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**If we fool ourselves into thinking a living funeral is a substitute for a funeral after death, we may be tricking ourselves into thinking we can go around our grief instead of through it.**

**ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.**





What do you think about having a funeral before the person is dead? This has been a common media question recently. As you probably know, these are often referred to as living funerals.

Living funerals have been referred to by the media as an “up and coming” trend that appears to be growing in popularity. A living funeral is, in fact, just what it sounds like – it is held while the person is still alive. These gatherings tend to be celebratory and upbeat.

A recent example involved a photo booth where attendees could get a joy-filled photo taken with the guest of honor. In addition, there was a margarita bar and an opportunity for ziplining.

**Anticipating a death is not the same as acknowledging the reality of a death and experiencing a rite of passage.**

In another instance recently, 200 people gathered at a conference center to *celebrate* the life of a woman who was dying of cancer. The event was publicized on local social media platforms and in a newspaper notice. The woman, a well-known member of the community, had written the publicity about the event herself.

While this woman was quite ill and actively dying, she was insistent on being present at her living funeral. By all accounts, her family and friends appreciated being able to gather, share memories and *celebrate* her life. Some of those in attendance wrote notes about what she had meant to them. Her family read these notes to her the day after the gathering. She died two days later.

Yes, this event was memorable and meaningful, particularly for the woman who was dying. It was a gathering intended to remember and honor her life.

However, let's be clear: While these

events are valuable to the dying person and those in attendance, they are not really funerals, nor are they a substitute for funerals.

### **What Is a Funeral?**

The word “funeral” comes from the Latin *funus*, meaning “death” or “corpse.” We have funerals as a rite of initiation, not closure. What are we initiating? Life without the person who died. We are initiating our period of mourning and stepping through a process that helps us care for and say goodbye to the body of the person who died, even as the process helps us say hello to our grief.

Since the beginning of time and across cultures, we (meaning the survivors of the deceased) have had funerals to help us begin to:

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death
2. Recall the life of the person who died
3. Lend support to one another
4. Express our grief into mourning
5. Search for the meaning of life and death
6. Take a step toward integrating back into our community in a changed social status.

### **The Problem With Premature “Funerals”**

So, what happens when we try to have a funeral before the person has died? For one thing, there is no dead body to care for or to help us acknowledge the reality of the death. For another, because the person is still alive, we are not yet making the transition from internal grieving to external mourning.

It's true that when someone is dying or has a terminal illness, we begin to grieve long before they die. This is called anticipatory grief. We essentially start to rehearse what it will feel like after they are gone. This is normal and necessary, and it

**Coming together with one another before a death is not the same as supporting one another after a death.**

does help us move intellectually closer to integrating the reality of the death into our continued living. Essentially, we step onto death's doorstep.

But as anyone who has been in this position can tell you, anticipating a death is not the same as experiencing a death. We're never really ready when a death occurs. The funeral after the person has died is essential to mark the "before" from the "after."

And so, ceremonies held before the death may bring us to the doorstep of our grief, especially if the person we are honoring is very near death. But we can't get ahead of ourselves. Anticipating a death is not the same as acknowledging the reality of a death and experiencing a rite of passage. Coming together before a death is not the same as supporting one another following a death. Expressing our anticipatory grief is not the same as expressing our profound and immediate grief.

Also, considering the meaning of the life of a person who is present is not quite the same as considering the life of a person who has died as we bear witness to the body that had previously animated life. Of course, we must always be respectful of beliefs that preclude the practice of spending time with the body.

**Expressing our anticipatory grief is not the same as expressing our profound and immediate grief.**

When we fool ourselves into thinking that a living funeral can be a substitute for a funeral after death, we may well be tricking ourselves into thinking we can go around our grief instead of through it. We're not really initiating our mourning. Instead, we may be trying to stop it before it begins.

Thus, we are well served to remind ourselves and teach others that a gathering before the death is not a substitute for a meaningful funeral. While living funerals may be helpful prior to death, as a stand-alone service, it just might be unfinished. ☰



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