

Celebrate life

In these times of doom, gloom and uncertainty, there is much to be concerned with, it is almost the glass half full mentality. In Melbourne, with now stage 4 restrictions and lockdowns, it is somewhat reminiscent of a science fiction thriller, albeit one we are slap bang in the middle of. Yet, there is another "half to the glass", and our lives continue on, different perhaps but never the less continue.

Living life and celebrating love doesn't always need to be at full throttle and at these times can often make us aware of the small things in life that bring us pleasure. Travel, eating out, meeting up with friends, sport, even shopping is now all off our radar. So it would appear we have to look for other things to occupy us and bring joy.

We can learn much from funerals, their relevance and meaning. Funerals are traditionally a time where we reflect on life and celebrate the life lived. Many of our forebearers lives have involved great adversities, wars, famine for some, financial depression, tragedy and loss. Yet, from these, hardships have grown tremendous resilience and shaped peoples lives. We often do not reflect on these things during the end of life service but focus on love, life and living.

The "Celebration of Life" has become a much more common term used in the past decade. In contrast, last century funeral ceremonies reflected on loss and were mostly of a religious nature citing from standard prayer books, with little reflection on the individual and their life. As the focus of many families shifted to a "Celebration of Life" so did the style and type of service.

Families once reliant on the church began using civil celebrants, "I recall most of the earlier celebrants did have some connection to churches and were often lay preachers, there was usually still some prayers within the service. I used to wonder if the family were taking our an each-way bet, a just in case clause when the got to the other side there was something." The traditional religious service just didn't seem to be adjusting to the changes in general life. Many wouldn't allow certain music to be played and in some cases would not allow eulogies to be said during the service.

Today's modern civil celebrant is highly professional and expert in their field. They can perform two separate functions at a funeral, Firstly as master of ceremonies, assisting families to structure the proceedings into order and introduce speakers and audiovisual. Secondly, they speak on behalf of families in an articulate and accurate way. Mostly, celebrants will perform both functions.

Combined with eulogies and reflections of love, life and loss, many other things personalise a "Celebration of Life" service. Location of service, Coffins, Environment, Audio Visual, music, printed materials, flowers, balloons, catering, photographs, paintings, jewellery, the list is as endless as your imagination. The key to the selection of these auxiliary services is the meaning and relevance to you. For without significance and relevance, much of the service can be lost on many.

Most of life's celebrations are performed publicly, funerals are often advertised in newspapers. Indeed a funeral notice is a public invitation inviting anyone to attend. Sadly, COVID19 restrictions have changed this, for now, Melbourne is currently restricted to a maximum of 10 mourners only attending funerals, resulting in many families having to choose which family members will attend services. Live streaming services, having been available for some time are now a regular occurrence on most funerals. From professional streaming companies to a family member with an Ipad or smartphone are streaming services locally and overseas to family members and friends that cannot attend in person.

External catering and refreshment services that have become common on most funerals have but shut down, even families have not been able to return home for group gatherings. This is possibly one of the saddest aspects of COVID restrictions, as once the funeral has finished, there is little opportunity for family and friends to gather and reflect.

Yet, amongst all this, wisdom comes from those personally affected by a loss. One young widow said after the funeral, "most people have said to me the hardest part would be only having 10 people at the funeral, in some ways I was kind of glad I didn't have to mourn publicly. You, know the hardest part, was restricted hospital access for my young children and me during my husbands final days".

Celebration of life does not always need to be public, many families are choosing unattended or direct cremations services and opting to celebrate the life lost in a private and personal way. Life, love and loss do not always need to be celebrated publicly. Some see this as a sad option, yet those that choose this option are at ease with their choice as it has relevance and a strong meaning for them. It is often something that teh deceased would have wanted or indeed asked for.

Working in funeral service people say many things to us, some focus on the macabre and bizarre, many wanting to know the weirdest things we have seen or been asked to do for a family. Well here is not the place you will read about that. For what is strange and bizarre to one person may be quite normal to another. Once again, relevance and meaning to the individual is where our focus is.

Although times may be tough right now, "live, life and love" and above all stay safe.

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