
CRAFTING
MEANINGFUL
FUNERAL
RITUALS
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
Foreword by
Margaret Holloway

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by the same author

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A Practical Guide
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ISBN 978 1 78592 390 6
eISBN 978 1 78450 743 5

Crafting Secular Ritual
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Foreword by Isabel Russo
ISBN 978 1 78592 088 2
eISBN 978 1 78450 350 5

Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies
A Transdisciplinary Conversation
Edited by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
ISBN 978 1 78592 083 7
eISBN 978 1 78450 344 4

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Jessica Kingsley *Publishers*
London and Philadelphia

Unless identified with a particular historical figure, the stories and narratives in this book are fiction based on fact. The situations described and the characters portrayed are composites. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

First published in 2020
by Jessica Kingsley Publishers 73 Collier Street
London N1 9BE, UK and
400 Market Street, Suite 400 Philadelphia, PA 19106, USA

www.jkp.com

Front cover image source: Sophie Standing

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78592 389 0
eISBN 978 1 78450 746 6

Printed and bound in Great Britain

In memory of Michael Picucci, PhD
psychologist, Somatic Experiencing practitioner (SEP)
and pioneer in humanistic ritual as resource

Oh how wrong you are
to think that the years
will never end.
We must die.

Life is a dream,
that seems so sweet,
but joy is all too brief.
We must die.

Of no avail is medicine,
of no use is quinine,
we cannot be cured.
We must die…

We die singing,
we die playing the cittern,
the bagpipes, yet die we must.
We die dancing, drinking, eating;
with this carrion, die we must…

(Anonymous lyrics of seventeenth-century
music known as *Passacaglia della vita*)

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FOREWORD

Funerals go back a long way. Evidence of the living burying the dead exists from pre-historic times, accompanied by ever more elaborate associated practices. Central to these was, and is, the funeral. We discover a curious conundrum when we study funerals and memorials over time and across civilisations: the present frequently mirrors the forms and practices of the past yet significant cultural shifts can also be observed at particular points in history (Inall and Lillie 2018). One such shift began in the developed world in the second half of the twentieth century. In Britain, for example, mourners began to express dissatisfaction with the traditional religious funeral, alienated by pronouncements and rites which they found meaningless and a ceremony which provided neither comfort nor a reflection of the person who had gone (Littlewood 1992). In 1980, Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, set out the purposes of a secular funeral to the UK Cremation Society Conference, including the requirement that it should provide the opportunity for ceremonial and ritual 'leave-taking' of the lost loved one.

Decades later, very few families and friends choose to conduct the funeral themselves (in the way Smoker had envisaged) and a leading UK journalist expressed dissatisfaction with the celebration-of-the-life funerals that have become the twenty-first century norm, describing traditional rituals as, 'infinitely more cathartic' (Coward 2002). The reason for this unease, we discover, is that bereaved families and friends may need help to translate their deepest feelings into words and actions that meet those needs (Holloway *et al*. 2013). It is this void that ritual practitioners, like Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, seek to address.

The notion of the life-centred funeral, in which the funeral address (if there is one) takes the form of a eulogy, is now firmly established in secular culture and has largely replaced theological content in funerals taken by a Christian religious minister. Personalised, customised funerals, with funeral directors keen to facilitate choice and celebrants of all

persuasions committed to providing the funeral that the families want in content, style and tone, presenting the person who has died through the recollections of those who mourn them, may seem exactly what contemporary society requires.

What is missing from that description of the modern funeral, however, is precisely the reason why funerals developed and have continued over time and across cultures. It is not remembering *the life lived* with which we struggle, but confrontation with the harsh realities of death. Rite, ritual and ceremony are the tools that human beings have always relied upon to negotiate this difficult terrain, but where religion and social status once provided the framework, participants in the modern funeral must find this, at least in part, for themselves.

Meaning in the face of death is sought, created and taken (Holloway *et al*. 2013) in a creative and dynamic process in which symbols and rituals allow personal meanings to be experienced in a shared public and social act. Traditional sources of comfort may be drawn upon but imbued with contemporary touches – a more diffuse spirituality, including for the holder of religious beliefs; community support received from distant friends of the deceased or sometimes, 'stranger mourners' through social media (Holloway *et al*. 2018). In cultures that favour individualism over community, it is telling that we cannot countenance a funeral without mourners; funeral directors and crematorium staff 'stand in' to obviate such an occurrence. In a recently reported story, thirty people attended the funeral in Orangetown, New York of an older woman, for them a complete stranger, after a young girl found out that nobody was going to attend the funeral and rallied support on Facebook (Warren 2016).

This complexity of emotion, beliefs and context runs through *Crafting Meaningful Funeral Rituals*. Jeltje Gordon-Lennox presents her book as a practical guide for 'amateur ritual makers' – ordinary people who find their day-to-day lives disrupted by the extraordinariness (as it appears for many of us today) of death and do not have the familiarity with ritual to draw on its resources; she also suggests that it might serve as an 'aide-memoire' for professional celebrants. Although incorporating practical exercises and taking the reader through the steps and task associated

with arranging and creating a funeral, this is not simply a 'how-to-do' manual, however.

Gordon-Lennox embeds discussion of each step in the attendant emotions and interpersonal dynamics, weaving together real-life stories from her practice into a funerals narrative that facilitates each reader understanding and creating their own story – their personal 'ritual profile'. This notion is made up of both 'ritual identity' – the individual's identification with particular forms of ritual – and 'ritual practice' – the style of ritual with which the person feels most comfortable. Repeatedly, she asks that we question the purpose of a particular act or use of symbol so that we can tailor it to our own needs. She assures us that a life-centred funeral enables those bereaved to put the life and loss into perspective, whatever the circumstances of the death. Ritual is therapeutic, but it is not therapy.

The funeral is presented by Gordon-Lennox as the opportunity to lay down those practices that will serve the bereaved through the ongoing process of grief. Memorialisation is discussed as the 'life after death' – whether that is understood in secular, humanist or religious terms. This is an important addition to the funerals literature that leaves us with the final disposal of the body – the period straight after the funeral long recognised in bereavement research as a lonely and difficult time (e.g. Parkes 1996). Study of memorialisation indicates that meaning-making lies at its heart and has always done so. We draw on tradition and past practice, but in the twenty-first century we are seeing a move away from the taking of meaning from handed-down beliefs and practices to the creation of personally customised meanings (Holloway *et al*. 2019). This is what *Crafting Meaningful Funeral Rituals* is all about.

Margaret Holloway
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Write. Leave behind some kind of monument to prove you lived, advised Pliny the Younger (ca. 62–105 CE). Many people contributed directly or indirectly to the writing of this book, including Pliny, whose lucid outlook on life and practical advice to writers appears fresh even today. Although he did not have a publishing team behind him, like me he relied on others to get his texts in shape.

First off, I want to express my gratitude to Natalie K. Watson. Her enthusiastic support lead to the publication of three practical guides on creating secular ritual. The team at Jessica Kingsley Publishers admirably rose to the challenge of making my approach to ritual accessible. After the publication of *Crafting Secular Ritual: A Practical Guide* (2017), which covers six life events or occasions, it was decided that the two main life events in Western societies, weddings and funerals, needed in-depth treatment. *Crafting Meaningful Wedding Rituals: A Practical Guide* came out earlier this year.

Many thanks to the team at JKP for seeing me through yet another book: team leader Emily Badger kept everyone on track, production editor Hannah Snetsinger's amazing patience and organizational abilities always impress me, Helen Kemp's eagle eye took care of copy detail, Alexandra Holmes for her help with proofreading and publicity executive Lily Bowden was always there with expert advice. Their close attention to the myriad of details are what turn a manuscript into a book.

Kyle Tevlin, Liselotte Horneman Kragh, Siobhán Cahalan, Anne Berk, Marty Rienstra, Liana Netto, Irene Stengs, Ellen Dissanayake and Matthieu Smyth deserve credit for wading through parts of early versions of the manuscript, as does Sharon Miller who tightened up the questionnaires on ritual profiles. Their pertinent questions and suggestions helped me reflect on my approach and unpack some of my denser ideas.

I would like to express my gratitude to to Albert Bell Jr. for his writings on Pliny and to Margaret Holloway for her visionary work on contemporary funerals and memorials. I am grateful for the support of my colleagues of the European Ritual Network (ERN): Nina Faartoft, Isabel Russo, Tale Pleym, Ida van der Lee, Thomas Wegmüller, Johanna Neussi and Joanna Wojtkowiak. Special thanks goes to Ida for creating public ritual art and to Iben From at the Silkeborg Bad KunstCentret for accommodation. Heartfelt thanks to curator Anne Berk and to my sister Anastasia Aukeman for their artistic vision and their support of me and my work.

Love and thanks to my children, Sushila and Jefferson, for distracting me regularly with their jokes and stories. Above all, I acknowledge Ian's immeasurable contributions to my life, among which is a penchant for detective novels set in unusual times and places such as ancient Rome and modern-day Denmark. This year marks 30 years of mutual support in the pursuit of our respective artistic projects.

PREFACE

No one really wants to have to go to a funeral – much less prepare one. Funerals make us think about the end of life, the death of others and our own mortality. Each one of us has a deeply human story of love and hope, of encounters and disappearances, of life and death. Life has a beginning, a middle and an end. Death represents that inconceivable final chapter. Funerals can help us come to terms, not with death per se, but with the fact that death is part of life. When all is said and done, funerals reflect first of all our relationships to the dead and then the place we give them in society.

TRANSFORMING OUR TIES TO THE DEAD

We like to think of funerals as initiating a process of transformation that allows the bereaved to loosen their ties to the deceased and then, as best they can, reweave the fabric of their daily lives around an irreplaceable loss. Whether and how this happens depends who dies, how they die and on what is now referred to as the 'funeralcare' process.

Twenty years ago, a family called on me to do a conventional religious ceremony for their 96-year-old matriarch. During our first meeting, I learned that the woman had turned her back on organized religion at age 16 – and never looked back. When I asked the family if they thought a religious ceremony was appropriate, her grandson blurted: 'We have to do something! She wasn't a dog!' I reassured them that I would do the funeral but insisted they work with me on a ceremony respectful of the choices the woman had made 80 years beforehand and the values by which she lived.

A conversation with a Buddhist priest revealed that he increasingly finds himself in a similar predicament. People who want to do something but feel estranged from their religion of origin – usually Christianity,

Judaism or Islam – ask him to perform a Buddhist funeral for a non-practising friend or family member. They often want him to preside a 'copy–paste' ceremony composed of a eulogy for the deceased and 'sanitised Buddhist-like texts and rituals' gleaned from the internet.

[AQ]Figure 0.1. Family gravestone
Located in Boxgrove Priory Churchyard, Boxgrove, West Sussex, United Kingdom.

In the face of uncertainty, threat and death, human beings feel compelled to do something, usually with or for others, to alleviate their anxiety, fear and sense of powerlessness. This irresistible need to act or carry out a series of actions – even acts radically opposed to the deceased's life and convictions – drew my attention to the number of times I was being asked to perform 'a nice ceremony' (and, sotto voce) 'with no references to god or religion, please'. It also made me keenly aware of how untenable the situation felt to us all.

CONFUSION ABOUT RITUAL PROFILE

Many people are confused about what I came to label their 'ritual profile'. This uncertainty leads to muddled 'ritual strategy'. Asking a religious leader for a non-religious funeral makes about as much sense as going to a vegan shopkeeper for eggs or meat. Rather than bemoan the fact that people knock at the wrong door for non-religious ceremonies, I began searching for suitable alternatives. In the process, I became aware that my own ritual profile had changed. Ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell's description of what happened to her resembles my experience:

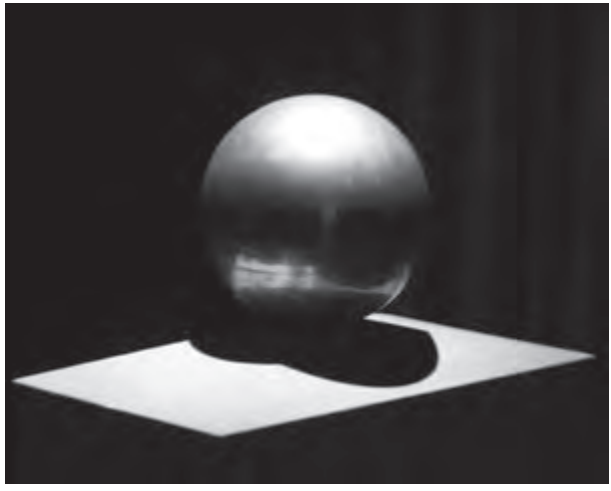
> Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to 'explain' my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to assemble a fuller picture of what had happened and explore whether what was true for me might be useful for understanding others. (C. Bell n.d.)

As a ritual studies scholar, Bell wanted to know what had happened. As a practitioner, I needed to know what comes next.[1] Taking god from the heart of a funeral ceremony felt like a brash, radical and unmapped move. In fact, many scholars still hold that secular ceremonies are devoid of ritual. Convinced that the formerly religious can celebrate their life events meaningfully, I searched for new forms, words and gestures; I even asked myself what one should wear to preside such a ceremony. Journalists soon challenged me with their own questions: Do life event ceremonies performed outside of a religious context count? If so, can they have the power of religious rites? What do these ceremonies look like? What about a wake in a bar or dancing on the beach?

In my efforts to accompany people as they strove to meet their need

1 Batja Mesquita's work on a concept she calls *emotion acculturation* is useful for understanding how one set of thoughts and emotions can be replaced by another set. Experiencing emotions normative to one's subculture is associated with higher wellbeing and lower symptom reporting (Mesquita, Boiger and De Leersnyder 2016).

for ceremony without god and religion I learned what it is that makes secular rituals different. Putting the person who has died at the heart of the ceremony profoundly shifts its focus and purpose. A ceremony that is respectfully centred on the deceased's life, values and relationships can be deeply personal, connect people to each other, remind us of the natural rhythms of life and even mitigate trauma. For this to happen, the setting must feel safe and the ceremony must be planned, created and realized by those who knew the person well. This knowledge unexpectedly led me to develop a creative way to craft new non-religious rituals.



[AQ]Figure 0.2. Inventor Nikola Tesla's funerary urn
This gilded urn with Tesla's ashes is shaped as a sphere, his favourite geometrical object. It is located in the Nikola Tesla Museum in Belgrade, Serbia.

There are many books about how to die a good death and just as many about how to face illness and mourn (see *Resources*). The aim of this book is to provide a simple hands-on guide to creating secular funeral rituals that honour our ties with the dead. Each chapter opens with a short story and then examines an aspect of a new approach to the practice of art-filled ritual.

If you are pressed for time and eager to begin crafting a funeral ceremony, feel free to skim through Part I, which covers our own mortality and the loss of a loved one. Humans have always understood about death and loss, grief and consolation. By stepping into the past to look at Pliny's views on mortality and his experience of death in first-century Rome, we take a bit of distance from our own fears and anxiety. We see too that a secular approach to ritual is far from new. Part II provides an updated view of contemporary ritual and includes tools essential to the crafting process, such as destressing techniques designed to meet our need to feel safe, notes on how to write up our last wishes and two practical tools on ritual profile and strategy.

Once you determine your own ritual profile and strategy you are ready to move on to Part III, the heart of the guide, where ritual design and materials are discussed. Specially developed tools help determine who or what is at the centre of the funeral, the values to convey through the ceremony and how to transmit them simply and authentically. A checklist keeps you on course and frees you up to fully experience the entire process.

Part IV closes with descriptions of three public memorialization events and reflections on the future of our relationship with the dead. Funeral terminology that may be foreign to many of us appears in a glossary. A short resource section with books, booklets and informative website links is completed with notes on dying and bereavement.

In short, this versatile guide provides the essentials you need to plan, create and realize a funeral that is adapted to your specific situation and context. Those who want recipes for ready-made ceremonies must look elsewhere. 'Ritual is work, endless work. But, it is among the most important things that we humans do' (Seligman *et al.* 2008, p.182).

Note: This guide is designed for amateur ritualmakers, who need to craft a secular ceremony to mark a death. The tools presented here have been forged, tested and tempered with individuals, families and professional funeral celebrants of diverse cultural backgrounds and language groups.

Although it was not originally my intention, I was delighted to learn that the guides also serve institutions in the renewal of traditional religious rites. I may no longer practise formal religion but I admire vital spirituality in all its forms and have great respect for those with devout practice.

The book may serve as an aide-mémoire for professional celebrants, but it is not a substitute for celebrant training. If you are searching for a training course, select one that offers personal attention from a skilled instructor, a mentoring system and the stimulation and support of peers. Online instruction is popular now and useful for studying facts. Learning about ritual accompaniment, how to deal with complex situations and preside at real funeral ceremonies requires face-to-face interaction – just like ritualizing.