

Caring Connections:

In the event of no funeral



Schuler-Lefebvre

FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

“I don’t want any funeral. Just leave me at the curb side for pick up on Monday morning.” Alec, an 82-year-old retired university professor, had struggled with cancer for two years before succumbing to the disease last August. Always a strong, albeit kindly gentleman, Alec had his own views about funerals, and had long determined that he didn’t want one. Out of respect for their beloved husband and parent, the family had complied with his wishes. His body was cremated without any funeral service, visitation or acknowledgment of his death. After all, it is only respectful and right to do what the deceased person wants, right? Except that for Eleanor, his wife and inseparable companion of 55 years, there was no closure. The ashes came back from the crematorium ... but now what? Something seemed unfinished. Alec’s daughter Ann and her husband Martin have been personal friends of mine for quite a few years now. Over Christmas, Martin asked me if I could help, because Eleanor was feeling that she had not been able to put things to rest. The four of us met one evening and she showed me pictures of their life together and told me stories, some of which made her cry and more that made her laugh. She also mentioned that several friends had said that they were sorry that they had not had a chance to say “goodbye” and were thinking of him over the Christmas season. That was where the idea of holding a memorial service began. I suggested that on a specific significant date, we could have a short committal ceremony at which time the family could place the urn and some memorabilia in a niche which they could purchase, and afterwards a memorial reception could be held for other family and friends. The funeral home that had handled Alec’s disposition agreed to accommodate the family’s wishes. That was why, on what would have been his 83rd. birthday, a “Celebration of Alec’s Life” was held in the reception center of the funeral home. And what an event it was.

I had the privilege of being the MC, and we began with a short introduction, explaining how grief is a natural reaction to a significant loss, and that we were there to say that we were missing Alec. I also explained how Eleanor felt that she needed to do this for HER, to help her say farewell to her life partner, and how perhaps this gave all of us the opportunity to say goodbye. But most of all we were there to celebrate a life.

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Martin is a communications specialist by profession and he had spent countless hours gathering family photos and home movies to put together in several moving video tributes. Five family members and friends stood to speak about various aspects of Alec's life.

His grandson, Derek, spoke about Alec's academic life and achievements, and of how thrilled he had been when as a professor he had come forward to present the academic degree to Derek. As Derek spoke, we watched the video of that proud moment as well as other pictures of Alec's life as a teacher.

Next came Anne, his daughter, who talked about her father and their family life, followed by son Jim who have a humorous recounting about adventures in the outdoors and the cottage which Alec had loved. Martin talked about his love of music and his participation playing the double bass in the local chamber orchestra (which were on hand to play in tribute to Alec). All these talks were illustrated by pictures and movies relevant to the aspect that was being highlighted.

Finally, Eleanor herself talked about their world travels ... Martin had recorded this part because Eleanor was afraid she would find it too emotional to stand before her friends and family and talk, but it worked well. There was an opportunity for "open mic" and several other people came forward to pay tribute to Alec. At the very end of the event, there was one final video. Many years before, the family had held a "spaghetti night" and a home video had recorded the happy scene. Alec's great joy had been to play this movie, and then reverse the footage, so that the spaghetti came out of people's mouths ... I am sure you get the picture. He would howl with laughter at this, and so in celebration we watched the same video, forward and reverse, and laughed along with him. Now I have not recounted these events simply as a chapter in "Dr. Webster's Diary." I want to share the details of this to show how such a gathering can have positive effects for those who are grieving, and who might feel that they "missed out" by not having a funeral. I hope that this experience which reaffirmed my already strong belief in the value of meaningful memorials may serve as a model of what can happen even when no funeral has taken place at the time of death.

Funerals are for the living and even in situations where the deceased has indicated that their preference is not to have one, there are other consideration. Eleanor and her family felt that something was incomplete. They had no closure. They need to have a "place" for Alec. Grief invites people to remember, not to forget. While Alec's motivation may have been not too have any fuss or to spare his dear wife the emotional stress of a funeral, his good intentions sadly resulted in exactly the opposite. Eleanor wanted to make a fuss and to have something meaningful to say that he had a wonderful life, and that she missed him. She needed to place that urn in the niche and say goodbye. She was pleased and surprised that 80 people (not the 40 or 50 they expected) showed up to say that they missed him too, and how thankful they were that he had touched their lives in so many ways. I am a great believer in the therapeutic value and importance of funerals. But what I learned that day last month was that it is never too late. Six months later or on a birthday or the anniversary of the death, or whenever, people can gather to celebrate the person's life and say their goodbyes. More than anything, people do not want their loved ones to be forgotten, and we can be the facilitators of that.

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Three things of interest have come out of this event.

First, I overheard someone say after the celebration, “this was so much more uplifting than a funeral.” I was pleased by the comment, of course. But then I thought, “Why shouldn’t funerals be as inspiring and positive?” Someone from my current support group told me that at her husband’s funeral, the priest stood up and said, “I didn’t know the deceased, nor do I know this family” and then proceeded to talk about himself and his experiences for the rest of the service. There is no excuse for this, and I make no apologies for this comment. One hour of conversation with the family is all it would have cost the minister to find something out about that individual and to make the service meaningful and personal. We need to say to funeral facilitators, religious and secular, “make it meaningful or don’t do it at all.” Grieving people deserve no less.

Secondly however, Alec’s celebration taught me again how much grieving people need to find closure. Since his death, Eleanor has been haunted by the memories of the last year of her husband’s life which was, by all standards, harrowing. The celebration of Life has helped her to see that even though the last two years were difficult, that they had 80 good and wonderful years. As she said “If anyone knew that they would have 80 good years, and two bad, that’s not a bad deal.” The celebration helped her put Alec’s death in the larger context of his life. Grieving people want and need to “do” something to honor and remember their loved ones. They need some ritual, religious or secular, which symbolizes their goodbyes and their grief. Having done this, the family now feels that they are able to put it to rest. And thirdly, (and I know you will feel I have saved the best till last!) Eleanor, the next week, went back to the funeral home to thank them, and while there prearranged her own funeral. “After all,” she told me, “I want my family to be able to remember me when I am gone and celebrate my life in the same way.” No argument here. I am pleased to tell you that she has invited me to facilitate that service. I agreed, but only on the promise that there would be many glasses of her favorite sherry down the hatch before we do. She responded with what seemed to me to be a happy and contented laugh.

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The Grieving Well Series - Dr. Bill Webster