

For thousands of years, funerals have been a means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the death of someone we love. As you enter into the planning process, you may find it helpful to remind yourself why we have funerals.

The funeral ceremony:

- helps us acknowledge that someone we love has died.
- fosters our memories of the person who died and encourages us to share those memories with others.
- offers a time and place for us to talk about the life and death of the person who died.
- provides a social support system for us and other friends and family members.
- allows us to search for the meaning of life and death.
- offers continuity and hope for the living.

One of the most important gifts of planning a funeral is that it helps you and your family to focus your thoughts and feelings on something meaningful. The funeral encourages you to think about the person who died and to explore the meaning of her life and the ways in which she touched the lives of others.

The remembering, deciding, and reflecting that take place in the planning of the service are often an important part of the process of grief and mourning. And ultimately, this process of contemplation and discovery creates a memorable and moving funeral experience for all who attend.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., is a respected author and educator on the topic of grief. He believes that meaningful funeral experiences help families and friends support one another, embrace their feelings, and embark on the journey to healing and transcendence.



Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt presents workshops across the world to grieving families, funeral home staffs, and other caregivers. He also teaches training courses for bereavement caregivers at the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he serves as Director. Dr. Wolfelt is on the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. He is also the author of many bestselling books, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner's Book of Hope* and *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies*. For more information, visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

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# Why We Have Had Funerals Since the Beginning of Time

WOLFELT'S HIERARCHY OF THE  
PURPOSES OF FUNERALS





# Wolfelt's Hierarchy of the Purposes of Funerals

The multi-colored triangle depicts the many reasons why we have had funerals since the beginning of time. The most practical reason is on the bottom of the pyramid, and the most spiritual and significant is at the top.

Let's talk a little bit about each layer of the pyramid.

**REALITY** | When someone we love dies, we are faced with acknowledging a difficult reality. It is hard to truly accept the finality of death, but the funeral helps us begin to do so. At first we accept it with our heads, and only over time do we come to accept it with our hearts.

**RECALL** | Funerals help us begin to convert our relationship with the person who died from one of presence to one of memory. When we come together to share our memories, we also learn things we didn't know and we see how the person's life touched others.

**SUPPORT** | Funerals are social gatherings that bring together people who cared about the person who died. This reason for having funerals is especially important to remember if the person who died liked to say, "I don't want a funeral. Don't go to any trouble." Funerals are in *remembrance* of the person who died, but they are *for* the living. Those who loved the person who died need and benefit from having a special time to support one another in their grief.

**EXPRESSION** | So many thoughts and feelings fill our minds and our hearts when someone we love dies. Collectively, these thoughts and feelings are what we mean by the term "grief." In other words, grief is what's inside us. When we express our grief—by crying, talking to others, sharing memories, taking part in a funeral ceremony—we are mourning. Mourning is grief communicated outwardly. When we grieve but do not mourn, our sadness can feel unbearable and our many other emotions can fester inside of us. Mourning helps us begin to heal. The funeral is an essential time for mourning.

**MEANING** | Did the person I love have a good life? What is life, anyway? Why do we die? There are no simple explanations, but the funeral gives us a time and a place to hold the questions in our hearts and begin to find our way to answers that give us peace.

**TRANSCENDENCE**  
Funerals have a way of getting us to wake up—to think about what we truly care about and how we want to spend our precious remaining days. Ultimately, funerals help us embrace the wonder of life and death and remind us to live deeply, with joy and love.



## PLANNING A FUNERAL IS A PRIVILEGE

As you consider the funeral, try to remember that planning the funeral of someone you love is not a burden, but a privilege. Think of the funeral as a gift to the person who died. It is your chance to think about and express the value of the life that was lived.

This is not to deny your need to mourn and to embrace painful feelings of grief in the coming days. You may feel deep sadness as you plan this funeral and begin to acknowledge the reality of the death. But when all is said and done, you will also feel deep satisfaction that you have helped plan a meaningful tribute to someone who has meant a lot to you. And you will begin to work your way from the bottom of the pyramid—acknowledging the reality of the death—to the top.

Planning and attending a meaningful funeral can have a lasting and profoundly important impact on your life. I encourage you to tap into the power of ceremony on your journey to transcendence.

*"A meaningful funeral celebration is about saying hello on the pathway to goodbye."*

— Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt