be like giving up” and he would die.

Guess what. He died anyway and left his family a mess. No one could agree on the details of the funeral, whether they should respect Doug’s wishes, at which they could only guess, or which of the numerous varied suggestions from family members would be appropriate. Nothing seemed to satisfy everyone. Feelings were running high among a family that had always been very close.

The tensions over the funeral were further aggravated by no clear indication of Doug’s wishes regarding the distribution of property and possessions. With no will, there were difficult legal issues to settle. But even deciding on a lawyer caused great dispute among family members. It wasn’t that people were self-seeking; it was more that they were emotionally drained, and with no guidance, decisions were more difficult. Perhaps it is easier to get upset over a few material assets and possessions than it is to express the grief material assets and possessions than it is to express the grief over losing someone who loved. It took many months to settle the estate, and, even worse, several years to restore family feelings.

Continued...

Continued...

Cathy Jones, the wife and mother in the family, seeing all this and hurting more over the dissension than the distribution, determined the same thing would not happen when she died. She returned to the same funeral home a few weeks later and made almost identical arrangements to those of her husband. The next call was to her financial planner, who came and helped make good financial suggestions to maintain her lifestyle and protect her estate. She contacted a lawyer and made a will, adding to that document a thorough list of “who gets what” of her possessions. Nothing of any value was omitted. Everything was down in black and white.

Seven years later, Cathy died, and even though she did not see it herself, her fondest wish was realized. With all the practical matters settled in advance, the family came together and grieved, and then worked in harmony to effect what their mother had wanted. Was this accomplished just because she had planned ahead? While the family might say that they were grateful for a second chance to “do it right,” it was their mother’s wisdom in clearly making her wishes known that made the difference.

From a grief therapist’s point of view, there is no doubt in my mind that grief is reconciled more effectively when the events around a death bring people together rather than driving them apart. The media frenzy surrounding the “end of life” struggles involving the family of Terry Schaivo has given another indication of the difficulties that can arise when wishes are not clearly recorded. One can only imagine the grief, hurt and even animosity that will linger in this situation. There are many reasons people should prearrange, not least of which because it can assist in the healing process. This should remind us how important it is to create meaningful forums where families can talk about and clearly articulate their wishes on such important matters.

My family knows what my wishes are regarding “end of life” issues because we have talked about it. They are also well aware of my feelings regarding funeral arrangements, although I have also told them that “funerals are for the living,” and to do whatever would be meaningful for them. I believe this gives them clear direction and guidance, so that when that inevitable day occurs, things will be in place to safeguard their estate and make sure wishes are carried out. I also want a message to be given to my family and friends on that day, which is basically that while I hope I will be missed, I want them to go on with life and make the most of it. I believe it is important in life-threatening situations to give dying people permission to let go. But it is also important for the dying person to find ways to clearly give those they love permission to go on.

Frequently, after a death, many people struggle with numerous “if only’s.” Having practical arrangements in place enables them to turn those “If only we had” statements into “Thank goodness we did.” The challenge for us all is to find creative ways to effectively communicate the importance and practicality of making such decisions to the families we serve. But here’s the interesting part. Since their mother’s death, at least four members of the Jones’ family, having learned from these two opposite experiences when their parents died, have made appointments to go and prearrange their own funerals and put their affairs in order. “We don’t want to put our families through what we went through” is the rally cry. And, even more fascinating, with almost missionary zeal, they are encouraging their baby boomer friends to do the same to ensure these things are in place. I thought you’d find that interesting.

(Written by Dr. Bill Webster)