



# Why do we have funerals?

*and ten more commonly asked  
questions about funerals and funeral  
customs.*

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### *Why do we have funerals?*

Although virtually every culture and religion has its own customs and traditions, funeral ceremonies all share a common goal. The funeral is a way to bring closure to friends and family impacted by the death, while honoring the person who died.

A funeral serves a two-fold purpose. First, it helps us begin the grieving process. When we lose someone close to us, no matter how prepared for death we think we are, we find ourselves unprepared for the loss. We find ourselves missing the deceased in unexpected, unaccountable ways. We need to discover how important this person was to us. It is almost as if we must inventory our loss before we can grieve it.

The funeral helps us by giving us permission to grieve. Today many consider the public expression of grief as a sign of weakness. But grief should not be seen that way; rather, it is nature's way of helping heal a broken heart. We are doing the best job of handling grief when we are grieving. The more we express our grief the sooner we work through this process that leads to recovery.

Second, the funeral helps us realize and appreciate the connections our loved one had established with others. Funeral gatherings provide a chance to talk, and to share memories. Visitation times at the funeral home or friends dropping by the home give us the

chance to begin telling the stories about our loved one.

Often those stories paint an unexpected picture of our loved one, and show us a new dimension, a new significance that we had not appreciated. It helps us realize what an important place he or she occupies in the memory of others. The stories we tell—and hear—will one day become the great memories that stay in our hearts forever.

One of the important purposes of the funeral is to gather with family and friends and say “This life was important. This life mattered to us. This life touched mine.”

Nothing establishes this significance like a well-done funeral that personalizes the loved one. We now realize the value of personalizing the funeral for this purpose. Families now feel free to eulogize their loved one or they often ask a close friend to do so. Many families bring personal items and pictures to the service to further personalize the event. Music is now more likely to be some favorite song the person loved or a song that meant a great deal to a marriage.

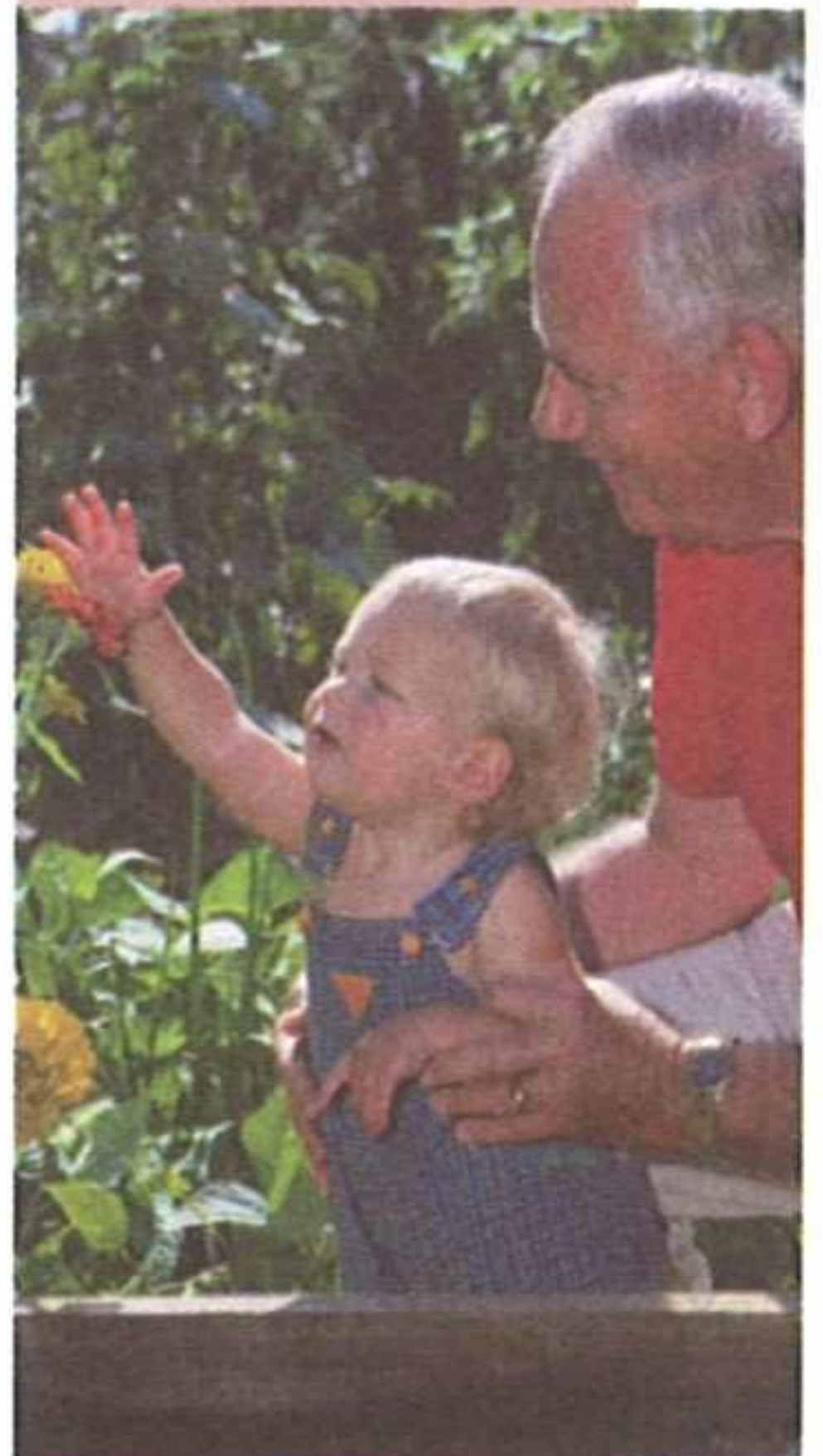
The funeral is not about caskets and rituals. The funeral is about mental health and healing. When we have inventoried our loss and started the healing process of grief, then and only then, has the funeral done its vital work in our lives.

### *Does the body have to be embalmed?*

Despite what many people believe,



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embalming is not required by law in most cases. In fact, many people have religious or cultural beliefs that forbid the practice. However, in some special circumstances your state may require embalming. Also, some funeral homes may insist on embalming if the family wishes to have a public viewing of the body. Refrigeration may also be required if the body is not buried or cremated within 24 hours.

*Should there be an open casket?*

Viewing the body is a way for friends and family to pay their final respects. It provides a sense of closure and helps people to accept that their loved one is really gone. This feeling of conclusion is often the first step in the grieving process and can help family and friends come to terms with their loss. It is also often helpful for children to view the body. The peaceful features of a loved one after death help to dispel the vivid and scary images of the dead that thrive in the imaginations of children.

*How should the body be presented for the viewing?*

Since this is the last time family and friends will see their loved one, the viewing should leave fond memories. Eye-glasses or any jewelry that the person wore during life should be left on the body. This helps to convey a more lifelike and natural look. It is also appropriate to include other items in the casket that were meaningful to the person during life. This makes it easier for friends and family to

*Viewing the body brings closure to friends and family.*



focus on the fond memories from their loved one's life.

Typically, visitation is held during the evening, so it is usually a good idea to have a private family viewing earlier in the day. At that time, the family has an opportunity to see the body before the general public and request any changes to the appearance of the deceased.

*What is the importance of visitation?*

Visitation is a vital step in the process of grieving. It gives people a chance to celebrate the life of the deceased by sharing stories and memories about the life of their loved one. Above all, it allows people to share their grief with others through fellowship, and to reinforce how much that person meant in everyone's life.

*Can a family choose cremation as well as a funeral service?*

Yes. Cremation in no way rules out a funeral service. The cremation can simply be delayed until the funeral service has taken place. Or if necessary, a memorial service can be held without the body present.

*Is it possible for a family to personalize the funeral service?*

Absolutely. A personalized funeral service helps family and friends to celebrate the life of the deceased and is what most funeral directors strive for. The funeral director will work hard to ensure that the service is customized to one's individual needs and tastes. There are many



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ways to hold a service that is unique to the deceased as well as meaningful for family and friends. Ideas for such a service could include a personal eulogy from a close friend or family member, a prominent display of personal items from the life of the deceased, and the use of the lost loved one's favorite song as a special musical selection.

*How do we decide when to schedule the funeral service?*

It is important to try to allow enough time for out-of-town guests to make travel arrangements to attend the service. Family and friends should also have enough time to read the obituary and arrange for time off from work. If adequate time is not allowed for scheduling the funeral, family and friends who weren't able to attend the service may harbor resentment or sadness because they were unable to pay their final respects. Saying good-bye is an important part of accepting loss and letting go and is the first step in the healing process. It is not uncommon to postpone the funeral for a few days or more in order to give far-flung friends and family a little extra time to gather. Funeral directors always try to be flexible in helping the family select a date.

*Where should the funeral service be held?*

Funerals are most commonly held at a place of worship or in a chapel in the funeral home. Some families may also decide to hold the entire service in the cemetery at the

graveside. Holding the service at a family residence is another option that is occasionally utilized. Just as in other aspects of funeral planning, funeral directors will try to be accommodating when selecting the site for the service. In addition, if the body is cremated, the EPA has regulations governing areas in which the cremation remains can and cannot be scattered.

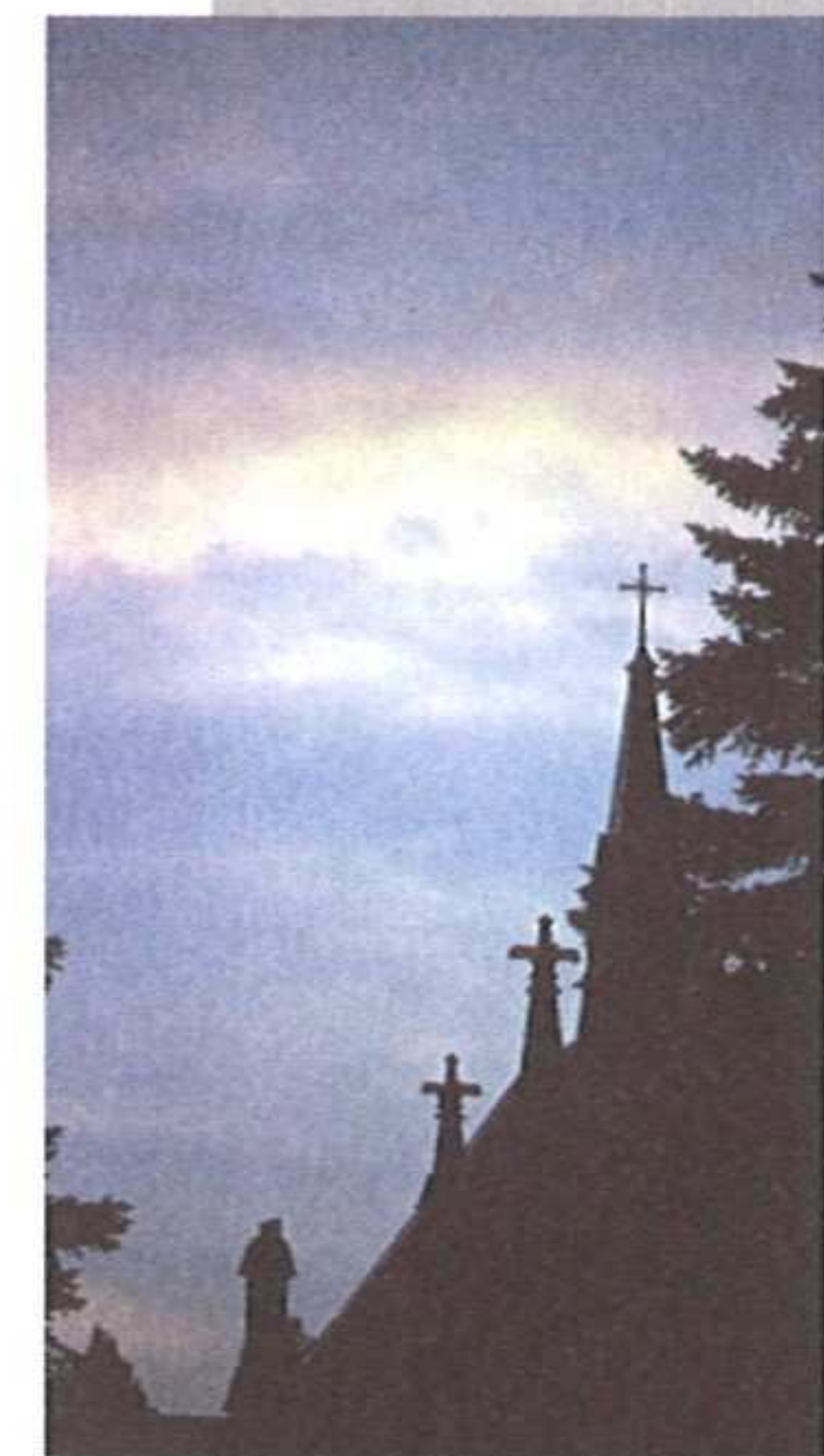
*Do caskets fully protect the body?*

There are two types of caskets: hardwood and metal. A hardwood casket is not completely impenetrable. While metal caskets provide a higher degree of protection, no casket is completely airtight. The vault, which is the outer container made of concrete or metal, also plays a vital role in protecting the body.

*Does a minister have to preside over the funeral service? What if I don't have one?*

It is not necessary for a member of the clergy to perform the memorial service. However, many families prefer to have a clergy member present at the service. If one is desired, the funeral director will locate a minister of any faith to perform the service. The funeral director will also arrange a meeting between the member of the clergy and the family of the deceased in order to tailor the service to the family's wishes.

*About the author:*  
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