

Sample Funeral Service

Opening Words and Introduction

Good afternoon and welcome to you all. We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of NAME and honour his/her memory. My name is Cathy Oliver, and I conduct this service as a representative of the Ontario Humanist Society. Humanism is a non-religious, ethical life-stance based on reason and compassion; humanists work toward a more humane and responsible world and are committed to making the most of their one life on this earth. We will reflect today on the ways that NAME lived by those principles and touched each of our lives; we will share memories of him/her and we will be reminded that, although it is his/her death that has brought us together today, it is his/her life that we celebrate. With that in mind, our time together today will allow us to share happy thoughts as well as sad thoughts, and memories that bring us smiles as well as tears.

Let us begin with these words, written by Sir Winston Churchill:

"Let us be contented with what has happened to us and thankful for all we have been spared. Let us accept the natural order in which we move. Let us reconcile ourselves to the mysterious rhythm of our destinies such as they must be in this world of space and time. Let us treasure our joys but not bewail our sorrows. The glory of light cannot exist without its shadows. Life is a whole and good and ill must be accepted together. The journey has been enjoyable and well worth making – once."

Tributes and Personal Remarks

I now invite NAME OF RELATIVE to share his/her tribute to NAME in the form of the poem Funeral Blues by W.H. Auden:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message She/He Is Dead,
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policeman wear black cotton gloves.

Cathy Oliver

She/He was my North, my South, my East, my West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Thank you NAME OF RELATIVE. It is time now to share stories and memories of NAME; I invite any of you who wish to say a few words to come forward one by one.

(Family and Friends take turns to speak)

Thank you to each of you who shared your stories. Let us now take a moment for silent reflection on the meaning of NAME's life to you, how you will remember him/her and what you will hold dear.

(Moment of Silence)

Reflections on Life and Death

NAME lived his/her life to the fullest, because he/she did not believe in continued existence after death outside of our memories. The idea of a life after death may be comforting - who wouldn't be intrigued by the idea of an eternal and blissful life - but what if you don't believe in such a thing? What comfort can we take from death? Well, as NAME believed, death is not necessarily the end of our story. Our lives become part of a collective story that continues indefinitely. The memories you each shared of NAME show us that he/she has influenced your lives in so many ways, some more apparent than others, but all of them significant. You have been changed by knowing NAME and, by knowing you, others will also be changed by him/her. But what if that is not enough, and you find yourself wishing that NAME were still here with you? The following passage by Aaron Freeman may be of some comfort:

You Want a Physicist to Speak at Your Funeral
Aaron Freeman

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand

that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics; that no energy gets created in the universe, and none is destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every BTU of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got.

And at one point you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off like children, their ways forever changed by you. And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that are her eyes, that those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

And the physicist will remind the congregation of how much of all our energy is given off as heat. There may be a few fanning themselves with their programs as he says it. And he will tell them that the warmth that flowed through you in life is still here, still part of all that we are, even as we who mourn continue the heat of our own lives.

And you'll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time. You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they'll be comforted to know your energy's still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly. Amen.

Concluding Words

Ladies and Gentlemen, this concludes our service for NAME. As we take our leave, we will remember that the best answer to death is the continuing affirmation of life; may the love of friends, joyful memories, and hope for the future give you the peace and strength to live your lives enthusiastically and beautifully.

We will bid our final farewell to NAME with Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's beautiful medley of Somewhere Over the Rainbow and What a Wonderful World, after which the family invites you all to join them in the reception room for refreshments, fellowship and cheer. Thank you.