

The Value of Readings in Funerals

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO – For centuries, funerals have helped families across cultures know what to do when they don't know what to do. Among the fundamental reasons we have funerals is to help us: acknowledge the reality of the death, recall the life of the person who died, activate support, express grief into mourning, establish meaning in our continued living, and integrate back into our communities in a changed social status.

We are currently faced with many people not understanding the reasons we have funerals. They also question the value of the individual elements that help create a ceremony deserving of the special life that was lived. In previous articles, I've advocated for educating families about the value of funeral elements such as visitations, music, eulogies, and symbols. Here I will outline the value of readings. My hope is that this will help you educate families about why readings can be an important element of meaningful funerals.

The readings used in funerals have the capacity to bear the weight of our most profound thoughts and feelings about death. They are words "well said." Often crafted by master wordsmiths, they capture what we ourselves feel inside but are usually incapable of expressing so eloquently.

Another way to think about readings at funerals is that they are the counterpoint to music. While music appeals deeply and directly to the emotions and the spirit, readings reach the emotions and spirit by way of the mind. Everyone absorbs information differently but especially for the "word people" in attendance at a funeral, the readings are a very effective element.

Religious funeral ceremonies typically contain a number of standard readings or prayers from the faith's body of literature. Since books such as the Judeo-Christian Bible are believed to contain God's own words about matters of life and death, it's clear

why readings from these books are the centerpiece of many religious funerals.

Secular ceremonies can also include readings, such as poems, that help family and friends allow themselves to mourn. Readings that specifically mention death help mourners acknowledge the reality and finality of death. In addition, readings that help mourners be in touch with their thoughts and feelings can also be very helpful as part of meaningful funerals.

Families may also consider readings that capture the unique life and philosophies of the person who died. Favorite passages, poems, and sayings can be integrated into the ceremony. Each of these personalized readings can be prefaced with a few words about the reading's place in the person's life. These help those attending the funeral remember the person who died.

Appropriate readings are one of the most important funeral elements for mourners' search for meaning in the face of the death. Religious and secular readings alike typically place the death in a larger context of meaning and therefore offer comfort to mourners. I suggest that funeral homes compile a number of sample readings of both religious and secular nature for families to explore for potential inclusion in the funeral.

Inviting several different people to do readings is a good way to involve mourners in the funeral ceremony. Their participation in the funeral helps them feel more engaged as they honor the person who has died. Responsive or group readings can also demonstrate social bonds and create community support.

Of course, the full integration of grief does not happen at the funeral. Let's remind ourselves that funerals are rites of initiation, not rites of closure. As with the other elements of the funeral, readings can help grieving families and friends experience a glimmer of light at a time when all can seem dark.

It is my hope that you will work with the families in your care to help them integrate readings that are meaningful for them throughout the funeral experience. Readings are essential elements that make every funeral tapestry richer and more meaningful.

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and

grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. Contact him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.

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The Notebook

DIRECTORS INVESTMENT GROUP (DIG), parent company to Funeral Directors Life, Passare, Claimcheck and other subsidiaries, has been recognized as a 2025 Best Workplace in Texas by Great Place To Work and *Fortune*. This is DIG's ninth consecutive year on the list. The company was ranked No. 8 in the small and medium business category, surpassing last year's placement at No. 13, and DIG was the only Abilene-based company to make the list. "Being named on this list each year is a great honor, and I'm especially proud that we were recognized as one of the top 10 best workplaces in our wonderful state of Texas," said Kris Seale, DIG president and CEO. To determine the qualifiers of the list, Great Place To Work received more than 116,000 survey responses from employees at eligible Texas-based companies. Via the Trust Index Survey, employees responded to 60 statements and answered two open-ended questions about company leadership, workplace benefits, volunteer opportunities and more.

STARMARK has appointed Dan Cook as vice president of business development. Cook, who joined Starmark in 2023, has a background in sales, accounting and finance.

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