

Delivering a Eulogy

How could a fill-in minister, the pastor of a small church, someone who didn't even know the deceased, make them seem alive for family and friends?

The Rev. Tom Hensley delivers up to 200 eulogies a year through Baldwin Fairchild Funeral Home. His landmark is "The Dash", a moving poem by Linda Ellis. The poem asks mourners to consider the meaning of the dash between the birth and death dates on a tombstone. Hensley always tries to personalize his eulogies. "The role I play is to help the family with a sense of closure on this chapter of life. My goal is to share words which honor the deceased and offer words of comfort from scripture...I am always honored to be there."

Preparing and delivering a meaningful eulogy can be a challenge, but some speakers seem to have a knack for it. Styles vary, but the key, says an expert on the craft, is being able to focus on the meaning of the person's life - and the lives of his loved ones who remain.

According to Cyrus Copeland, an author of books on eulogies, "A eulogy builds a bridge between the living and the dead...Constructing and crossing that bridge is one of the most difficult things you do. But in doing so you begin the process of healing."

Hispanic eulogies are more romantic, reflecting on Latin culture, they dwell on familial relationships and personal narratives. The funeral and the eulogy are not for the dead ones; they are for the ones who are left behind. A eulogy can give a message of love. They are often funny. It makes it hurt less.

A big part of Rabbi Arnold Seigel's job is conducting funerals for Jews not affiliated with a local congregation. He conducts about 40 services a year. When he does not know the person who died, he says he has to be a quick study when he speaks with family and friends. He doesn't speak intimately of the deceased, but gives some lesson on an aspect of the person's life. He concentrates on what he hears as the good side of the person and dresses it up a little. "It's better to be serious without being maudlin. With a full life, you can take some liberties."

Twenty years ago the clergy delivered most of the eulogies. Now it is a mix of family, friends and poker buddies. Those done by friends and family tend to be more interesting because they relate to accomplishments and vulnerabilities.

There are a number of common elements that make up a good eulogy: start strong, tell stories, be honest, be unique and close well. Tell a story, be irreverent, be personal, speak in the "I". How much humor to use, especially when the deceased was not exactly a "Ward Cleaver", can be problematic. Don't sugarcoat the message, don't judge the person, just tell it like it was.

Some families seek the services of "funeral celebrants" who deliver secular eulogies for those with no religious affiliation. There are some people out there who don't want a minister who didn't know the deceased preaching a sermon and saying verses over them.

Taken from an article in the Orlando Sentinel, 9 September 2006, by Mark Pinsky