

For years many of us have been dissatisfied with the funerals we have experienced. We have opinions about what we don't want, but what do we want? Although the following ideas are expressed in first person, their intent is to get you started thinking about what is right for you. Remember there is **no one way or right way**

Legal stuff

As next of kin one first has to notify the patient's doctor to see if that person will sign the death certificate. If the patient is in Hospice or a hospital, those organizations take care of that; a funeral director will do it as well. If the patient hasn't seen a doctor for a while, dies in a way that wouldn't be expected, or dies away from home, the State Medical Examiner might have to see the body and sign the death certificate; s/he also has to sign permission to cremate. Local police can connect one with the Medical Examiner. If your kin dies in the hospital, there may be a hassle to get the body to a private home; the funeral home may have to pick up the body and deliver it.

Preparing the body

Once the loved one dies, I would like to clean him up and dress him in clothes that were his or my favorites. Parts of that job might be a bit unpleasant, and if he became stiff, it could be challenging. However, I imagine using the time to talk about what's on my mind, maybe even about issues we never resolved, things I put up with, or things about me that he dealt with.

Although he wouldn't answer, I have the sense that talking during this time would give me comfort. I don't know if I'd like music or quiet during the process, but I could choose that at the moment.

If I needed someone to help me prepare the body, I would pick the person who seemed most appropriate at the time. It might be a friend, a son, a daughter-in-law, or a grandchild. I imagine sharing memories while we worked.

Adjusting the container

I'd buy a cardboard body box, an acceptable container for cremation at our local funeral home. I'd line the box with a loved family quilt or blanket, maybe even some kind of a soft rug right under the body. I'd get someone to help me lift the body into the box, and then I'd fold the blanket around him, not covering him at first. I'd probably put a pillow under his head. I'd find mementoes to put in the box with him. (I'm not thinking of valuables, because I'm not into destroying items of value.) Maybe I'd have a few sheets of instrumental music, pictures of people he loved, a used Frisbee disc for disc golf, a paperback mystery, a *Sports Illustrated Calendar*, an item of my clothes he liked, and something to symbolize the computer. I'd also want an object to represent his career.

For my death

If it were my death, I could imagine my family putting me in black socks, because

it's an important occasion, and adding a fleece jacket to whatever outfit they chose, because I'm always cold. They might tuck in a paperback romance, an old self-help book, a paintbrush, stained glass tools, and pictures of my family and my artwork. An old deck of pinochle cards, a thimble or measuring tape, and a golf disc would be fitting as well.

Bidding Goodbye

At first I'd put the body in a private room so family members could take the time they want to say their individual goodbyes. I'd have magic markers on hand so that anyone could write a message that might fit. For my husband, a note I might write would be "You're the one who made my dreams come true." Some might draw pictures on the box or have items they wanted to add to those collected. For some folks, the family might sprinkle flower petals on or around the body.

Embalming not necessary

Although the body will not be embalmed, decomposing should not be a problem for a few days. That gives adults and children a chance to touch the body and experience that their loved one no longer resides in his shell. I think this would make it easier to remember him in ways that do not involve holding onto the corpse. I hope it would help with the acceptance that death is a natural, not a fearful part of the life cycle.

A private family time

After family members had a chance to say their individual goodbyes, I'd put the body in the living room and have a short service for the family during which we could share stories. That time might include playing favorite music.

Following this sharing, I'd wrap the quilt around the body, close the box, and call the funeral home to take it to the crematory. Later we'd pick up the ashes.

The Memorial Service

Sometime after that would be the time for a community service. Friends could come and share in any way that was meaningful to them: stories, music, a reading... I'd like to have finger food at this service, so people could eat in their chair or at their spot on the floor while they're sharing or listening.

After the service, and if it were convenient, the participants might each scatter some of the ashes. In that case, we could have the ashes in a decorated box or attractive container, and people could take a scoop or a cup of ashes to put in the woods or around the grounds. If that weren't appropriate or workable, the family could scatter the ashes somewhere outdoors themselves.

Time to remember and grieve

I assume these activities would take a few days, about the same amount of time as a

conventional visitation and funeral service. I'd hope the family would be able to spend time relaxing and talking together in different combinations without the pressure of dressing formally and standing around a visitation area for hours. At times family members might withdraw and rest. It would be fine if any of them wanted to put out pictures of the loved one. I think individuals could have quite a bit of flexibility to respond to the loss in a way that seemed comfortable and meaningful to them.

Share wishes with loved ones

Our local funeral director will work with the family and try to do anything they want as long as it is legal. Others may too.

One of the most important things family members can do is talk to each other about their ideas and wishes. Without such talks, family members may have widely disparate views about how to honor and remember the one who has died.

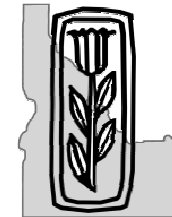
Sharing our wishes about cremation is particularly important. Family members may disagree strongly about the procedure, and such situations leave a funeral director in fear of a law suit.

When you have shared your wishes, even if your family has trouble talking about them, family members may be more able to reach agreement the time comes that arrangements have to be made.

What Would We, the Family, Like?

A reflection of personal
choice

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