

Death, Burial, and Family Differences

I think if I were in my 30s or 40s I would not even read this article; and believe it or not, the truth is, I was never permitted to go to a funeral until I was 18. It was for my grandmother, my mother's mother.

Death, cremation, burials, cemeteries – these were rarely talked about in my family. Friends of my parents died, distant relatives died. My parents went and I did not. I sometimes thought it had to do with the fact that I was Jewish and before you knew it, the deceased was in the ground and the focus was with the living.

I remember when I was 12 or 13, my grandmother's brother-in-law, Dave, died. I liked Dave a lot and wanted to go. My mother prohibited me from going and upset me so, I was sick in bed with a fever; maybe that would have happened anyway. Who knows?

So it wasn't until I married, moved to RI, and became part of a large Italian Catholic family that I began to learn about this final cycle of life – death. It was also, at this time, that my parents decided to move to RI to be closer to me. Since they were retired and I was the only child, it seemed inevitable. But, within months of my giving birth to my daughter, it became apparent that my dad had a mission for me to buy burial plots. That was 1977.

After receiving a lot of advice and information from friends and relatives and after reluctantly visiting a variety of cemeteries, it all came down to what we considered to be the most important thing for us – a nondenominational cemetery. In addition to that, we thought our children would be more comfortable in a place that was not so starkly a cemetery with grave upon grave upon grave. For us, a serene location with understated natural-looking grounds, so rich in foliage, appealed to my visual nature; and with that in mind, we chose such a cemetery.

We chose to buy four cemetery plots, which, we found out many years later in 2008, could be used for eight cremation burials.

Last year, there was much discussion in my husband's extended family about death, burial and cremation – subjects, as you remember, that were almost forbidden while I was growing up. The older generation had all died and now, WE WERE THE OLDER GENERATION!

Some family members had children and some did not. One person, who had two children, did not want to be buried. She wanted cremation and a scattering of her ashes. Another couple, who had no children, chose cremation and wanted their ashes put in urns; my husband favored cremation, but I still could not come to terms with it. So many options of burial and cremation were acceptable to different family members. These discussions were beneficial to all. They were a good thing.

It was a group of older cousins, (those over 50) who participated in these discussions that took place around dinner tables at family gatherings; some of those under 30 pretended not to listen, while others poo-pooed us and some even chuckled as we sought to discuss our differences and come to terms with

the inevitable; but It was not until the summer of 2008, that I was chosen by the family to make an appointment at the cemetery to get the facts!

Pilgrims of five were we arriving at the office.

The gentleman who met with us was very forthcoming, kind, friendly and willing to answer any and all questions each family member had. He was also a great giver of information so that we understood all costs at that cemetery as he carefully explained our alternatives. Since this discussion was nearly one year ago, I do not remember specifics, but I do remember that it put me in a very comfortable place. It was as if we had just enrolled in “funeral arrangements 101.”

I do remember that because my husband and I were “land owners” (of cemetery plots) prices of cremation were slightly lower for us; I left with an informative brochure, but having misplaced it. I refer to the cemetery’s website if I have questions that crop up and need to be answered. I also remember that it would be the responsibility of a family member to choose a funeral director, who would fill out the necessary paperwork and who would transport the deceased to the cemetery. The cemetery itself was not responsible for the paperwork or the transport.

Members of the family, could, if they wished, view the deceased and then be present for the cremation. Once the deceased is cremated, the ashes could be given to the family, they could be scattered in a special area at the cemetery, or they could be buried in a burial plot at that cemetery or elsewhere. I remember seeing a lovely chapel on the cemetery grounds that is available for a service. Containers for the ashes were varied in type and price.

But, subsequent to this meeting, when we started investigating funeral directors, we found a wide variety of prices for the same service of which we were in need. (See the RI FCA price survey at [http://www.funerals.org/affiliates/rhodeisland.](http://www.funerals.org/affiliates/rhodeisland)) So we knew we needed to shop around.

So what have we all decided to do?

More discussions over dinner tables at family gatherings....Well, the couple who have no children stayed with their decision to be cremated, visited other funeral directors, and then contracted with one to ensure their future wishes would be carried out. While I suggested they plan ahead and not pay ahead, they paid because they said they were assured insurance. The family member who wanted her ashes scattered still wanted to do that; my husband still wanted cremation and, in the interim, I agreed to do the same.

Our next topic of discussion was centered on the kind of service we could or might have. The children got involved; we felt we did not want to stray too far from known conventions to which they were accustomed. They all agreed and stated that as long as we wrote down what we wanted, they would follow our wishes. And in reality, since all of us were not going to die at the same time, there would likely always be one of the older cousins available to help.

It was here that the issue of costs was discussed. No one wanted to spend thousands of dollars on a funeral; and no one felt the necessity to be embalmed or to have an expensive casket with a wake and a funeral service and then be cremated. Those costs seemed prohibitive.

Now remember, I was the only non-Catholic. None of the other family members wanted a wake. Since that was not part of my tradition, it did not enter into my decision. I chose cremation followed by a graveside service and interment. My younger daughter questioned whether I wanted a rabbi. If feasible, I said; but if not, I was comfortable with a family friend reciting certain prayers that I wanted. My husband said he did not care and that I could make the decisions for him. I chose cremation, private interment and then a memorial service at the church where he had been an altar boy for over ten years. The husband of the couple who had no children wanted to have his own ashes in church during his funeral service.

We even talked about the obituary in the paper – should there be one or not? One family member was against it, but most of us and all of the children were for it. No one considered writing his or her own obituary.

So we went along, each of us tweaking our plans according to our own comfort zone.

Looking back on this, I personally feel that we have undemonized a subject most families shy away from and do not approach until forced to. Our family has triumphed in getting the job done. We have looked it straight in the eye, confronted the uneasiness of the discussion with lots of laughter, some tears, and much support from each other. We have listened to the younger members and have written down our wishes.

Yes, we have veered away from some of the traditions of our parents and grandparents; and maybe some of us will tweak our choices again as we consider more requests or suggestions from the younger members. For after all, we must always be mindful of the living.

We hope our story will help you with your family discussion.