

Eating and drinking –after the funeral, or before?

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Published in Funeral Director, 2009, 92(9): 58-59

As a middle class white southerner who lives in a city and does not work in the funeral industry, I have attended over the years a number of funerals not only of family but also of friends, neighbours and professional acquaintances.

Socially, these non-family funerals have not always been the easiest of occasions. I travel, often by myself, direct to the crematorium, which may be in another town, where I may know few other mourners. Normally, I stand around outside the crem with the others waiting for the hearse to arrive, hoping to find one or two people I know, and – if I am lucky - gravitate to them. Others stand around in small groups, but I have no clue how well they know each other. Am I alone in my isolation, or are we together in our isolation? I do not know.

With a neighbour's funeral, I may find a few other neighbours, but we don't know who all the other mourners are – are they family, or had the deceased a wide circle of friends and colleagues? At the cremation of my cleaner, who died suddenly after working for me for just a few months, there were three hundred mourners, of whom I knew not one.

Because funerals nowadays tend to celebrate the deceased's life, I may well find myself during the service relating to the deceased – smiling at characteristics I recall, learning new things about aspects of their life I was less familiar with. But I am not relating to the other mourners. It is like being in a cinema or theatre where the performance may be good, but the audience are all in isolated little groups. After the funeral, everyone may be invited to refreshments. If the funeral is local and I do not know the deceased well, I probably won't go. If I do go, I get to talk to some new people, but who they are is fairly random.

All this can be a rather isolating experience, poorly designed to enable mourners to connect with one another. I used to think this is how it has to be. We get through the painful business of cremation or burial, and only then can we eat and drink and tell stories. After the dreadful business of burning or burying the body, mourners can restore their own bodies through food and drink, and the natural sociability of eating and drinking together helps restores our souls. Perhaps it is easier to tell stories after memories are prompted by the more formal eulogy or tributes at the funeral.

But this all changed for me earlier this year. It was at Phil's funeral. There had to be a last minute change to the timing, so the sandwiches and jars of home-made wine the cancer-stricken Phil had been preparing for just this occasion were attacked just before, not after, the funeral. This transformed everything.

Over his 77 years, Phil had picked some characterful friends, living in different parts of the country and indeed the world. Several were too old, or lived too far way, to attend. Through him, most had heard of each other, but few had actually

met. The stage would normally have been set for the kind of isolating funeral to which I had grown accustomed.

We turned up at his flat in dribs and drabs around midday, a couple of dozen of friends old and new, and some neighbours. When everyone was there and tucking in, a touch of genius happened: his partner called for quiet, and invited any who wanted to say a very few words about Phil and how they knew him. About half a dozen responded, taking around fifteen minutes in all.

From then on, everything changed. I approached one person after another, ‘So, *you’re* Steve!’, or ‘Peggy, I’ve heard so much about you, Phil was always talking about you!’ Three quarters of an hour later, the cortege arrived at the flat and we all followed in our cars, no longer twenty five isolated individuals but the united company of those who had loved Phil. We entered the crematorium knowing one another. Together, we sent Phil on his way. Afterwards, those who wanted to, went to a nearby café for a cuppa before travelling home.

Several people said it was the best funeral they’d ever been to.

In many societies around the world and throughout history, the funeral binds people together. In my experience in middle class southern England, it can too often do the opposite, revealing just how isolated we are. But it need not be like that, even for modern urban people who no longer live in close neighbourhoods or near extended family. In some other countries - like Ireland, the USA, and Japan - the wake precedes the funeral, and the stories are told before the body is disposed of. Indeed, in these three countries, many more people are likely to attend the wake than the funeral itself.

I am not saying all English funerals should be like this. In many cases, many mourners already know each other well. But when this is not the case, families – and the funeral professionals who advise them – might consider the merits of reversing the conventional timing.

Phil liked questioning convention, even if his final upsetting of convention was unintended. Cheers, Phil!