

OUT WITH THE OLD – IN WITH THE NEW

Celebrating the life of a loved one is a commendable approach, but, says **ALEX JAMES**, there is no need to hop on the bandwagon if clients would prefer a more solemn affair

Whilst working in a palliative care setting as a family support, my role was to support families facing death of a loved one, and in particular children facing the death of a parent. The most beneficial relationships I formed with people were those that developed over a period of up to two years, and after death, until the remaining family were able to work towards manageability themselves. During the shared journeys I would eventually talk to the dying about their ending. This included thoughts feelings, and hopes about the future – a future in which they would not be present.

Much of my work centred around how I might capture the essence of an individual so that their family might feel a bond to them even after death, and so that the children might have a way of knowing them, to grow up feeling some kind of transcendental link to their deceased parent.

By involving the children in some of the pre-bereavement journey, they would have a base of understanding for when the inevitable happened, and a place from which to continue with their life.

We would talk about many things whilst sitting together; early on in kitchens over cups of tea; in my office at work; later at bedsides, whilst the children drew pictures and wrote stories. There were tears and laughter too. I felt a deep sense of privilege for being trusted and allowed to share those precious times with each families.

I'm telling you this because I want you to understand my work and my relationship with my clients. Talking about the future became easier as our relationships developed, and talking about final arrangements also came to feel comfortable as a topic, sad though it was for all of us. I remember once sitting in a client's garden, a young mum with two small children. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon and as her husband made tea and the children helped to prepare a tray of cakes, we looked at a brochure together: a collection of coffins. The lady had asked me to bring it with me so that they might choose hers together.

"Pink is your colour," her husband chuckled as he spotted the bright fuchsia pink casket on the page before us. "Oh my

God this is unreal...tea Alex?" As we sat in the sunshine, the children on their climbing frame, bees buzzing around us and the smell of freshly cut grass in the air, it didn't seem possible that such an ordinary afternoon could facilitate such an extraordinary conversation. Things seemed so normal and yet there we were planning her funeral together. The pink coffin was something she connected with - "you should all wear something pink," she said, "and afterwards have pink champagne or something - make it a celebration of my life, not a sombre sad event. What music should I have? Any ideas Alex?" She spoke with an ease that might have been present if she were planning her 40th birthday, not her final farewell.

Another client, Tim, was 30, he had four children, and I grew to know the family well over the last year of his life. One morning shortly before he died he asked me whether I thought it was mean that he didn't like the idea of everyone going down the pub after his funeral without him. He felt angry that life was cheating him out of what he perceived would be his. "I want my parents to arrange my funeral," he said, "and I don't know about the children attending - they're very young - but I'll leave that to Helen. I just want it to be a quiet, sad affair with space for Helen and my parents to say whatever they want. Actually I don't even mind if its only them who attend. Does this sound selfish Alex?" I can honestly say that most of my clients have been like Tim, but somehow they or their families got caught up in the new 'celebration of life' services that seemed to be the way.

It is a growing phenomenon that families want to 'keep things light', apply a little humour, and make reference to how the deceased 'wouldn't have wanted a really sad affair'. It is as though we have recognised man's failure to overcome mortality and decided: 'If we can't control it, let's make a party out of it. Let's provide a fun day of commemoration with bands and banners, and caskets with



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wonderfully painted murals, and lanterns and balloons and pink champagne. Let's even write our own epitaphs so as to make the congregation laugh rather than cry. Let's put the **fun** into **funerals** - out with the black car and traditional sadness, and in with the smiles.'

But **stop** for a moment. Whilst I believe we should have choices (and of course there's nothing wrong with a more personal final goodbye), I also believe that most people aren't too enthusiastic about throwing parties or tossing tradition out of the window. Many still want to feel safe

in the traditional oak, carried by the men in black. They want to know their loved ones are sad to see them go.

My view, therefore, is we shouldn't race towards change too quickly. There's room for everything, and there is no need to embrace the carnivalesque when it comes to funerals - not if clients would prefer something more solemn. We should facilitate what individuals want and guide them through it, give them time, and above all tell them that there is nothing uptight about opting out of the jazz and humour. Death is sad, after all.