

Flowers and Personalization: They Go Together Like a Hand in Glove

By Kim Stacey

Many funeral directors and those on the periphery of the industry claim that the personalization trend is the brainchild of the 'baby boomer' generation. Considering that includes me, at 54, I have to say this: we *do* want things our own way. We want to live our lives in our own way – normally a way significantly different from those of our parents – and we want our deaths to be equally as individual.

It's common to read news stories about unique "send-off" ceremonies: the ashes of [Hunter Thompson being shot from a cannon](#) being just one example. The rise of [Star Trek funeral products](#) and the proliferation of personalization products and services available through funeral homes are just two hallmarks of a social trend which is taking hold around the country.

What Defines Personalization?



When you consider the 'traditional' funeral: you most likely imagine a standardized ritual (often religious) service where friends and family gather together to honor the life of a loved one, and mourn their passing; and then an interment in a burial ground. The church or funeral home chapel is seen, in the mind's eye, full of floral tributes which look something like the one to the right, and below.



While the flowers themselves are beautiful, and no doubt fragrant, the arrangements "say" nothing about the deceased. Despite that fact, their calming presence for the guests would be profound.





Each truly *is* lovely in its own right (I especially love the casket spray); however none can be considered “personal” or “unique.” Chances are the funeral in the church down the way has similar tribute flowers surrounding the casket.

A personalized funeral service, commonly referred to these days as a *celebration of life*, would not be standard, would not be commonplace. The ritual would be less formal, and you could go so far as to say the ritual has become less important than the person it is being held for – the deceased has, in a sense, become the star of the show.

In the past there would be a “memory board” of photographs prominently displayed. Recently the “tribute video” has become a staple of personalized services: a video compilation of family photos set to music, shown as a back drop to the event. Theme based print keepsakes, such as bookmarks, or memorial folders can now be personalized with photos of the deceased. The themes express their hobbies or personal interests – and many times the theme of the print materials is coordinated to the theme of the video tribute. But, where do the flowers ‘of old,’ those traditional floral tributes seen so clearly in the mind’s eye, fit into this more personal celebration?

The Timeless Importance of Flowers

Without doubt, the arrangement and placement of flowers around the dead is humankind’s oldest tribute, the oldest form of memorialization; the oldest act of mourning. We can go back 62,000 years, to a cave burial in Northern Iraq, where we’ll find that a body was carefully placed on a bed of branches, leaves and flowers. You can turn to the entombment of the “boy king” Tutankhamen in Egypt, where his sarcophagus was festooned with floral tributes. And, much more recently, what do we commonly see at roadside memorials, or the spontaneous memorials created after public tragedies? Flowers. Consider this roadside tribute.



Experts have found that flowers play a significant role in the grieving process. Candince Shoemaker and Diane Relf in their 1990 study, [*The Role of Flowers and Plants in the Bereavement Process*](#)ⁱ, substantiated the value of flowers and plants during this experience in people's lives. Shoemaker and Relf found more

than half of the bereaved surveyed strongly agreed that flowers were a critical component of the funeral ritual that helped them deal with their grief. The study further demonstrated that because of their soothing qualities, sympathy flowers displayed at funerals actually had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of the bereaved.

But despite their findings, and despite the fact that studies tell us that flowers make the process more manageable and inject some degree of pleasure, the presence of flowers at and around funerals is actually diminishing. The trend to request memorial donations to charitable institutions may lessen the burden on funeral directors, but it does little to mitigate the grief of those left behind when death occurs.

Clay Atchison, owner of [McAdams Floral](http://McAdamsFloral.com) in Victoria, Texas and webmaster for www.inlieuofflowers.info, offers his wisdom gained from extensive experience. “We know that flowers provide a voice for the many people who have difficulty finding the right words of consolation and support during a time of tragedy. Flowers are a tangible means of showing concern, affection and sympathy for the bereaved.”

At the funeral service, flowers also help brighten a somber environment and provide a topic of conversation and a tranquil focal point. “After the funeral service, flower arrangements brighten the home and comfort the family, while flowering and foliage plants can serve as a living memorial to the deceased,” Atchison added.

Bringing Personalization and Floral Tributes Together

How can we take the best of the traditional, and blend it with the new? Let’s face it, with a 62,000 year-old history of floral tributes upon the death of a community member, the tradition we’re trying to re-invent, is a long-standing one – which tells us that it’s of value, and worth retaining in some form.

We no longer need to have the same types of floral tributes as our parents and grandparents. We are the boomer generation – and we can do it ‘our way,’ with style. Consider the beauty of this eye-catching floral frame (right).

The sunny yellow of the Button daisies, carnations and roses, combined with the overall elegance of the frame perfectly suit the vintage photograph of the man being honored. It speaks to a central character of order and organization; yet also addresses the abundance of life itself, in the cascading leaves and flowers. It’s a truly appropriate floral tribute to a man who lived a rich, full life.



If you are considering such a *personal* floral tribute, but are having hard time thinking about the character of the deceased in terms of flowers – have no fear; you can turn from their character, to their hobbies and interests. Just look at some of these innovative ways to acknowledge someone’s passions:



Figure 1: Tribute to an Avid Soccer Player

Florists have found unique ways to weave personality of person and flower together, capturing the vibrancy of both in color, texture, and form. Consider this floral tribute to an avid racing fan – it captures the excitement felt on race day, doesn’t it?



While it’s hard for me to think about losing my sons or anyone in their circle of friends, I think this floral tribute to a skateboarder would bring smiles to those in attendance at the celebration for their life. It retains a sense of

playfulness so much a part of a young person’s spirit – or even those adults I see frequenting the local skate park! The board ‘rides’ on a colorful bed of flowers, which to me speaks of the rider’s buoyancy and delight while pursuing this personal passion.



Figure 2: Race Car and Checkered Flag

Many of the mothers and grandmothers I know enjoy scrapbooking. Now, I've got to tell you; it's not for me: there's just too much work involved. I'm one of those people who toss photos and keepsakes in boxes and drawers – always hoping I'll find the time and inclination to gather them together in an album, or in this case, a scrapbook.

For those who are inclined to this hobby – and I know there are a lot of them, because of all the scrapbooking Web sites around the Internet – a floral tribute like this next one would surely please and comfort those who were in attendance. If you really want to take a playful stance, you could also see it as pleasing to the spirit of the deceased.



Figure 4: Scrapbook and Captured Memories



No matter who you are, no matter what age upon death, there are personal traits and activities you could tap into for one-of-a-kind floral tributes. My heart is warmed by the artist's tribute arrangement, and I know many artists who would consider it worthy of an oil or water color study. And what can you say about the sailor's tribute arrangement, except that it's beautiful?

Slide 5: The Artist's Palette



For those who love tennis, there's this stunning casket spray, incorporating their beloved tennis racket – the singular tool that brought them so many victories on Saturday or Sunday afternoons.



Figure 7: Tennis, Anyone?

Through personalized tributes, you can feel a greater sense of closeness to your loved one, instead of holding a traditional, cookie-cutter funeral. A personalized memorial gives you the freedom to talk about the life of the person you've lost.

While your funeral professional will have many ideas to help you personalize the memorial or funeral service, there are things you can think about before sitting down with them to discuss available options.

Consider the Unique Life of Your Loved One

As you think about personalization, turn your thoughts to your memories of the person who died. Think about his or her qualities, and what they meant to others. Consider their passions, hobbies, pastimes, likes and dislikes. Sometimes it's best to do this with family and friends; grief can be overwhelming for many, and cloud your thinking.

Make a list of the following:

- Personal characteristics or passions
- Special memories to share
- Any personal or professional achievements
- Keepsake items which reflect their interests or commitments

Personalizing the Ceremony

It's time to incorporate those into the funeral plan. Be creative as you, together with your family, friends, funeral director and the person who will lead the service, brainstorm how to remember and honor this special person.

A good way to personalize the funeral is to personalize the common elements of funeral ceremonies. These can include:

- A visitation
- Eulogy
- Music
- Selected readings
- The procession from chapel to cemetery
- The graveside service
- A reception

Each of these elements can be personalized in many ways. If you're having a visitation, for example, you could set up a display of photos, memorabilia, collections or artwork. You could do the same at the gathering following the ceremony. Choose music that was meaningful to the person who died or to your family. Select poetry and other readings that speak to the life of this unique person. Ask the people who were closest to the person who died to participate by playing music, giving readings; being pallbearers, making food for the gathering—whatever suits their own unique talents.

The Eulogy – Using the Power of Words to Enlighten and Comfort

When personalized, the *eulogy* is perhaps the most memorable and healing element of the funeral ceremony. Sometimes called the *remembrance*, the eulogy is the speech during the funeral ceremony which speaks of the life and character of the person who died. Basically, the eulogy acknowledges the unique life of the person who died and affirms the significance of that life for all who shared in it.

The eulogy can be delivered by a clergyperson, a family member or a friend of the person who died. Instead of a traditional eulogy delivered by one person, you may choose to ask several people to speak and share their memories. There is also a growing trend toward having people attending the funeral stand up and share a memory of the person who died.

More Ideas to Personalize the Funeral or Memorial Service

In addition to having your florist create uniquely personal floral tribute bouquets, the funeral service itself should be as special as the life you will be remembering. Here are a few more ideas:

- Create a column in the guest book for people to jot down a memory after they sign their name.
- Display personal items or hobby paraphernalia on a table at the visitation, the ceremony and/or the gathering afterwards. It could be fun to have people bring in any photos they have of the deceased, to create a sharing table. These photos could later be compiled into an [online obituary](#) album.

- Ask several people to share memories and talk about different aspects of the person who died.
- Choose clothing for the person who died that reflects his or her life, interests, and passions. The clothing needn't be formal or somber. If I were in the casket, I would be fitted with my reading glasses, and have an open book (I'm not sure which one yet, as there are so many!) on my chest.
- Create a personalized printed program for the ceremony. You can include photos, poems, and anecdotes. Your funeral director can help you with this.
- Ask children if they would like to write a letter or draw a picture for the person who died. Their "goodbyes" can then be placed in the casket alongside the body.
- Select flowers that were meaningful to the person who died, and incorporate them into a personalized floral tribute. For me, roses and star gazer lilies would be appropriate; for my father – an arrangement of snapdragons and tulips would be fitting. Think back to comments made by the deceased, or ask their friends, "What flowers did he mention as being beautiful?"
- At the funeral, invite people to write down a memory of the person who died. Appoint someone to gather and read the memories aloud.
- Create a funeral that captures the personality of the person who died. If he loved to laugh, don't be afraid to use humor. If she was loving and affectionate, why not have everyone hug the person next to them during the ceremony?
- Display photos of the person who died at the visitation, the ceremony and/or the gathering. Today, the video tribute is becoming common, but as it's done by the funeral home staff, it takes away from the cathartic value to family and friends. One of the most moving memorials I've attending was for a long-time member of a local biker club, the [Ghost Mountain Riders](#). Hundreds of riders from the surrounding counties attended, and it seemed everyone had photos to share from the dozens of 'rides' taken with the deceased. The memories stirred by these images brought laughter and story-telling that went on into the wee hours of the next morning.
- Use music throughout the ceremonies; at the visitation, the committal, the reception, and the funeral or memorial service itself. Mix it up: include whatever the deceased loved. My sons already know what I want: [Naïve Melody](#), by the Talking Heads. Over and over – all the versions, one after another; it speaks to me on a very deep level. For my mother, I would have chosen [Please Release Me](#), by Engelbert Humperdinck. I have clear memories of her connected to this song; for better, or worse, it's my mother.
- If appropriate, create a personalized grave marker. Include a poem, a drawing or a short phrase that defines the person who died. One of my personal favorites can be found in [Mountain View](#) cemetery in Oakland, California. It's a simple brass plate: name, relevant dates of birth and death, and two words: *World Traveler*. The images those two words conjure are so descriptive of the woman who rests beneath: exotic destinations, delicious foods, and a multitude of memories gathered in a lifetime of journeys.

Let the Remembering – and the Loving – Continue!

When the service is over, and the guests are leaving, there is often a palpable sense of reluctance. People often don't want to leave, because they feel they are leaving the loved one behind – it becomes a tangible act of letting go, when many are (as yet) unwilling to do so. To ease their heartache, I think it kind to send a token along with them; it doesn't have to be anything large, or consequential.

Provide guests with small gifts:

- If the deceased loved to cook, provide guests with a stack of their favorite recipes
- If your loved one was a photographer, provide guests with a favorite photographic print
- If gardening was a passion, why not provide guests with a packet of flower seeds so they can plant them in their own garden in memory of your loved one
- If nature called to them, ask your guests to release doves, butterflies, or other wildlife in their memory – planting trees, is also an option to honor the nature lover in your life
- If ice-cream brought them joy, plan an old-time ice cream social for after the service
- If volunteering was their passion, provide guests with the information of the places where the deceased volunteered, at and ask them to continue doing their work
- Provide postcards that are addressed (to family, for example) and stamped, then, ask guests to take a few home with them and when they think of a special memory, they can write it down on the postcard and mail it. That way, special memories and stories can always be shared with the family

I'll be honest with you in telling this little story. I lost a dear friend almost two years ago. He opted for direct cremation, and the gathering in his honor was very informal. I assisted his wife in putting some of his ashes in small jewelry boxes – with gold adhesive enclosures – and each guest received a box. The intention was that they find the perfect place –for them – to scatter his ashes; in a private ceremony of their own devising. Where are mine? In the top drawer of my dresser; I guess I'm not yet ready to completely let go. But when I do, the ceremony will be personal, and private. That's quite a gift, but one that you'll be unwilling, or unable, to give your guests.

Final Thoughts

A well-planned, inclusive, personalized funeral will touch the family, the friends of the person who died quite deeply. Instead of being an empty ritual, the personalized funeral or memorial helps you begin the healing process. And having unique, personalized floral tributes throughout the services or delivered in the days following the death of a loved one, can bring great comfort and a quiet joy. Much more so than only making a charitable contribution made in honor of the deceased.

For more information on the importance of flowers in bereavement, visit www.inlieuofflowers.info .

Photos credited to the *John Henry Company*.

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ⁱ Shoemaker, C.A. and P.D. Relf. 1990. The Role of Flowers and Plants in the Bereavement Process. Final Report. Department of Horticulture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

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