

## Why photographing a funeral is important

In our society there has been a dramatic shift in people's faith from religion to the medical profession and with this shift, death is no longer regarded as part of life's cycle.

As Philippe Aries has argued in his book *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981):

In the course of the twentieth century an absolutely new type of dying has made an appearance in some of the most industrialized, urbanized, and technologically advanced areas of the Western World . . . society has banished death . . . Society no longer observes a pause.

This twentieth-century view has strayed far from the view of past centuries which viewed death as a natural event: Genesis 3:19 (King James' Version) states, "In the seat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground, for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return".

Unlike the Church, the medical profession is reluctant to admit death is inevitable as it regards it as failure and will often fend off death without regard to the wishes of the person dying or the concerns of their friends and family.



A photo of the Church service which shows a large number of mourners come to honour the deceased can be of enormous comfort to the bereaved.

With the denial that death is a part of life, funeral photography can be seen as odd or inappropriate; many people cannot comprehend there can be any benefit from photos taken at a funeral.

Paradoxically, our society doesn't seem repulsed by the media's fixation on death whether it be from natural disasters (Haiti), civil war (Iraq) or technological failure (plane crashes). The constant stream of violent images may feed our natural curiosity about death or reassure us that death happens elsewhere but images of violent death do little to help or guide us when we personally encounter death.

When I photographed my first funeral, through ignorance I was ill-prepared to understand how funerals can have a very special role to play for the family of the deceased. I had expected the widow to be a sobbing wreck, dressed in



black, unable to function because this was how death had been portrayed to me in fiction and in the cinema. The tender reality was completely different and I was surprised at how giving the widow was. Instead of being a passive figure of pity, the widow embraced all the guests with warmth and dignity and was concerned with their well-being.

I couldn't understand how the widow could give so much of herself at such a time. Now I think that the widow's vitality was due to the loving support she was receiving from her family and friends and also from her proximity to death which made her appreciate the beauty of life. In this and subsequent funerals, I have found that the family member responsible for organising the funeral is often the most compassionate person present on the day.



The officiating priest hugs the son as the widow leaves the wake.

Through photographing funerals I have also come to appreciate that funerals are about honouring the deceased.

I find at funerals everyone is human for the day; somehow by honouring the person their own humanity is revealed.

Perhaps it is a time when people set aside their own concerns and worries since they are having to reckon with the passing of a life.

My clients have commented that certain photos of mourners have immense beauty and are important to them.



A daughter placing flowers on her mother's grave after the committal. The photo is unposed.



A mourner giving an impromptu speech at the wake in which she recounts how significant the deceased was to her.

I became a full-time photographer three years ago because I was curious to find out if I had a voice as a photographer and for a while I couldn't hear one.

Searching for my photographic voice, I tried a myriad of different photographic subjects, photographing everything from shopping safaris for *Home Beautiful* magazine to a tribal area in India for the Naandi Foundation. When a neighbour asked me to photograph his uncle's funeral as a present to his beloved aunt (discussed earlier in this article), I was not sure what to expect but then found the funeral enriching personally because I felt such strong tenderness at the funeral.

Over time, to my relief I found I had a photographic voice and that it is about capturing tenderness. The American photographer Ethan Hill stated in an interview on [www.aphotoeditor.com](http://www.aphotoeditor.com) that:

. . .my pictures are only as good as the elusive dance of a subject's willingness to give something intimate and meaningful of themselves, and a photographer's ability to recognize that at that very moment a gift is being given to them. . .

But Ethan Hill's photography is about formal portrait sittings and I have found that I gravitate to spontaneous situations within the confines of an organised event such as a funeral or a Christening. At these events I find tenderness is present for they somehow allow people to transcend their own daily concerns.

For example, I recently photographed a Christening in a Greek Orthodox Church in Sydney where I took the following photo – by way of context, after

the priest initially blesses the child, he is then undressed by his grandmothers in order to be baptised.



Similarly, with weddings there are moments which are about the genuine union of two people and when they occur, in a sudden gesture of affection or a quick glance at one another, they are precious.

But as a photographer, I think that photographing funerals is the most significant ceremony that I can photograph. I cannot think of an emotion finer than tenderness and find it occurs more at funerals than at any other occasion since people set aside their self-interest and petty concerns and as a result are human.

I also think that photographs of funerals can be very important for the families involved. From the feedback from my clients, I know that such tender moments are worth preserving photographically. Similarly, in the book *The Intimacy of Death and Dying*, Vanessa Gorman writes of the significance of photography when she lost her first child [Layla]:

“My older sister Alex quietly took rolls and rolls of film of Layla, the most precious photos in my collection”.

The importance of photography may be a consequence of our society having dispensed with most tangible reminders that assist with bereavement. Historically, our society valued tombstones and graves since they engendered a sense of permanence and gave the bereaved something tangible to remember the loved-one by.

Now, however, tombstones and graves are being dispensed with and accordingly, there are fewer tangible reminders to assist the bereaved.

I am interested in finding visual ways to assist the bereaved in remembering the loved-one. Just as images of friends, family and work colleagues at the funeral do much to trigger memories by reminding them of how special a person the loved-one was, so too can images of the material world of the deceased – their garden, their hobbies, their books and their home.



Excerpt from a Remembrance Book which included photos of the home that featured a beautiful collection of *objets d'art*. For the relatives and friends, these images conveyed much about the deceased and these photos were no longer possible once the collection had been packed away.

Images from any event can become a nagging nuisance, an envelope of photographs lying around, photographs stuffed into a drawer. My solution, one that I feel is dignified and long-term, is to offer the bereaved a 'Remembrance Book' which includes photos from the funeral but can also include anything that was special to the loved one such as photos of their garden, their home, photos of their life, their favourite poems or songs, photos of their war medals, the family tree, the order of service and eulogies from the funeral.

I would like to think that my Remembrance Books, which are small enough to fit in a handbag, help with the grieving process. When the anxiety, pain, sadness and distressing "business" of the death and funeral has receded a little, months or years later, the Remembrance Book gives relatives and friends a permanent focus to remember and honour the deceased.

These books have been given to grandchildren too young at the time of the funeral to let them learn about a loved great-grandmother.

After more than fourteen months from when I photographed one funeral, I received a phone call from the son who said that he was looking at the Remembrance Book from his father's funeral and wanted to thank me so much for what I had done because the Remembrance Book was invaluable and he was now able to look at it with time and a focus he hadn't had at the time as he was so busy organising the funeral not to mention grieving.

In conclusion, our society has an unnatural tendency to deny death and I would like to think that through funeral photography our society may see that funerals are an incredibly important ritual in reminding us of our humanity and helping us with dealing with loss.



Example of a family tree in a Remembrance Book. The flowers in the background were those placed on the coffin.