FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Funerals in Contemporary North America

Traditional Funerals

Within the United States and Canada, in most cultural groups and regions, the funeral rituals can be divided into three parts: Visitation, Funeral, Burial Service.

Visitation

At the visitation (also called a "viewing" or "wake") the embalmed body of the deceased person (or decedent) is placed on display in the coffin (also called a casket). The viewing often takes place on one or two evenings before the funeral.

The only prescribed aspects of this gathering are that frequently the attendees sign a book kept by the deceased's survivors to record who attended and that the attendees are expected to view the deceased's body in the coffin. In addition, a family may choose to display photographs taken of the deceased person during his/her life (often, formal portraits with other family members and candid pictures to show "happy times"), prized possessions and other items representing his/her hobbies and/or accomplishments.

The viewing is either "open casket", in which the embalmed body of the deceased has been clothed and treated with cosmetics for display; or "closed casket", in which the coffin is closed. The coffin may be closed if the body was too badly damaged because of an accident or fire,
deformed from illness or if someone in the group is emotionally unable to cope with viewing the corpse. During an open casket, if the deceased was of Roman Catholic faith, a large rosary made out of fresh flowers may be hung inside of the coffin.

However, this step is foreign to Judaism; Jewish funerals are held soon after death, and the corpse is never displayed. As well, Jewish law forbids anyone to embalm the body of the deceased. Traditionally flowers are not sent to a bereaving Jewish family as it is a reminder of the life that is now lost.

The decedent's closest friends and relatives who are unable to attend frequently send flowers to the viewing, with the exception of a Jewish Funeral, where flowers would not be appropriate. The viewing typically takes place at a funeral home, which is equipped with gathering rooms where the viewing can be conducted, although the viewing may also take place at a church. It is also common practice in some of the states in the southeastern United States that the body be taken to the decedants home or that of a relative for viewing. The viewing may end with a prayer service; in the Catholic funeral, this may include a rosary.

A visitation is often held the evening before the day of the funeral. However, when the deceased person is elderly the visitation may be held immediately preceding the funeral. This allows elderly friends of the deceased a chance to view the body and attend the funeral in one trip, since it may be difficult for them to arrange travel.
A Traditional Fire Department funeral consists of two raised aerial ladders. The firefighter(s) travel under the aerials on their ride on the fire apparatus to the cemetery.

**Funeral**

A memorial service, often called a funeral and often officiated by clergy from the decedent's or bereaved's church or religion. A funeral may take place at either a funeral home or church. A funeral is usually held three to five days after the death of the deceased. Some people consider it important to conduct the funeral exactly three days after the death.

Funeral services include prayers; readings from the Bible or other sacred texts; hymns (sung either by the attendees or a hired vocalist); and words of comfort by the clergy. Frequently, a relative or close friend will be asked to give a eulogy, which details happy memories and accomplishments; often commenting on the deceased's flaws, especially at length, is considered impolite. Sometimes the delivering of the eulogy is done by the clergy.

Tradition also allows the attendees of the memorial service to have one last opportunity to view the decedent's body and say good-bye; the immediate family (siblings (and their spouses); followed by the decedent's spouse, parents and children) are always the very last to view their loved one before the coffin is closed. This opportunity can take place immediately before the service begins, or at the very end of the service. During funerals, bagpipes are sometimes played.
During the funeral and at the burial service, the casket may be covered with a large arrangement of flowers, called a casket spray. If the decedent served in a branch of the Armed forces, the casket may be covered with a national flag. It is considered inappropriate to use both.

*Note: In some religious denominations, for example, Roman Catholic and Anglican, eulogies are prohibited or discouraged during this service, in order to preserve respect for traditions. Also, for these religions, the coffin is traditionally closed at the end of the wake and is not re-opened for the funeral service.*

**Burial Service**

A burial service, conducted at the side of the grave, tomb, mausoleum or crematorium, at which the body of the decedent is buried or cremated at the conclusion.

Sometimes, the burial service will immediately follow the funeral, in which case a funeral procession (the hearse, followed by the immediate family and then the other attendees) travels from the site of the memorial service to the burial site. Other times, the burial service takes place at a later time, when the final resting place is ready.

If the decedent served in a branch of the Armed forces, military rites are often accorded at the burial service. In many religious traditions, pallbearers, usually males who are close, but not immediate relatives (such as cousins, nephews or grandchildren) or friends of the decedent, will carry the casket from the chapel (of a funeral home or church) to the hearse, and from the hearse
to the site of the burial service. The pallbearers often sit in a special reserved section during the memorial service.

According to most religions, coffins are kept closed during the burial ceremony. In Eastern Orthodox funerals, the coffins are reopened just before burial to allow loved ones to look at the deceased one last time and give their final farewells.

**Luncheon**

In many traditions, a meal or other gathering following the burial service, either at the decedent's church or another off-site location.

For Irish descendants, An Irish Wake usually lasts 3 full days. On the day after the wake the funeral takes place. Family members and friends will ensure that there is always someone awake with the body, traditionally saying prayers.

- It is called a wake because the grieving family stays awake for at 24 hours praying over the body. Traditionally this is done in the decedent's home.

**Etiquette**

Generally speaking, the number of people who are considered obliged to attend each of these three rituals by etiquette decreases at each step:

- Distant relatives and acquaintances may be called upon to attend the visitation.
- The decedent's closer relatives and local friends attend the funeral or memorial service, and subsequent burial (if it is held immediately after the memorial service).
• If the burial is on the day of the funeral, only the decedent's closest relatives and friends attend the burial service (although if the burial service immediately follows the funeral, all attendees of the memorial service are asked to attend).

Also, etiquette dictates the bereaved and other attendees at a funeral most commonly wear semi-formal clothing—such as a suit and tie for men or a dress for women. The most traditional and respectful color is solid black (with a matching solid black tie for men) preferably without any underlying pinstripes or patterns in the weave. But failing that charcoal gray, or dark navy blue may be worn. Wearing short skirts, low-cut tops, or, at Western funerals, a large amount of white (other than a button-down shirt or blouse, or a military uniform) is often seen as disrespectful. Women who are grieving the death of their husband or a close partner sometimes wear a veil to conceal the face, although the veil is not common now.

It is a distinct rudeness to leave a mobile telephone on audible mode at a funeral service, as its ringing automatically interrupts the service.

**Private Services**

On occasion, the family of the deceased may wish to have only a very small service, with just the decedent's closest family members and friends attending. This type of ceremony means it is
closed to the public. One may only go to the funeral if he or she was invited. In this case, a private funeral service is conducted. Reasons vary but often include:

- The decedent was an infant (possibly, they may have been stillborn) or very aged and therefore having few surviving family members or friends.
- The decedent may be a crime victim or a convicted criminal who was serving a prison sentence. In this case, the service is made private either to avoid unwanted media coverage (especially with a crime victim); or to avoid unwanted intrusion (especially if the decedent was convicted of murder or child molestation).
- The family does not feel able to endure a traditional service (due to emotional shock) or simply wants a quiet, simple funeral with only the most important people of the decedent's life in attendance.
- The decedent is of a distinct celebrity status, and holding public ceremony would result in too many guests who are non-acquaintanced with the decedent to participate. On the other hand, if a state funeral is offered and accepted by the decedent's immediate family, a public funeral would ensue. A recent example of this is the death of celebrity Steve Irwin, in which his family was offered a state funeral but refused. They held a private ceremony for Irwin on 9 September 2006.

In some cases (particularly the latter), the family may schedule a public memorial service at a later time.

**Memorial Services**
The memorial service is a service given for the deceased without the body present. This may take place after an earth burial, donation of the body to an institution such as a school, cremation (sometimes the cremains are present), entombment, or burial at sea. Typically these services take place at the funeral home and may include prayers, poems, or songs to remember the deceased. Pictures of the deceased are usually placed at the altar where the body would normally be to pay respects by.

Non-traditional funerals

New Orleans Jazz Funeral

A unique funeral tradition in the United States occurs in New Orleans, Louisiana. The unique tradition arises from African spiritual practices, French martial musical traditions and uniquely African-American cultural influences. A typical jazz funeral begins with a march by the family, friends, and a jazz band from the home, funeral home or church to the cemetery. Throughout the march, the band plays very somber dirges. Once the final ceremony has taken place, the march proceeds from the cemetery to a gathering place, and the solemn music is replaced by loud, upbeat, raucous music and dancing where onlookers join in to celebrate the life of the deceased. This is the origin of the New Orleans dance known as the "second line" where celebrants do a dance-march, frequently while raising the hats and umbrellas brought along as protection from intense New Orleans weather and waving handkerchiefs above the head that are no longer being used to wipe away tears.
“Green” Funeral
Those with concerns about the effects on the environment of traditional burial or cremation may choose to be buried in a fashion more suited to their beliefs. They may choose to be buried in a coffin made of cardboard or other easily-biodegradable materials. Further, they may choose their final resting place to be in a park or woodland, known as an eco-cemetery, and may have a tree planted over their grave as a contribution to the environment and a remembrance.

Internet Visitation/Funeral
A Funeral Home in North Syracuse, New York was the first funeral home to offer and broadcast a visitation and funeral "live" on the Internet. A Funeral Director at the Home said "It's not new technology, just a new application." The use of a web-camera allows relatives who could not otherwise attend services to do so from any computer. Family members and friends separated by distance, weather or circumstance can now become part of the support network by being connected electronically to the ceremonies.

Funerals in East Asia
In most East Asian and many Southeast Asian cultures, the wearing of white is symbolic of death. In these societies, white or off-white robes are traditionally worn to symbolize that someone has died and can be seen worn among relatives of the deceased during a funeral ceremony. In Chinese culture, red is strictly forbidden as it is a traditionally symbolic color of happiness. Contemporary Western influence however has meant that dark-colored or black attire is now often also acceptable for mourners to wear (particularly for those outside the family). In such cases, mourners wearing dark colors at times may also wear a white or off-white armband or
white robe. When a coffin is lowered into the ground the mourners will bow their heads and must not watch the coffin being lowered into the ground. Sometimes, some members of the procession are required to turn their backs and not look at the coffin as it is sealed, entering the carriage, removed from the carriage and entering the ground. They may also be required to wipe their faces with a white cloth. Paper money and commodities constructed out of paper and bamboo are often burnt for the deceased for use in the afterlife.

A traditional Chinese gift to the attendees upon entering is a white envelope, usually enclosing a small sum of money (dollar coin), a sweet and a handkerchief, each with symbolic meaning. This custom is also found in other East and Southeast Asian cultures.

Most Japanese funerals are conducted with Buddhist rites. Many feature a ritual that bestows a new name on the deceased; funerary names typically use obsolete or archaic kanji and words, to avoid the likelihood of the name being used in ordinary speech or writing. The new names are typically chosen by a Buddhist priest, after consulting the family of the deceased. The new name bestowed upon them is the name they will have in the afterlife, where they will train for 49 days to become a disciple of Buddha. Most Japanese are cremated.

**African Funerals**

The custom of burying the dead in the floor of dwelling-houses has been to some degree prevalent on the Gold Coast of Africa. The ceremony is purely animist, and apparently without
any set ritual. The main exception is that the females of the family of the deceased and their friends may undergo mournful lamentations. In some instances they work their feelings up to an ostentatious, frenzy-like degree of sorrow. The revelry may be heightened by the use of alcohol, of which drummers, flute-players, bards, and singing men may partake. The funeral may last for as much as a week. Another custom, a kind of memorial, frequently takes place seven years after the person's death. These funerals and especially the memorials may be extremely expensive for the family in question. Cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry, may be offered in remembrance and then consumed in festivities.

Some funerals in Ghana are held with the deceased put in elaborate "fantasy coffins" colored and shaped after a certain object, such as a fish, crab, boat, and even an airplane.

**Final Disposition of the Dead**

Some cultures place the dead in tombs of various sorts, either individually, or in specially designated tracts of land that house tombs. Burial in a graveyard is one common form of tomb. In some places, burials are impractical because the ground water is too high; therefore tombs are placed above ground, as was the case in New Orleans, Louisiana. Elsewhere, a separate building for a tomb is usually reserved for the socially prominent and wealthy. Especially grand above-ground tombs are called mausoleums. Other buildings used as tombs include the crypts in churches; burial in these places is again usually a privilege given to the socially prominent dead. In more recent times, however, this has often been forbidden by hygiene laws.
Burial was not always permanent. In some areas, burial grounds needed to be re-used because of limited space. In these areas, once the dead have decomposed to skeletons, the bones are removed; after their removal they can be placed in an ossuary.

"Burial at sea" means the deliberate disposal of a corpse into the ocean, wrapped and tied with weights to make sure it sinks. It is a common practice in navies and sea-faring nations; in the Church of England, special forms of funeral service were added to the Book of Common Prayer to cover it. Science fiction writers have frequently analogized with "Burial in space".

St. Joseph's Chapel Mausoleum at Mount Olivet Cemetery in Key West (rural Dubuque), Iowa. This mausoleum has traditional mausoleum crypts as well as columbarium niches for cremated remains.

Cremation, also, is an old custom; it was the usual mode of disposing of a corpse in ancient Rome. Vikings were occasionally cremated in their longships, and afterwards the location of the site was marked with standing stones. In recent years, despite the objections of some religious groups, cremation has become more and more widely used. Orthodox Judaism and the Eastern Orthodox Church forbid cremation, as do most Muslims. Orthodox Judaism forbids cremation
according to Jewish law (Halakha) believing that the soul of a cremated person cannot find its final repose. The Roman Catholic Church forbade it for many years. But since 1963 the church has allowed it so long as it is not done to express disbelief in bodily resurrection. The church specifies that cremated remains are either buried or entombed. They do not allow cremated remains to be scattered or kept at home. Many Catholic cemeteries now have columbarium niches for cremated remains, or specific sections for those remains. Some denominations of Protestantism allow cremation, the more conservative denominations generally do not.

Hindus consider the funeral as the final "samskar" or ritual of life. Cremation is generally mandatory for all Hindus, except for saints and children under the age of 5 years. Cremation is seen as the only way in which all the five elements of fire, water, earth, air and space would be satisfied by returning the body to these elements as after cremation the ashes are poured into the sacred river Ganges or into the sea. After death the body of the deceased is placed on the ground with the head of the deceased pointing towards south which is considered the direction of the dead. The body is anointed with sacred items such as sandalwood paste and holy ashes, tulsi (basil) leaves and water from the river Ganges. The eldest son would whisper "Om namah shivay" or "Om namo bhagavate vasudevaya" near the ear of the deceased. An oil lamp is lit besides the deceased and chapters from the holy Bhagavad Gita or Garud Purana are recited. Traditionally the body has to be cremated within 24 hours after death, as keeping the body longer is considered to lead to impurity and hinder the passage of the dead to afterlife. Hence before cremation as the
body lies in state, minimal physical contact with the body is observed. A priest is called in to lead the formal religious rituals, after which the body is taken to the cremation ground, where the eldest son normally lights the funeral pyre, this act is considered to be the most important duty of a son as it is believed that he leads his parents from this world into moksha. Immediately after the cremation, the family members of the deceased all have to take a purifying bath and observe a 12-day mourning period. This mourning period ends on the morning of the thirteenth day on which a Shraddh ceremony is conducted in which offerings are given to ancestors and other gods in order to grant liberation or moksha to the deceased.

Recently a new method of disposing of the body, called promession or an Ecological funeral, has been patented by a Swedish company. Its main purpose is to return the body to soil quickly while minimizing pollution and resource consumption.

Rarer forms of disposal of the dead include excarnation, where the corpse is exposed to the elements. This was done by some groups of Native Americans; it is still practiced by Zoroastrians in Bombay, where the Towers of Silence/Daxmas allow vultures and other carrion eating birds to dispose of the corpses. Zoroastrianism believes that fire is sacred and should not be defiled by cremating a human body. It is also practiced by some Tibetan Buddhist monks where it is sometimes called Sky burial. Cannibalism is also practiced post-mortem in some countries. The practice has been linked to the spread of a prion disease called kuru. Mummification is the drying of bodies to preserve them. The most famous practitioners of mummification were ancient Egyptians: many nobles and high-ranked bureaucrats of the old Egyptian kingdom had their
corpses embalmed and stored in luxurious sarcophagi inside their funeral mausoleum or, in the cases of some Pharaohs, a pyramid.

**Control by the Decedent of the Details of the Funeral**

In law in the United States, the deceased have surprisingly little say in the manner in which their funerals can be conducted. The law generally holds that the funeral rituals are for the benefit of the survivors, rather than to express the personal whims and tastes of the deceased.

The decedent may, in most U.S. jurisdictions, provide instructions as to his funeral by means of a Last Will and Testament. These instructions can be given some legal effect if bequests are made contingent on the heirs carrying them out, with alternative gifts if they are not followed. This assumes, of course, that the decedent has enough of an estate to make the heirs pause before doing something that will invoke the alternate bequest. To be effective, the will must be easily available, and some notion of what it provides must be known to the decedent's survivors.

Some people dislike the clutter and display of flowers at funerals, and feel that there is an unseemly competition in the number and size of the floral arrangements sent. Many newspapers refuse to print an obituary that requests that flowers not be sent; to do so would be to offend the florists' industry. Many obituaries do however, contain notices regarding "memorial gifts" to a
charitable organization. It is usually understood in these situations that a gift to the charity made in memory of the decedent relieves the donor of the social duty of sending flowers.

**Anatomical Gifts**

Another way of avoiding some of the rituals and costs of a traditional funeral is for the decedent to donate some or all of her or his body to a medical school or similar institution for the purpose of instruction in anatomy, or for similar purposes. Students of medicine and osteopathy frequently study anatomy from donated cadavers; they are also useful in forensic research.

Making an anatomical gift is a separate transaction from being an organ donor, in which any useful organs are removed from the unembalmed cadaver for medical transplant. Under a Uniform Act in force in most jurisdictions of the United States, being an organ donor is a simple process that can often be accomplished when a driver's license is renewed. There are some medical conditions, such as amputations, or various surgeries, that can make the cadaver unsuitable for these purposes. Conversely, the bodies of people who had certain medical conditions are useful for research into those conditions. All US medical schools rely on the generosity of "anatomical donors" for the teaching of anatomy. Typically the remains are cremated once the students have completed their anatomy classes, and many medical schools now hold a memorial service at that time as well.