

Modern Mourning: Laying Your Loved One to Rest

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Death is something people are seldom comfortable dealing with. Cultural and religious rituals have given some direction on how to mourn and act when someone dies. However, these rituals are changing as society becomes more secular, more technology-driven, and, for several years, more isolated due to the pandemic.

Key takeaways:

- Traditional funerals have become shorter, using technology to meet modern mourning needs.
- The pandemic has underscored the continued need to gather and mourn for loved ones to start the healing process.
- Funeral homes have modernized their offerings to include wearable memorial jewelry with ashes from your loved one, and assistance with more secular forms of interment, such as green or sea burials.

The effect of the pandemic on mourning

In 2020, COVID-19 began taking lives randomly and unexpectedly. People died away from loved ones, with good-byes sobbed into cell phones or shouted through facility windows. The pandemic shut down the mourning process as we knew it. Funerals and church services were halted at the peak.

Mourners were robbed of the traditional funeral with their loved one's physical presence, and the comforting touch of friends and family. No one was able to gather to pay respects, share stories and offer consolation.

Neighbors could not stop by with home-made casseroles. Food and community, important in most cultures, were absent from the grieving process.

My father, a retired police captain and WWII Navy veteran, died of COVID-19 in 2021. Visiting hours remained sterile, most people were masked, there were no warm embraces, conversations were short, and no food could be shared.

It was the police honor guard, finally allowed back into funeral homes, a lone bugler on a hill, a flag ceremony by the U.S. Navy, and a graveside prayer service that gave the proceedings and my father the dignity that COVID-19 had taken. These formal observances were the most important part of my personal healing process.

Tradition vs. new normal funeral services and memorials

The pandemic highlighted the importance of traditional funerals. Many waited months until it was “safe” to hold memorial services at funeral homes.

A traditional Christian funeral consists of 1 or 2 days of visitation, with a religious service at the funeral home, or place of worship. It is followed by a burial or entombment at a cemetery. Luncheons follow at a restaurant or funeral home.

Memories are shared and loved ones start to look to the future and discuss how the family will proceed without their loved one.

In the case of older loved ones with few friends and family, visitation may be 1 day. To reduce costs, a direct burial or cremation, with a short graveside or mausoleum service, and private luncheon may be chosen. Some spouses will take ashes home.

Modern funerals go viral

There was an emphasis on the importance of funeral homes offering virtual services for those unable to attend a funeral in person. This technology was especially important when pandemic restrictions limited funerals and church services to 10 or less.

Funeral homes also developed online tribute walls or pages where condolences could be left, flowers ordered, or request the planting of a memorial tree. The obituary, details of the funeral and donation information could also be published on the page, saving family and friends from searching newspapers for such information.

Unique and modern methods of mourning

Although not as popular as the traditional service, John Brickman, Funeral Director of Brickman Brothers Funeral Home in Willoughby, Ohio, shared several examples of modern mourning facilitated by his funeral home.

One family had their loved one's motorcycle moved into the funeral home beside their loved one. Another family asked them to help arrange for some of their loved one's ashes to travel into space. The funeral home managed to accomplish this with help from NASA.

“Celebrations of life”

Recently, some funerals focus on celebrating the life and accomplishments of deceased loved ones, especially when they are older or passed after a lengthy illness.

“Celebrations of life” are upbeat affairs displaying photos or videos of key life events.

Family and friends share endearing stories, the individual's favorite music is often played, and sports memorabilia or other cherished items may be on display.

Mr Brickman is quick to add that "celebrations of life" do not outnumber traditional funerals, especially where a death is unexpected and tragic, or the person is very young.

Other modern ways to mourn

Mourners used to be identifiable in the community. Widows wore black for at least a year. Today, we are back at work within a few days to a week. To provide a more tangible way to mourn, many funeral homes are offering the following:

- Memorial jewelry, containing small amounts of ashes.
- Photographs of loved one's fingerprints.
- Diamonds made from ashes provided by the funeral home.

Other lasting ways to visually memorialize loved ones, include:

- A Tattoo with a loved one's name and image.
- Memorial portraits with paint containing your loved one's ashes.
- FaceBook memorial pages with photos, short videos, stories, condolences and tributes.

- Altars in homes with photos, flowers, spiritual items or incense.
- Roadside memorials provide a collective grief experience and raise awareness of tragic events.
- T-shirts are “wearable prayer cards” depicting a loved one’s image and name.
- Car decals with a loved one’s photo and name.

Modern rituals: laying your loved one to rest

Formal religion has been on the decline in the U.S., with alternate forms of spirituality gaining popularity. Funeral homes are holding space for and assisting with these new rituals, including:

- Growing a Tree – a biodegradable urn is filled with a loved one’s ashes. A tree sapling, nutrients and soil can be planted in a cemetery, park or other personal place.
- Burial Pod – your loved one, without embalming, is buried in a biodegradable egg-shaped pod. A tree is planted on top of the pod and grows nourished by the natural decomposition process.
- Aqua Cremation – a gentle stream of water is used to hasten natural decomposition of the body, without cremation.
- Infinity Burial Suit – the infinity burial suit is eco-friendly, allowing a return to the earth and

cleansing of toxins in the body.

- Composting - there is a company that allows the body to naturally break down and donates this human compost to a protected forest in southern Washington.

- Sea burial - the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) allows burials of human and cremated remains in ocean waters. Notice of the burial must be given to the EPA within 30 days after the burial.

Restrictions on modern rituals

Embalming is used to stop the body from decomposing so viewing can take place. There are no longer legal requirements for embalming, if remains stay within the state.

Cemeteries have had significantly more restrictions on how burials occur. Given the development of new mourning rituals, cemeteries are adapting and setting aside green spaces or other areas to allow for more modern forms of burial.

Whatever way families choose to pay respects or celebrate a loved one's life, the importance of community and shared mourning should not be underestimated. The funeral or "celebration of life" provides a space and structure to start the mourning process. Funeral Directors understand post-pandemic mourning rituals are

evolving, and they are becoming savvy at helping families arrange modern funerals.

Resources:

1. Virtual afterlives: Grieving the dead in the twenty-first century.
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