

**The History,
Value And Benefit
Of Funeral Flowers**

By

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Most of us in the funeral profession have been there - the headache of funeral flowers. Not to be negative, but I used to get very frustrated with the responsibility of handling funeral flowers. The routine always seemed the same. I would have a new suit on and when transporting flowers I always damaged my suit either with water, or that green mushy stuff they position the flowers in, or from flower pollen stains, or from my own blood when my fingers got stuck by the sharp wire mesh they hook the flowers to.

Then of course there was the flower pedal challenge. Flower pedals in the garage, in the funeral coach, in the station wagon, in the visitation room, in the chapel, on the steps of the church, down the aisle of the church, all around the church, along the route to the grave, and all around the grave.

I spent a tremendous amount of my time as a funeral director picking up flower pedals and hiding them in my suit pockets. The dry cleaner always knew "my suits" because my pockets overflowed with dried up flower pedals.

There were flower pedals everywhere on funerals. It seemed to me as if the great big mums had a secret explosive device in them planted by angry vengeful florists which would detonate simply by a funeral director looking at them. Wham, boom-ten thousand mum pedals on the floor, and two minutes before the service was to begin to boot!

Of course this attitude was one of immaturity and limited vision on my part, for I was unaware and ignorant of the importance of funeral flowers. I was ignorant of the history, development and benefit of flowers. This article was written to help correct my deficiencies concerning this subject. The hope is this information will help other funeral professionals.

The Oldest Activity

The oldest tribute, the oldest form of memorialization, the oldest act of mourning is the arrangement and placement of flowers around the dead. This ancient activity was well documented by Dr. Ralph Solecki in his famous excavation in the Shandiar Cave in Northern Iraq.

Dr. Solecki discovered in 1951 several burial sites in the Shandiar Cave. Eventually his discovery would gain for the subject of human burial the world's record for the oldest form of religious activity in the Guinness Book of World Records. In any event, during Solecki's archeological dig he submitted soil samples from each grave to Mme. Arlette Leroi-Gourhan, a paleobotanist from

Paris, France for pollen analysis. She found under her microscope pollen and flower fragments from at least eight species of flowers. These flowers represented mainly small brightly colored wild flowers. She recognized relatives of the grape hyacinth, bachelor's-button, hollyhock, and a yellow-flowering groundsel. Mme. Leroi-Gourhan declared that the burials took place 62,000 B.C. and that it was no accident of nature that the flower pollen was deposited so deep in the cave. Neither birds nor animals could have carried flowers in such a manner in the first place, and in the second place, they could not possibly have deposited them directly on a burial site. Therefore she concluded that someone 62,000 years ago had roamed the mountainside in the mournful task of collecting flowers for a funeral tribute.

In A Flower Garden

Throughout the ages, humankind has equated death with sleep and this repose or sleep was usually in a garden full of flowers. "May God receive all our souls among his holy flowers," Turpin asks God over the bodies of his barons. Similarly the ancient figure of Roland prays that, "He will let them lie in holy flowers." This ancient verse contains both aspects of the condition that followed death, namely lying down or the sleep without sensation, and holy flowers or the garden in bloom. The garden of flowers equated into visions of paradise in the olden times, the images of "cool meadows" of Virgil's Elysium, "watered by streams," or from the garden that the Koran promised to believers.

If paradise was full of flowers and meadows, in ancient thought Hell was the opposite. In Homer's Hades, there was neither garden nor flowers. Hades - at least the Hades of Book XI of the Odyssey - also makes quite clear the absence of floral or any pastoral comforts.

The Prayer Book of Serapion, a Greco-Egyptian liturgical text from the middle of the fourth century, contains this prayer for the dead, "May his spirit rest in a green and tranquil place."

Thus the words designating paradise are all related to one central concept: the cool garden with an abundance of flowers.

As we will see shortly, the funeral profession of the early and mid 20th century identified closely with this floral imagery.

Nowhere in the influential thinking of Western Civilization was the idea of linking paradise with the garden more prevalent than in the burial of Jesus Christ. Jesus was entombed in a garden, pure and simple. Our cemeteries today often resemble a garden concept like the one where Jesus was entombed. Today people value the floral concept of the pastoral scenes of death in contrast to the mass burials that were witnessed in Nazi Germany. So the power of the idea of death being linked to flowers is still easily identifiable.

Symbolism and Flowers

Throughout history, flowers have been used to symbolize almost every aspect of the life cycle, from birth through death.

In death, flowers are used to symbolize how the beauty of creation is temporary, and as sure as the flower must be cut from the stem so it is with life - we all too must have our life cut from the stem so to speak.

Flowers also have a particular aesthetic value in the face of death, for the beauty of the flower helps balance our emotional response to the sharp contrast of the perceived ugliness of death. Flowers help soften the raw data imagery that death leaves with survivors.

The fragility of life is also symbolized by a flower. Flowers to be healthy require the proper condition to grow and expand - just like human beings.

And finally the color of flowers have a specific symbolism, particularly in religious thought.

The purple flower is a symbol of penitence and royalty. This floral color is used during the preparatory and penitential seasons of Advent and Lent.

The white flower is the symbol of joyous and celebrative color of light. This floral color is used during the festive season of Christmas and Easter, and on high days during ordinary times.

The green flower is the symbol of nature in the freshness of growth - hence our green cemeteries. This floral color is used, except on high days, during ordinary times - the season after Epiphany and the season after Pentecost.

The red flower is the symbol of fire and blood, and is used on the Day of Pentecost and on other special occasions when the work of the Holy Spirit or the blood of Christ or of martyrs is being commemorated.

The black flower is the symbol used for Good Friday, though red flowers are also sometimes used.

Flowers as we had just seen help the person think in symbolic terms which is the way that much of the information concerning death is communicated.

Practical Use Of Flowers

From time immemorial flowers were used to control the offensiveness and obnoxiousness of body decomposition. No doubt this was part of the reason that flowers were used in the Shandiar Cave burials so many centuries ago.

One of the most famous funerals where flowers were used to mask the odor of decomposition occurred in 1874 when President Andrew Johnson was buried. His body was not embalmed, and by the day of the funeral his body was in such a foul condition that undertaker Lazarus C. Shepard closed the casket and heaped loads of fragrant flowers on top and around the burial receptacle. The fragrance of the flowers hid the odor long enough for the funeral to take place.

“In The Garden” Movement

In 1914 C. Austin Miles wrote the famous funeral hymn “In The Garden.”

“I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses.”

Refrain

“And He walks with me and he talks with me
And he tells me I am his own....”

The hymn stormed the country and became one of the most frequently sung hymn at funerals in the United States. The hymn also began a movement in funeral

service whereby the mortuary practices of the country would revolve around the body reposing in the garden.

In fact the movement in Protestant funeral practices in the United States to use the "In The Garden" theme was so strong that funeral homes began to develop facilities which used an indoor garden as the back drop where the body would repose.

These chapels were actually solariums with water falls, plants and flowers, and even live birds flying around inside. And as is seen in these funeral home ads of the 40's and 50's the establishments actually utilized the "In The Garden" name.

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Flower Ladies

The importance of flowers in funeral service was probably best exemplified by the creation in Mid Western funeral practices of the role of the Flower Lady.

The flower lady was analogous to the pall bearer role, but instead of carrying the casket this group of women (usually six) would carry the flowers from the place of the funeral to the flower vehicle and then would assist in setting them up at the cemetery.

Flower ladies were chosen with as great of care as the pall bearers were, for they were usually close friends of the family and it was viewed as a distinct honor to be chosen.

The flower lady role eventually subsided as the funeral ritual became less community oriented and people's life styles became more hectic.

The Contemporary Value And Benefit Of Flowers

In order for funeral professionals to be able to better educate families about the benefit of funeral flowers the following seven suggestions are made:

1. Belief

Your own belief in the value and benefit of funeral flowers will be your greatest asset in presenting this information to families.

2. Sentiment

There is a common denominator in sending flowers, in giving to a charity, and in supporting one's church. It is sentiment.

Sentiment is actually a complex organization of ideas, feelings, and instincts which are built up in the course of an individual's experience. Sentiment serves a very vital human need.

It should be realized, too, that mankind's need for sentiment is the basis for the development of many of our funeral traditions. There is a great deal of insight in the remark made by the famous English statesman, Gladstone. He

said, "Show me the manner in which a nation or a community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the law of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals."

2. Significance Of Flowers

Flowers are sent to funerals for several reasons. First, flowers are a means of expression. It is often difficult for those mourning a death to put feelings into words. Flowers are a visual expression of love, sympathy, and respect. They are a means of lending support and sharing the burden of grief.

In addition to sending flowers to the funeral service, there is a growing trend to send flowers to the home of the bereaved after the service. In addition, some people send flowers to the church in memory of the deceased.

Flowers create a background of warmth and beauty which adds to the dignity and consolation of the funeral service. Those who have attended services where there were no flowers have expressed the feeling that something was missing that the funeral was depressing.

3. Freedom Of Expression

Families deserve the right of complete freedom of expression at time of death.

People are not cut from the same spiritual or emotional mold. Therefore, they should be free to express themselves in the manner which best conveys their emotions. Any expression which is the result of dictate, ceases to be an act of the heart.

4. The Tradition

Americans traditionally have expressed their respect for the dead, and sympathy for the bereaved, by sending flowers. This long-standing custom helps people express their innermost feelings.

Funeral flowers are for the living and the dead. They are tokens of respect for the deceased.

5. Atmosphere

Flowers create a background of warmth and beauty adding to the dignity and consolation of the funeral service. Following the service, the bereaved are left with an indelible impression of the funeral. Flowers are a very important item in this lasting impression, for they directly affect the warmth and comfort generated by the “memory picture.”

The more comforting the memory picture, the more easily it is recalled by the bereaved; and the more vivid is the reinforcement of reality and actualization of loss. Flowers do not wither and die in the mind of the bereaved. They are recalled time and again as indelible memories.

6. Flowers Have A Spiritual Significance

They are symbolic not only of love and sympathy, but also of eternity and immortality. Flowers help minister to the bereaved by giving testimony of the love and understanding of fellow human beings. The life of flowers is fleeting. They attest to the transitory life of man. There is profound religious symbolism in the very fact that flowers do not last forever.

7. “Please Omit”

“Please Omit Flowers” and “in lieu of flowers” notices occur from time to time in various publications. These requests generally originate with the family, who have been influenced by well-meaning friends or organizations.

There are many implications in such a request. The obituary is actually an announcement of the death and an invitation to friends to attend the funeral. It is not considered good taste to openly anticipate a gift and accompany an invitation with a dictatorial statement that only certain kinds of remembrances are acceptable.

A “PO” or “in lieu of” request causes embarrassment to friends. Some ignore the request and send flowers, causing embarrassment to those who heeded the request.

Many people resent being told how to express their sympathy. They like to decide for themselves whether to send flowers, make a donation, send a card,

or extend a helping hand. There is a place for both flowers and charity in our modern day world, and it is important that we place each in its proper perspective.

CONCLUSION

The funeral meets the bereaved's need for support. Death throws people into despair and depression by separating them from one who has provided love, companionship, and security. The funeral and our funeral customs provide the means by which those close to him can give their support and share his suffering.

The funeral period provides for the expression of sorrow. Only through talking out the past can the bereaved person realize the extent of the relationship with the deceased and accept the loss and suffering. Only through weeping and talking to good listeners can they release their grief and their feelings of guilt and hostility. Experts in grief therapy believe that grief can be expressed best through rites, rituals and ceremonies. The ceremony deals primarily with intellectual concepts and doesn't fully engage the bereaved's feelings in the patterns of community support which are psychologically beneficial. Flowers though express the inexpressable - they are symbolic.

People have traditionally expressed their respect for the dead and sympathy for the bereaved by sending flowers. This custom is one of longstanding and it has served people as a means through which they can express their feelings.

There are three points to be stressed finally in connection with the tradition of funeral flowers. First, the role of flowers are both symbolic and aesthetic. They add great value to the richness and meaning of the ritual.

Second, flowers represent sympathy extended to the bereaved.

Third, flowers are sent both to the living and to the dead. Flowers are sent to the living as comfort and they are sent as tokens of respect for the deceased.