

Loss in Translation: Funerals and Death Care Transcript

Louise Winter

I'm not sure that things are ever going to go back to quite how they were before i hope that some elements of being connected to people and be able to hug them and go into their homes to get to know them better and share a cup of tea with them i hope all that will return but i think the last year is definitely going to leave its scars

Peter Gaskin

i think it's very disappointing, how little thought has been put in to allowing people to grieve. This whole year where we've had such restrictions and for some the restrictions have been accompanied by bereavement

Lisa Wilkinson

It's barbaric you're just robbing people who have already been robbed its insensitive, it does not allow for that chapter of a process to be closed

Miri Lawrence

I mean the thing that has been said to me the most has been i didn't get a chance to say goodbye and i hope he or she knew how much i loved them

Lisa Wilkinson

My name is lisa wilkinson and i live in County Antrim in Northern Ireland. So one of my roles is a humanist funeral celebrant. My father died 20 years ago. I remember i wanted everybody to go away there was nowhere in your house that you could walk into where somebody wasn't standing. There were people everywhere tea and sandwiches reached to you all the time and all i wanted to do was ask them all to leave but when you reflect back as a warmth about your grief being witnessed which is currently absent

Perry Meyer

My father passed away 2018. I'm not a particularly religious person, I'm Jewish and practicing, but if i'm honest i didn't really relish the thought of having to go through the intensity of being with a load of people and having to follow that practice of sitting shiva it's called, for being in mourning it kind of felt that i've already lost somebody i don't want to kind of go through that experience. The actual mourners descended upon my mum's house for the seven days of mourning. Throughout the course of each day mourners kind of drift in when you would kind of take your position of mourning with a shirt showing its rip right, sitting on low chairs. It puts you into this zone that you're receiving you're saying prayers

you're remembering, and at the end of it you formally get up. The rabbi says hey time's past you know long life get out leave the house go for a walk, you have now finished and I personally found that whole process quite cathartic, therapeutic if you like and and helps you really get over the intensity of the experience of losing someone

Tony Angel

My dad used to say the two best parties in life, they're either a wedding or a funeral and he was absolutely right, it's where your body's alert and sensitive to a really either joyous moment or where it's an incredibly raw emotional environment where again after a little bit of liquor, you can let your hair down and that's what happens you know because it is ultimately a giving thanks for life and celebrating a life.

Tony Angel

My name is Toby Angel and i'm one of the co founders and the managing director of a business called Sacred Stones Limited we are charged with looking after the cremation ashes of loved ones and we're looking after families who wish to commemorate

Louise Winter

A funeral is an acknowledgment that something has happened it marks a significant change in our lives. Ultimately life is going to go on and a funeral is an opportunity for us to acknowledge the reality of what's happened so that we can live our best lives moving forward. My name is Louise Winter i'm a funeral director and founder of Poetic Endings we help people put together beautiful thoughtful and meaningful funerals

Waheed Kahn

That is fascinating in all religions in all cultures death and its rituals are of very high importance and and if they're not done correctly can lead to lasting memories for the families that didn't do things right or as per wishes of the family. My name is Dr. Wahid Khan. I'm one of the trustee of the Inverness mosque, which is the northernmost mosque in Britain. When somebody dies, people start gathering at the house of that person, lots of neighbors start producing food for that family so they don't have to cook. These are very social interlinked rituals or procedures, which keeps the community binding.

Miri Lawrence

My name is Mary Lawrence, I'm a liberal Jewish rabbi. it's customary in Judaism when someone has died, that you wish the mourner a long life. Sometimes that might seem a bit of a strange phrase, but it's kind of a rubric. So you just know what to say, at a time. where sometimes we don't have the words,

Tony Angel

if you accept that there are three principal rituals in life, union, people coming together, creation if they're fortunate enough to have children, and then of course death. And there are complex rituals around each of those three. But I would volunteer the perhaps the last one is so significant because it involves all of us.

Lisa Wilkinson

The restrictions have removed so many rituals and practices and processes. So normally, as a celebrant, you would always arrive very early, and you would park outside the main building, no, not this time. You can't shake hands. You have to stand at a distance with a mask. You'd deliver the tribute outside this building, you're not allowed in the building. And then halfway through or whatever. You nod at the funeral director who wraps these wooden doors twice. Two members of staff come out, they don't speak, don't offer condolences, they just take the coffin away and close these two wooden doors again. And then a small TV screen comes on outside. And that's how you say your final farewells on a TV screen.

Louise Winter

The main restriction right now is the number of people who are allowed to attend the funeral. Lots of burial chapels are closed so graveside services have been taking place outside. When the first lockdown happened, and particularly flowers stopped, florists couldn't work, the flower markets were closed. And flowers have been such an important part of the funeral of bringing some color and life and joy and beauty to it. Because it was really hard not being able to have roses to place on the coffin.

Miri Lawrence

I couldn't imagine a funeral where I didn't at least put an arm on a shoulder as we were walking to the grave side, I would normally give somebody a hug if they were distressed. That's not really about Judaism or religion. It's just the humanity of comforting somebody when they are grieving. And I remember at one funeral, one of the main mourners saying to me, I've got gloves on can I at least hold your hand. It kind of felt, you know, you've got the government restrictions which are there and should be there, but almost a feeling of being policed at doing the wrong thing at a time and everything physically in your body is saying I want to reach out to that person.

Louise Winter

The government does issue guidelines through Public Health England. And that does allow a certain amount of interaction with the body, it allows ritual washing and dressing and providing precautions are taken. As a company we have a much stricter policy because I don't trust that the virus won't mutate and that it is safe.

Shoayb Bux

So we've had to adapt to the restrictions. The starting process of collecting a deceased. You know, we've had to have a dedicated transport team whereas historically family members would be involved in that. My name is Shoayb Bux, I'm a volunteer at Preston Muslim burial society that helps the Muslims of Preston and surrounding areas process their deceased. The pandemic required a lot of background research into what's possible in terms of whether we're still able to continue to wash and shroud the way we've normally done, the gosl team or the shrouding and bathing team had to be a dedicated team of volunteers because we could put them through the appropriate training on how to don and doff PPE, how to ensure that the precautions were taken to reduce any risk of transmission, as well as how to continue giving the wash with certain protections.

Lisa Wilkinson

At my aunt's funeral, there had been new restrictions brought in that morning, where when the coffin is brought out of the hearse it's sprayed. I was horrified. So I said to my sister, turn your back and take aunt's Margaret's perfume with you. And when they start to spray the comb, spray her perfume everywhere. Let that be the spray noise that you see and hear and smell.

Tony Angel

The most important thing is that people mustn't feel rushed. And that is without doubt the biggest challenge for family, the fact that someone has died and they may not have even been there when they died, or they may not be allowed to see them. But then when it comes to ritualizing, and giving thanks and they're told, but you can only have 20 minutes, tops. Well, that is not healthy.

Rachael Meyer

That's my question, my one burning question. Who decided 20 minutes is enough. At the moment, the COVID regulations are making it quite difficult anyway because there's got to be enough time to clean everything down in between ceremonies. My name's Rachael Meyer, and I'm a humanist celebrant. So I trained as a wedding celebrant first, and then the pandemic hit and all the weddings were put on hold. So during lockdown, I decided it would be a good idea to do the training as a funeral celebrant. But there's a lot more that goes into being a funeral celebrant emotionally because of course, you're dealing with grief.

Shoayb Bux

We have seen a difference in terms of how families grieve. It has added additional pressure with having to deal with who they now take to a funeral whereas previously would have been, it's open to anybody. And they would see you know hundreds of people at a funeral prayer.

Miri Lawrence

You know that when you go to a funeral, there will be prayers, there will be some singing, there will be a eulogy. They'll be the rituals around the grave side and the putting the earth and these have all been minimized to a certain extent. So for example, you have to handpick your mourners, you don't have the music, rather than have they committal with the spades of earth, you might just have either a small spade or just a very small handful. But when you all put it together, it kind of feels like half a funeral.

Lisa Wilkinson

My mum was in a nursing home for what was to be two weeks. And then on New Year's Day, the staff from the home rang to say I couldn't come. Because my mom was one of five residents who had tested positive for COVID. I knew I knew straight away, she won't make it. I got another call to say that she was unresponsive. And then another call 15 minutes after that, to say that she had died and it's at that stage where you realize all the things that you're not going to have, all those rituals and practices that bring comfort. So we weren't like allowed to see her ever again. Fortunately for us, we're a family of five, my husband, my son and his fiance and my daughter. And that's our bubble. So we could be together. Because of my work I knew I will never say goodbye to my mother on the TV screen. It's just not gonna happen. And I was aware that the next nearest crematorium in County Cavan, which is in the south of Ireland, so under a different government jurisdiction, everything I knew that the crematorium

there was a warmer place to be. A three hour drive by decided we're taking granny to Cavan and it won't be 10 minutes outside on a TV

Louise Winter

Grief and lockdown is so difficult. People have often been through really traumatic, awful experiences. I've noticed that lots of grieving people are going through a really intense period of pain. And it's because they are mostly at home thinking about what has happened, and life is not moving or just feels very stuck.

Rachael Meyer

Since we were all completely sort of locked down. I've been doing everything over zoom, it's almost been a good part of the grieving process. Normally a wake that follows the ceremony is the place where family friends would gather together and show each other support and people are not allowed to go into each other's houses anymore, or get together. So all of that support network has been stripped away. And I've been told that having the zoom planning meetings for the ceremony allows more people than you perhaps might normally speak to, to be all together in the same room, albeit a Zoom Room. And as a celebrant, you know, I'm firing questions at everybody trying to promote memories of all times in the deceased's life. People say that it's actually given them the opportunity to think about the good times that they've had, and, you know, have happy thoughts and smile, in the middle of that grief.

Waheed Kahn

When somebody is in near dying state, we have a religious obligation to go and see them and pray and recite the Shahada, which is, there's only one God and Prophet Muhammad is the messenger.

Shoayb Bux

So what notification system we did, and we felt it was very important to do right at the beginning of this pandemic, is to have a Twitter account created specifically for Preston Muslim Burial Society, and every deceased that we would process, we would then tweet out the name of that individual, and where they were from, and when they passed away, and then a little prayer to go after that. And we tweet that out as a public notification system, purely to get the accurate details out there of who's passed away, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, as well as allowing people to then send on their condolences.

Rachael Meyer

I did a funeral ceremony for a lady who had died, she was living in a care home in Yorkshire and her son and his family lived in Hong Kong. And because of the travel restrictions, because of COVID, they weren't allowed or it would, it would have been incredibly difficult for them to come over for the funeral. So the funeral director arranged an audio visual company to come and basically beam him into the crematorium chapel on a big TV screen. So he was beamed in live, to speak to everybody during the ceremony. So not only was it webcast out to him, he was kind of in the room as well, which was incredible.

Miri Lawrence

Over the last year, we've been incredibly innovative, but a whole process around funerals and dying and the different periods of mourning. There's a familiarity about them. And I think that that's certainly

why I haven't chosen to make innovations because I think it's been important to keep as much as familiar as possible. As part of taking comfort from the prescribed rituals or liturgy that's in existence.

Louise Winter

The more honest we all are about what's going on, I think the better it can be. It's about allowing our emotions to come up not trying to hide them or dismiss them or drink them away or smoke them away or anything like that. Just about sitting with the acknowledgement the reality of what is happening. So that we can find a way not to be completely traumatized by it like previous generations have been.

Waheed Kahn

Maybe it's a strange thing to say that but the communities are more united and more together after the pandemic actually than before, we will appreciate things like praying together eating together a lot more after this lockdown is finished.

Tony Angel

We have to mark this now we have to leverage the cohesion that we're all experiencing, to acknowledge that, you know, something monumental is happening to all of us, it affects all of us.

So the COVID-19 Stone came about because we just felt there was a need to do something,

Tim Ashton

A family who've given a lot to our community had one of the senior members of their family die. The whole sort of communal life of how we would say goodbye to that person just wasn't able to happen. And I suggested that if we raised a standing stone, it would find a means to meaning in some ways. So my name is Tim Ashton, and I'm a farmer from North Shropshire. The farm that my family look after here, has spent the last four or five years developing a long barrow monument on it. And there's also some standing stones and the whole area as a kind of ritual and memorial space.

Tony Angel

We had a service where we put the the stone up, symbolically the stone was standing, and I'd put supporting poles against the stone. And I invited every guest to remove a pole and say a few words. And in doing so once the last pole was removed, we were acknowledging that this stone had meaning significance and permanence.

Peter Gaskin

And there was people from different faiths, there was myself with no faith, and there were a couple of people, I think, who had suffered bereavement. So it was a very personal moment for them. And we all said a few words. My name is Peter. I'm a humanist celebrant. The reason I loved the whole idea of the stone is precisely because it's non prescriptive. So you've got this structure that people have gathered round, to memorialize the times. And it wasn't just about people who died. It was about the whole experience of living under the restrictions and dealing with bereavement

Tony Angel

it was important that it shouldn't be a memorial, commemorating something in the past, it had to be about the here and now it had to be about registering that we were living through something that is frankly, bloody awful.

Peter Gaskin

I just hope that if this horrible situation ever arises, again, we think in advance of how we might handle this better. And these these are people not just numbers.

Lisa Wilkinson

I haven't watched the news bulletins sense because they all start with numbers. And for me, I just see it like a bingo caller calling a number, or take a guess how many it is today? No, absolutely not. My mum. That's my mum. Not a number.

Shoayb Bux

For me, death is a very normal, everyday thing now. I'm always seeing the sadness and the grief of families. However, I see a lot of strength. I hear a lot of inspiring stories of what people have achieved in their life, what they've done and what they're meant to others. It's certainly a fact of life. And it's something we all want to prepare for before death does hit us. And we leave this world where we've done the best we can for religion, for God. And in terms of family.

Tony Angel

If you think about grief, it's a relationship that you have for life. It's not something you recover from, grief softens. But grief is the mechanism or the word to describe the mechanism for which we give thanks and remember someone we loved. So when I think about my grief, I don't ever want it to go because it's the way I remember something. And I think if you can create an environment where people can journey comfortably at their own pace, then that becomes an inherently valuable and constructive way of understanding how finite life is.