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# The Last Laugh

*At Funerals, Families Add Humor, Foibles to the Eulogy; Memories of 'Banana Head'*

By [KATHERINE ROSMAN](#)

Joseph McNeely Sr. recently stood before a gathering of 50 people—women in church hats, men with pocket squares—and described his father, Hubert Sr. "Daddy loved the ladies," he said. The crowd broke into laughter.

Hubert had died at the age of 90 days earlier. It was his funeral.

A funeral is a solemn rite of passage, and since the days of ancient civilization, the eulogy has been a speech of good words for the dead.

That's changing, say funeral directors, clergy and theologians. Even amid tragedy, today's eulogy increasingly includes anecdotes that point to the deceased's foibles and quirks, offering a nuanced character sketch. "More often, people are saying, 'Let's be realistic about this person,'" says Hari P. Close, a funeral director who worked with the

The eulogy has been undergoing a transformation. Kelsey Hubbard talks with Katherine Rosman about how many families are turning to humor and an honest account of the deceased's life rather than strike a more traditional, religious tone.

McNeely family.

At the funeral, the younger Mr. McNeely praised his father as the doting dad of nine children. He raised six of them as a single parent in Washington D.C., he told the gathering. But that fact didn't fully capture Hubert. "He couldn't move his hands well at the end but if a pretty lady got close enough, he'd grab her," Mr. McNeely said in an interview.



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Daniel Shea for The Wall Street Journal

Nancy, at piano at home with husband Avi Bernstein, spoke of her mom's wit at the funeral: "She said, 'Everyone come sit on the table and we'll play a game.' My daughter said, 'But Grandma, mom doesn't let us sit on the table' to which she replied 'your mom isn't here!'"

Just as more weddings are officiated by friends and relatives, mourners increasingly are turning to friends and family to speak at funerals. People are also less likely than ever to have personal relationships with members of the clergy. A rabbi or minister might welcome the mourners and give a eulogy that puts an individual's death into the context of broader religious canon. The clergy may also discuss the official resumé of the deceased, naming family members and schooling, and then turn to family or friends to speak.

Josh Woods delivered one of the eulogies at the funeral of his best friend Joshua

Sweitzer, who died of colorectal cancer last December at the age of 39. Mr. Woods spoke of the bravery with which Mr. Sweitzer faced the disease as well as his adoration of his wife and two young daughters.



Carole Caplan Lonner, with daughters Nancy, left, and Jane, right. At her mother's funeral, Jane said, "A few months ago we were at a funeral together, and the son was delivering a very long eulogy. At which point my mom gave me a big nudge, held up three fingers and whispered 'Three minutes. That's it for you.'"

makes it inappropriate for the secular or non-ordained to speak from the lectern so they may address the gathering from elsewhere.

And moments of levity can shock, and even offend. If potential speakers wonder if a story is too honest or revealing for a eulogy, it is, funeral directors advise.

Some clergy say eulogies laced with humor can come at the expense of the religious significance of funeral services which traditionally weren't focused on individual loss but community piety. For example, the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer is an ode to God that never mentions someone has died. The funeral liturgy in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer didn't include a mention of the deceased's name until modern editions.



Hubert McNeely Sr. died last month at 90. His family spoke of his dedication and impish charms. "Daddy loved the ladies," said his son, Joseph McNeely Sr.

about moving on after the death of a spouse.

At her funeral, her two daughters and their husbands quoted her one-liners. Her son-in-law Avi Bernstein lampooned the tenuous nature of a mother-son-in-law relationship, telling mourners, "After Carole was diagnosed with cancer she said, 'This must be bad, even Avi is being nice to me.' "

A few weeks after the service, the funeral director forwarded to her daughter, Nancy Bernstein, an email from an acquaintance who didn't approve of the show tunes or the humor in

He also told how Mr. Sweitzer loved parties and going to the Kentucky Derby and had discouraged Mr. Woods from going on a date with the woman he eventually married. "He told me not to waste my time," Mr. Woods said, to the laughter of the hundreds of mourners who filled Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago.

"A rabbi's eulogy tells what someone was. I wanted my eulogy to tell who he was," Mr. Woods says.

Some funerals can get unwieldy and long with the rush of family to the podium. Also, the etiquette in some houses of worship

Today's funerals are shielding mourners from facing the sorrow of death, says theologian Thomas Long. "A good funeral is now marked by the level of laughter," he says, adding that non-clergy officiants are becoming "emcees."

Before she died in January at 74, Carole Caplan Lonner planned a funeral to reflect her work as a playwright, her love of family, and her sense of humor. She asked two friends to perform songs from her musical, "The Kids Left, the Dog Died, Now What?" and she selected one upbeat song and one

For some mourners, the solemnity of a traditional funeral doesn't soothe. Rose Davis can't remember much about the funeral for her mother, Rose Weissinger, who died in 1997 at 53 of colon cancer but that it was "devastating and horrible," she says. Once time had given Ms. Davis some perspective, she decided that the heaviness of the service wasn't a fitting send-off for her mother. So she planned a memorial service on the fifth anniversary of her mother's death in 2002.



Dena Sweitzer with her late husband Joshua Sweitzer, center, and his friend Josh Woods. "We went to countless shows together—big arenas, tiny clubs, road trips—even busting out of Yom Kippur break-fast, much to the chagrin of some of my family, to make it to a Pearl Jam show," said Danny Lambert, at his brother-in-law Joshua Sweitzer's funeral.

The main eulogy was delivered by Charlotte Eulette, the international director of the Celebrant Foundation & Institute, a New Jersey-based company that trains lay-people to lead funeral services and write personable eulogies. The Institute is part of a do-it-yourself cottage industry which includes online eulogy-writing services. Ms. Eulette says the year-long course instructs celebrants about the rituals of different cultures and how to interview families to write eulogies. "Getting the quirky things is important," Ms. Eulette says.

The memorial service program was titled, "Where is my coffee, Banana head?" "My mom called everyone 'Banana head.'

Everyone. But that never came up at her actual funeral," Ms. Davis says.

When Lauren Winner, an assistant professor at Duke University's divinity school, served as a lay member of a ritual committee at a Charlottesville, Va., Episcopal church, the priest said he wanted to prohibit non-clergy eulogies. Funerals were getting long with so many eulogies, he said. Ms. Winner told him that had her family not been permitted to speak when her mother died, it would have alienated some of the family from the church, Ms. Winner says. The priest saw her point and backed down.

When her Jewish grandmother died, Ms. Winner told stories about Grandma appearing at the age of 39 in "Death of a Salesman" dressed in a negligee. Years later, Ms. Winner was in college and Grandma called to say she was lying awake at night worrying that Ms. Winner wasn't dressing age appropriately, Ms. Winner told the mourners. After the service, the rabbi told Ms. Winner her eulogy reminded her of a David Sedaris essay.

"It was the highest compliment," Ms. Winner says.

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