

Everybody's Talkin' - Harry Neilson

Why is this profession so special?

The nature of funeral ceremonies is changing. I know because I have been hanging around funeral parlours, crematoriums and bereaved families for the last four years of my life and have conducted over 1,500 funerals. I was Scotland's first full time Civil Funeral Celebrant and have officiated at every kind of funeral ceremony imaginable and experienced almost every situation you could find at a funeral.

- Two hearses arriving for two different funerals at the same time
- The wrong songs getting played at the crematorium
- Mourners collapsing in the front row
- A heckler within the congregation who offered a barrage of swear words to me (or possibly the deceased!)
- A punch up as the people left the funeral
- A mobile phone falling out of someone's pocket at the graveside as the coffin was lowered and landing in the grave

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- A Church Minister verbally abusing me and telling me what a disgrace I was to the funeral profession. As far as he was concerned, there was not enough religion in the funeral he had just attended (and I had officiated at) despite the fact that the family who put the service together did not want any religion in the ceremony.

Some people say to me, "Isn't it a morbid job, going to funerals every day?" but it is anything but depressing. Conducting funerals is a wonderfully exciting and reflective job. Not many jobs help you to think about the most important things in life. Why are we here on this earth? Why do you do your job? What are you passionate about in life? If you had a near death experience and saw your life whizzing past, would you have any regrets and wish you had done something else with your life? If you won the lottery tomorrow and had no worries at all in life, what would you be doing come Monday morning? Working as a Funeral Celebrant helps me focus on the greatest passions within my life.

This profession is special because we fit the service to people's needs and wishes. It is special because, for most Celebrants, this is our full time job. It is special because many of us are trained professional speakers. Above all, Civil Funerals are special because we craft the right stories and words and create the most meaningful ritual that brings that family to a new place of comfort and healing.

Funerals – A celebration of life

In 99.9% of the funerals I conduct, it is clear that at the end of people's lives, the most important things are not money and material things, but family and friends. When I visit a family to talk about the person who has died and write up their life story, I have never had a request to tell the congregation at the funeral that the deceased wished he or she had more money in their bank account when they died. It is more about the importance of spending real quality time with your children and your parents, eating more ice cream, kicking more leaves in the autumn and making peace with that long lost brother you fell out with 20 years ago. It's funny how, all of a sudden, at the end of our lives and when it comes to what will be said about us when we die we want to remember the good stuff and not dwell on the more awkward stories.

Nowadays people want a funeral service that is memorable and celebratory. To some families a 30-year-old story of a picnic in Burntisland in freezing cold Scotland (that's July by the way) in dad's clapped out old Bedford van, with what felt like half the kids in the street crammed in the back, is a vital memory that must be re-told at the funeral service. It makes perfect sense for the immediate family to want to remember their loved ones in their own way. Why should the family not decide what stories should be recalled on the day of the funeral? If this means that during the same picnic 30 years ago the family remembered the jokes and hilarity in that van and dad drinking a tin of McEwan's Export (thankfully no longer allowed) and that they now understand why two pieces of bread stuck together with jam and consumed at a beach are called a "sandwich", then these stories must be re-told regardless of someone else's opinion of how relevant or interesting that story is. It may be nostalgic and, to the uninitiated, sound sentimental but these are the kinds of things many people want to hear at a funeral nowadays; of some great day 30 years ago with their dad and how they ate candy floss and chips in a poke (bag) on the way home from their day at the beach.

Funerals are a wonderful opportunity for family and friends to remember all the reasons why they loved someone and are going to miss them. For me to be the one who communicates that message at a funeral is a fantastic privilege. The honour of a family inviting you to celebrate the life of someone who had a major (or minor) impact within a family is a great job. Every day I drive to a crematorium or graveside to talk about the dead and my job is to make the dead come to 'life', so to speak. To talk with such authenticity, warmth, compassion and passion that people come to me at the end of the service and say things like; "Are you a friend of the family?", "How long did you know John for?" It is a tremendous honour to speak well of the dead and bring them to life in the hearts, minds and souls of those whose lives were touched by this individual.

I recently conducted a funeral for a man who was a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II. He saw many of his friends die of starvation but amazingly survived the concentration camp. When he returned home to civvy street, he got on with his life. He fell in love, had a family and a successful

career and wrote a book about his experiences. He then lost his sight. You might think the war, the Stalag or the inability to see might have put him off life, but not Alan. He was such an inspiring man that it was a privilege to talk about him at his funeral. He oozed positivity throughout life and when I spoke about him at his service in a Dundee hotel and celebrated his life I couldn't help but think, "I should be more like this man. If someone dents my car door in the supermarket car park, is it really worth getting mad about? If children don't eat their brussel sprouts, does that merit me being in a bad mood with them for the rest of the night?" There has been many an occasion when I have conducted a funeral like the one for Alan MacKay, the Daily Record journalist and author of '313 Days Before Christmas' and driven home reflecting on my own life, my wife and children and thought, "I should be more like this...I ought to make more time to do that...why don't I adopt that person's philosophy on life tomorrow." Not many jobs allow you to do that on a daily basis.

Few jobs give this opportunity to reflect on life, why we are here and what is most important. Who else has a vocation and profession where you are given an insight into what makes people tick, into what people want from life, into what drives them on day by day or maybe forces them to give up on life? As a Funeral Celebrant, I am given a wonderful insight into someone's soul and am gifted with someone's life story and treasury. It is noble to speak about the deceased in the best possible way. Not only is a funeral the last ever public act of your life, it is the only time in your life when a disparate group of people come together for an hour, for a unique occasion and then go home their separate ways. When you think about it, how many times will someone stand up in public and speak well of you? Possibly when you retire or at a Silver or Golden Wedding celebration, but there are not many such occasions. All the more reason for a funeral ceremony to be beautifully written and skilfully delivered. It is right and proper to celebrate a life well lived.

Within a typical funeral gathering just think of who is there. Some people will have known John when he played football and scored the winning goal for the school team, others recall the good looking teenager who wooed the girls on his Vespa bought from his first pay packet. Some people only worked with John for a couple of years, saw him at the golf club bar or spoke to him over the back garden wall about the price of fish. All of a sudden, at a funeral, this contrasting group of people come together for a never to be repeated occasion. My attitude therefore is that the deceased and all family and friends deserve the best 'celebration of life' service possible no matter who they were and what they have done or not done in life.

Funerals are wonderful human occasions. They are not always easy; many are tragic and prove the point that life can be unfair. Why should children die? What do you say to a husband whose wife has just died in childbirth? How do you find words to comfort a broken-hearted mother whose son has been murdered in cold blood 10,000 miles away in a foreign country and no one was there to hold his hand? Why should a beautiful 21-year-old girl die of cancer when her whole life was in front of her? What do you say to parents who have to bury their twin babies? What about the family who have had such

awful memories of someone who was desperately cruel to them in past years and yet they still have to have a funeral ceremony for that person they may not have liked? How do you find the right words when there are absolutely no positive words or thoughts to share about that person and where some people are delighted the old git is dead? The family will tell you how they want their loved one's life to be celebrated or recalled and what words they need to hear.

Why Civil Funerals?

With statistics telling us that church attendances are declining massively, who will minister to people who may not go to church very often or who have had a negative experience of a funeral and thought "never again"? What if the words and memories you want to talk about are not reflected within the ceremony and you did not get a chance to see a draft copy of the service before it was delivered? That's not right; it's your funeral you should get to see what will be said in advance. What if you are told you are not in control of what will be said on the day of the funeral, the officiant is? Who will give a family the exact service that they want, no questions asked and no judgments made? Civil Funeral Celebrants will.

In February 2008 a leading Church of Scotland Minister, Reverend Johnston McKay, said only regular and faithful church goers should be entitled to have funeral in a church and non attendees should be provided for by other officiants. Until a few years ago the basic choice in the UK was to have a religious funeral in a church or an atheistic (Humanist) service in a crematorium, funeral parlour or at a graveside.

Civil Funerals offer a third option giving families real choice. Properly trained and accredited professional speakers lead these services with less reference to the beliefs of organised religion or the philosophy of the Humanist Society. The beliefs, wishes and values of the deceased and their family are paramount.

Funeral ceremonies in the UK are changing in nature. You should have the right to create the exact service you want when you die, according to your values, wishes and beliefs. Even if your only experience of a funeral is what you have seen on EastEnders, you will know that more and more people are requesting personalised and celebratory funerals. A cursory glance at the newspapers and the internet will reveal that families are making it clear exactly what they want when the time comes for their funeral.

If people wish to find out more about the changing nature of funeral ceremonies I would encourage them to subscribe to a truly magnificent and incredibly comprehensive newsletter from one of America's leading Civil Funeral Celebrants, Pam Vetter, otherwise known as thefunerallady.com. If you dip into her archive of funeral stories you can hear about people's individual needs, wants and wishes and the changing world of funeral ceremonies. The inventor of the Pringle Crisp tube had his ashes placed into a Pringles cylinder. There is the company who can turn your cremated

remains into an Hb pencil and the brilliant story of two sons who bought their mum a traffic meter and cemented it next to her graveside stone. Of course the meter said 'just expired'. Pam's newsletter also reports on the incredible story of a man called John Henry Smith who passed away in July 2005. When he died, he was laid out in his local funeral parlour on his favourite recliner chair, wearing his beloved (American) football top - the Pittsburgh Steelers - a can of beer in one hand and a remote control for the television in the other. This rivals the story of the lady in England who wrote in advance how she would like her funeral service. She must have had happy memories of her wedding car with 'Just Married' and the good old tin cans trailing behind it because she let her loved ones know, in advance of her funeral, that the words 'Just Dead' were to be spelt out in flowers in the back of the hearse and her many many shoes were to trail behind the funeral cars.

Increasingly families are advising the funeral industry that they want to be in control of the day when they leave this earth. And why not? Why not, in this day and age, have the funeral ceremony exactly as you would like it? There will always be room for church funerals and Humanist funerals. But what about those who do not go to church and who are not atheists and are somewhere between religion and atheism? Society needs Civil Funerals and professionals who are dedicated to funeral ceremonies.

Google a few sites like mydeathwish.com or mywonderfullife.com and you will see that people are making plans for how they would like to be remembered when they are gone. Perhaps the task of planning a memorable funeral is somewhere in their list of 101 things to do before they die but the fact is, we are in a new age of funeral ceremonies, and Civil Funerals Celebrants are a welcomed profession within the western world because they are leading the way for personalised and bespoke funeral ceremonies. It seems evident that we need Civil Funerals because people want them.

The emergence of personalised funerals

Whether we like it or not, we are dealing with a new age of baby boomers who are not afraid to tell it like it is. They are requesting tailor-made services. From having Monty Pythons 'Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life' being played as people leave their service, to requesting no-one wearing black at the funeral. Others have even made arrangements that their loved one will get emails sent to them from beyond the grave for up to 10 years after they have passed away. Some people think it is a great idea to have their ashes collected from the crematorium on the day of their funeral and sent away to a company who will turn them into a firework to be set off on Guy Fawkes Night. They may think it perfectly acceptable to put the fun into funerals and have a novelty coffin that looks like a pint of beer or for everyone to come to the funeral dressed in their favourite football colours. More and more people are open to funerals being individualised, personalised and meaningful. I have led hundreds of funeral ceremonies with live musicians, speeches from people who actually knew the person, PowerPoint slide shows as well as a prayer, a hymn and some Frank Sinatra numbers as we entered and exited the crematorium.

I hear the argument on blogs and web pages that this is nothing more than egotism gone mad and that over the top 'celebrations' with football songs and white doves being released at a funeral is nothing more than the deceased dictating how they shall be remembered at their memorial service. For some this borders on the side of pomposity, arrogance and the 'me me me' culture. But consider; some people are not even as fussy as that. It is not always about making the funeral so 'memorable' that people speak about it for days, or for the Celebrant to make sure that the mourners laugh at some past story when John got drunk and made a complete fool of himself at his 21st birthday party and passed out stark naked on a beach near Dundee. (By the way John and Neil are not the same person). At the very basic level, all the family want is for you, the presider of the funeral, to get their name right!

Don't laugh, it still happens. I know of a religious Minister who was asked to conduct a funeral service at Dundee Crematorium and he clearly had not done any homework on the deceased. He turned up with his prayer book and said something along the lines of, "My dear friends, can I please welcome you all here today for the funeral service for Agnes". He spoke for a few minutes saying Agnes this and Agnes that until there was a cough from the front row and a rather gruff voice yelled out, "Excuse me, it's no Agnes, it's Angus". Not only did he get the name wrong, he got the sex wrong. If that had been the funeral of someone in my family, I would have cancelled it there and then, told the people to come back another day or got up and taken the service myself. It is not asking much is it? Even if the person who has died has an almost unpronounceable Polish or Ukrainian name, could the officiant not at least write it phonetically on a piece of paper and say it 20 times before they conduct the service. A funeral should not be a bad experience, at the very least the name should be pronounced correctly and yet such appalling mistakes still happen. Proper 'homework' should be done by the officiant so that all mistakes are minimised. What if someone was referred to during a funeral service as James and yet no-one in the congregation ever knew him as James; he was always Jim or Jimmy? Small mistakes can cause irreparable damage and hurt. Even small changes, small acts of personalisation such as nicknames being used individualise a service and instantly offer a more accurate portrait of the deceased.

Painting a true, authentic and sometimes honest picture of life
Most people want me to speak well of their loved one who has died. Nothing more, nothing less. They want me to tell it as it is, according to the family's wishes and to speak with passion, warmth, authority, compassion, sincerity and artistry. That may at times mean I have to deliver a slightly sanitised version of someone's life story and remove embarrassing tales and it may at times mean a somewhat exaggerated version of what someone is said to have done so that only the good bits are being recalled and celebrated at the service.

There is nothing wrong with highlighting the happy stories of someone's life within a funeral eulogy and down playing the more difficult or challenging times. The family of the deceased do not necessarily want you to tell lies or paint a patently false picture. People are not daft; most people attending a

funeral will know a person's good and bad points. The amount of story editing is not the point. The utmost importance is how the deceased's life story is told and the skill of the person speaking during the service.

But at the end of the day it is the family who decide how their loved one will be remembered, they give me the stories and I paint a true and authentic picture of their loved one's life as they see it.

Increasingly families want someone who will turn up at every funeral and give the same quality performance each time; one that touches their heart and soul. The family want to leave the funeral thinking; that was my dad to a tee; you did my son proud; my gran would have loved that or that was the best funeral I have ever attended. People take you into their confidence when you turn up at their family home prior to the funeral to conduct the interview and they want you to move their family and friends on the funeral day, almost make them sit up as they listen to stories about this person they have known and loved. They want to feel inspired on the funeral day.

On many an occasion, when I have conducted an interview, I have witnessed husbands, wives and children open their hearts and reveal intimate secrets for the very first time. Parents may even tell the Celebrant stories they have never told their children before. A life has ended, people have things to say and they want you, the Civil Funeral Celebrant, to re-tell these stories in an engaging and passionate way because that family believes their loved one deserves only the very best. The call for personalised funeral ceremonies is loud and clear.

I remember one lady telling me that she had only just found out that her mother, who was a stunning girl in her early days, had been photographed by the once famous Mayfair magazine. Sons and daughters of another family told me they had only just realised what their mum meant about their dad working in 'Butlins' when they were children. It was actually another type of holiday camp that was run by Her Majesty's Prison Service. Another one of my favourites was the elderly man who went into his garage every day to tinker about. Two years later, when a low level articulated lorry drew up within the Broughty Ferry cul-de-sac, to the disbelief of friends and neighbours, there emerged a magnificent red aeroplane that had been hand built by this incredible octogenarian. His son still flies it to this day at Perth Aerodrome. Celebrants are gifted someone's life story and are asked to skilfully deliver that story in a way that will make the deceased family and friends feel proud. Is there anything more precious than painting a true and meaningful picture of someone's life?

So what is a Civil Funeral?

Civil Funerals are a relatively new vision of how funeral ceremonies should be conducted. The first was conducted in the UK around about the year 2000. Civil Funerals are not anti religious but they are totally different from atheistic / Humanist ceremonies. Civil Funerals are unique because they can be religious, semi religious or non religious in nature. They do not object to

religious content. Their basic premise is that your needs, your beliefs and your values are most important, not ours. They do not preach religion or Humanist philosophy unless of course that is what the family have asked for. It is a job for passionate people, creative writers, eloquent speakers and for people who want to assist families through the bereavement process. It is not uncommon to visit a family and find out that the deceased was an agnostic, his widow a lapsed Roman Catholic and of the three children, one goes to church now and again, one never goes and the third is open to every religion under the sun. It seems to me that only Civil Funerals can serve such families without any risk of compromising anyone's beliefs and values. Everyone's beliefs can be accommodated within a Civil Funeral. This makes Civil Funerals different. A Civil Funeral is a 'bespoke', 'tailor made' or 'personalised' funeral ceremony and completely different to any other funeral, because every individual is different.

As Dally Messenger III from the International College of Celebrancy in Australia will tell you, when the Civil Celebrancy movement began there in July 1973, the Australian Government had noticed the decline in church attendances and decided the time was right to have ceremonies (initially it was only marriage ceremonies) that reflected people's own choices and preferences.

This was a fundamental cultural change. Prior to 1973 most ceremonies, whether weddings or funerals, were in churches or registry offices. The church or the state was making all 'the rules'. The Australian government was radical. Power was to be taken from the state or church and given to the individual. Ceremonies would no longer be dictated from 'on high' but would be created 'from below', from the people, from the couple to be married, from the bereaved family. It was a realisation that the funeral ceremony is yours; you decide how it will be.

Soon the news of Civil Funerals spread to New Zealand, the USA and the UK and it is predicted to be a service that will grow in popularity as it seems to fit the spiritual, emotional, sociological and psychological needs of many people in the UK today.

Please note, not all Civil Funerals are 'celebrations'. I know the word is commonly bandied about but sometimes that is not the right word. I think, for example, about families and communities in Australia who were devastated by the horrific fires in Victoria in February 2009. Sometimes sadness, mourning, grief and lamentation can be the dominant theme for bereaved families.

What is fundamentally being spoken about here is the right of people to have the exact service they want and for everyone else outside the immediate family to accept these choices without judgement or criticism.
The importance of healing

We all mourn in our own way. Indeed we all heal in our own way and we must not forget the power of funeral ceremonies to heal. If a particular song must

be played, play it. If the Celebrant has to tell the story of why Uncle George came to be affectionately known as the 'Grumpy old sod' then that story has to be told. The family knows best. There may be certain 'things' that have to be said and addressed at the funeral because that is what they need to say in order to move on. Maybe the individual died alone suddenly at work and no one was with him. Maybe there are allegations of malpractice in the NHS hospital ward and anger within the family in addition to grief. Maybe there has been terrible abuse in the past or violence or theft of a family's inheritance. There could even be a desire for revenge against the person who took the life of a young man in a car accident. If something needs to be said, let it be said. This is a one-off occasion.

The Celebrant gently and patiently allows the family to talk at the family interview so that the right words are chosen for the service. I also know that when a draft version of the service is sent to a family in advance for them to edit and change, they feel empowered. It is vital, from a holistic bereavement perspective, that the family feel happy with what will be said on the day and are at peace with how their loved one's life will be celebrated before the funeral day arrives.

The words spoken and the way the words are delivered can put people at ease and reduce anxiety. This naturally asks for the appropriate amount of preparatory work, often 8-10 hours. But when the right words are crafted and when the Celebrant delivers the words with expertise and passion you can see and feel the effect it has on the grieving family. They will tell you at the end of the service what you have done for them. You see that in their faces. You feel that in their embraces. You read about it in their thank you letters.

I have spoken at funerals for families bereaved by murder and I know that finding the right words is incredibly important. Do the family want to laugh or cry at the funeral even when their father has been murdered? (See Chapter 6.) It is all to do with relationships of trust and giving people the right service, the right words and the very best delivery of these words. That may mean there is an honest recall of life stories and no hypocrisy or it may mean recalling only happy and special memories and, in the above example, never touching upon the evil that befell that individual.

That is why this profession is so special. The family's needs come first. I am not there to promote myself, to talk about how I feel or to be an entertainer. I am first and foremost a professional speaker and Celebrant helping a family grieve in the right way, in their own way.