



CHAPTER I

Putting the “F-U-N” Back in Funeral

The Benefits of Self-Planning

Funerals are the new weddings. They’re rich in festive and dramatic possibilities, and they bring together all of your loved ones. Best of all, your funeral is *your* day, and it’s all about you. You get to select the menu, you get to invite whomever you want, you get to pick the music.

Your funeral is your last chance to express your best self, make a few demands, care for your loved ones, and say goodbye on your own terms.

Party Like It’s 1999

So what makes a funeral fun? Pageantry, pomp, party favors, processions, parades, interactive rituals involving fire and water, contests of wit and strength, exotic food, rich cakes and custards, intrigue, good music, the drunken, sort-of-inappropriate-but-basically-harmless guest nobody seems to know but was clearly invited (or was he?), quality gin, dancing, and more food—the

same things that make other parties and milestone events fun.

Having a spectacular send-off isn't a new concept; throughout history, cultures around the world have honored and celebrated the dead with a variety of engaging funeral rites. Ancient Aztec and Mayan Indians held graveside feasts and decorated cemeteries with colorful flowers. Wealthy Romans made sure their funeral festivities stayed festive by hiring professional dancers to regale attendees. Pagan Irish funerals were lively affairs, featuring choruses of singing mourners and funeral games involving athletic feats. In Korea, *Dasiraegi*, a traditional play featuring folk songs and dances, remains a revered tradition.

With so much history and so many new celebration possibilities, you should have no trouble designing a one-of-a-kind send-off. It's never too early to start planning. Researching and identifying your funeral goals now, while you're alive and healthy, can help you determine the most effective and captivating ways to highlight *you* and your fabulous life.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

For too long, funerals have gotten a bad rap. That's because the traditional American funeral service is inherently sad, depressing, and unoriginal.

Most often, it's held at a church or funeral home chapel, featuring the usual scripture readings, the same old tired hymns, and somber organ music (which, by the way, is the saddest sad death music ever and kind of manipulative when you think about it). Too quiet, too solemn, too stiff.

Afterward, a reception: polite chitchat and finger food made out of white bread and mayonnaise. How boring. What could an event like that possibly say to your loved ones about *you* and your life? Not much. Then there's the price tag. A bland little event such as this, the average funeral, costs between \$6,000 and \$8,000 (more like \$10,000 if you add burial and cemetery costs, and other death merch). That doesn't even include memorial

bookmarks, invitations, mourning outfits, and other “extras.” No wonder people cry.

Let the Good Times Roll

There’s nothing wrong with a little veneration, but what about celebration? How about some relief from all the grief?

Remember how you got goosebumps during the funeral scene in *The Big Chill*, when the septuagenarian organist laid down the first few chords of “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”? If you want your guests to immediately connect with you and with each other, you have to set the tone from beat one.

Hymns are so ho-hum. Lively up yourself with “Rock the Casbah” and “Baba O’Riley,” slip in some Billie Holliday for some atmosphere, then shimmy it out with “Queen Bitch.” That’ll get your guests rockin’ and let them know that you’re dead serious about having them celebrate your life.

Ditch the gloomy venue. Swap the lilies for a laser light show. Recruit an officiate with a fresh approach to sacred observances—whatever will breathe life (your life) into the festivities. Out with the old, in with the you.

It’s your choice. Do you want a sedate, cookie-cutter funeral or a funtastic party of your life?

Well-Planned = Self-Planned

It’s not enough to simply die anymore. You need a festive farewell that embodies your sunny spirit, showcases your unique character, and inspires your survivors.

Have a funeral, have a memorial party, have a small funeral followed a month later by a raucous remembrance roller derby. Have as many or as few events as you wish. Just be original. With personalized life celebrations becoming more popular, your guests will expect as much.

Too many people have missed out on having fantastic

funerals because they didn't plan ahead. Maybe they didn't know they could, or maybe they just didn't take responsibility for their post-life plans. Maybe they never considered the possibility that an untimely death could happen to them.

It's Up to You

If you do nothing about your funeral, your survivors will inevitably turn to the “professionals”—i.e., funeral directors and clergy—for guidance, when they should have your database of event planners, vegan caterers, glitter specialists, and dance coaches. Then you'll either end up with a beige little funeral, or worse, your memorial will be mishandled by meddling relatives. Do you really want your mother picking out your funeral outfit? Or your weird cousin Benny reading his cat poetry at your service?

I'm not saying that there aren't funeral directors and clergy members out there who couldn't step up and (help) throw a remarkable funeral, but they may not go there on their own. Without your vision spelled out to the letter, and an assertive celebration team managing your funeral plans, your relatives, as well-meaning as they might be, might very likely plan a memorial that says more about them than about you. Why? For the same reason your aunt always gives you acrylic reindeer sweaters every Christmas: people tend to give what they think you'd want, which is actually what they'd want.

There's nothing more depressing than a bad funeral, especially now, when there are so many exciting departure options. You can get more bang for your buck and show your guests the time of their lives (and your life) by pre-planning your last big bash.

You owe it to yourself and your guests, many of whom may have to fly across the country for your funeral, to make your last party your best party.

Benefits of the DIY Funeral

There are so many good reasons to plan your own funeral. Aside from the glaringly obvious creative issues, planning the party of your life gives you control and your survivors direction during a very traumatic time for all you.

In the painful hours and days following your demise, your loved ones will need all the help they can get. Your detailed party plan will give them something to do and help ease their pain. They'll be so busy trying to fulfill your last wishes that they won't have time to mope. Pre-planning gives you the chance to:

- Script and shape the event(s).
- Recruit a funeral team to carry out your wishes.
- Research the professionals who can bring your funeral dreams to life.
- Select an appropriate venue.
- Decide on a disposal method that meets your spiritual needs, environmental standards, and celebration timeline.

It also gives you time to destroy any embarrassing or incriminating photos, memos, emails, or other information that could surface after your death. You may be able to take some secrets with you to the grave, but others will inevitably be exposed (and cause your loved ones a lot of pain) if you don't tie up loose ends now. For example, if you have a secret family in another state, now might be a better time for all of your loved ones to meet than at your funeral (this actually happened to a friend of mine). It's your mess; clean it up before you go!

Cleaner, Leaner, Greener

Pre-planning your funeral can help you save money and the earth. Today, many people want a simpler, more affordable, and more meaningful exit. They also want more control over

end-of-life events. Home-based, family-directed funerals and green burials are becoming popular choices as consumers seek out less invasive death care and eco-friendly exits.

By skipping some traditional and unnecessary funeral products, such as embalming and a casket, you can trim some fat off of that \$10K funeral price tag. Keep it simple and depart in a shroud or a biodegradable cardboard burial vessel that your friends can decorate at your home death vigil.

I’m not suggesting you skimp on your funeral and related events, but rather, think about how you want to allocate your funds. Why pay for things you don’t need when you can throw a funeral bash that will provide your loved ones with hours, if not days, of fun and remembrance? Your funeral isn’t just about reliving old memories, but creating new memories, too, so that you will live on in your survivors’ hearts and minds forever.

The thousands of dollars you can save by being a smart consumer or, better, by skipping some unnecessary death care services in favor of an eco farewell, could pay for the multi-media presentation in your Memory Room, a champagne brunch for your inner circle, or iPhones for your funeral team members. The karmic energy you’ll create by returning to Mother Earth in a natural, non-polluting way—well, you can’t put a price tag on that.

Express Yourself

Most important, self-planning your funeral allows you to celebrate yourself and let your loved ones know who you were and what was important to you.

Use the party of your life to celebrate a life-long hobby, profession, or obsession, as did the Pittsburgh Steelers fan who had his survivors stage his viewing at home so his friends could see him indulging in his favorite pastime: sitting in a reclining chair, Steelers blanket across his lap, “watching” a pre-recorded loop of his favorite team. Or, if you only have a few months to live, throw yourself a “going away” party like a woman in Washington

did. Surrounded by 40 friends and harp music, she entertained her guests dressed in an angel costume, complete with gossamer wings and halo.

You can also use your last bash to reveal a side of yourself that didn't get much play in life . . . or simply arrange to go out with a bang. A Lutheran pastor from Minnesota, who my friend, a former member of his parish (and his nephew), affectionately refers to as "the blaster pastor," requested that his ashes be mixed into fireworks and exploded over the St. Croix River on the 4th of July. Journalist Hunter S. Thompson took a less sparkly and more direct approach when his ashes were shot out of a cannon in the mountains near his Colorado home.

Your end-of-life celebration(s) is also a chance to showcase



THE PARTY *of* JOANNE DILLMAN'S LIFE

JOANNE DILLMAN

1939–

Illinois, USA

PARTY: I don't want a funeral, just a party. It will be open to all. I'd like it to be informal. If people would like to toast me or reminisce, say a few words, that would be nice.

SOUNDTRACK: I'd like an evening of Swedish music—polkas and schottisches so people can dance. I'd like one of my friends, either Dalia or Zenia, to sing "Amazing Grace."

FOOD: A traditional Swedish smorgasbord (pickled

hidden talents, reveal lifelong secrets, and even accomplish what you never did in life. Maybe you haven't thought of it before, but even in death, you still have the chance to help your survivors learn more about you, which can only further endear you to them. You can finally give out your secret chili recipe. In fact, have it printed on the back of the menu at your funeral barbecue.

Dig out your old 4-H ribbons from the state fair and your high school track trophies. Your friends will get a kick out of your old yearbooks, too, so don't forget those. Get creative with your mementos. What about a collage or photo mural of your hairdos throughout the years? Your past—even the bad hair days—is a rich source of entertainment for them, because it's their past, too.



herring, salmon, pickled beets, pickled cucumbers, ham, potatoes, Swedish meatballs, etc.).

DRINKS: Aquavit to start the program, gin and tonics for the rest of the evening.

DISPOSAL: No viewing. No embalming. I'd like to be buried in a simple but well-made pine box to honor my father, who was a carpenter. I'd like to be buried in the same cemetery in Michigan where my parents and aunts and uncles are. If my husband should predecease me, I would like some of his ashes in my coffin. Should I depart first, I would like some of his ashes placed in a small container on my grave.

LEGAL: I have a medical directive and medical power of attorney in place.

Let the Healing Begin

Maybe you're not so sure you can pull this off. Maybe a little voice in the back of your head is telling you that it's selfish to plan your own funeral. Well, it's not. And you're not alone. More people are self-planning because they want and deserve a more personal, more expressive final fête than the traditional American funeral (and because it's fun). Don't worry; just plan.

Your guests won't deny you your special day or judge the depth of your self-focus in orchestrating what will be an action-packed day (or days) of good memories, good times, and even better gin. They'll find your attention to detail and your unorthodox requests charming and refreshing. In fact, they'll feel comforted knowing that you got the funeral you wanted and justified in wanting their own spectacular send-offs.

You only die once, so why not make the best of it?



Start Planning Now

You sparkled in life—why settle for a humdrum funeral? Do yourself and your survivors a big favor and start planning the party of your life now. Start by telling your survivors more about yourself.

- Download your planning worksheets from www.thepartyofyourlife.com.
- Describe your spirituals beliefs, likes and dislikes, significant relationships, and anything else that will help your survivors know more about you and how to fête you.
- Identify the traits and qualities for which you'd like to be remembered.
- Identify the bad habits, outstanding debts, and illegal activities you'd like your survivors to keep secret for as long as possible.
- Store information in your funeral box.