

Writing a Memorable Eulogy

By Rhodes Davis

I have walked out of a funeral home with my sadness over a lost loved one compounded by hearing a eulogy comprised of generic platitudes, vague words of comfort, and little information to provide insight to the life that had ended. It is a tragedy that one could live a dignified life of love and service and be buried with words that could have been spoken over a hundred other people by filling in a different name.

The eulogy is one of the most important speeches one could deliver as it pays tribute to the meaning of a life in the presence of those mourning the loss. It is a solemn occasion as friends and family, often separated by hundreds of miles and many years, gather to pay a final tribute to a loved one. In most cases it is a celebratory time of a life well lived. Tragic situations can provide an opportunity to develop sympathy for the deceased or remember the important lessons a life cut short. It is the final public reflection of the life that has passed and a means of providing comfort and closure for the survivors. We do disservice when we pull out a standard funeral service from a book of stock event speeches. A vague speech about death and remembrance is equally lacking. A eulogy should memorialize the end of life with an exclamation point, not a whimper.

This is not an easy speech. Perhaps you did not know the deceased very well—well enough to give a testimony of their life or difficult situations surround the death that make a tough job tougher. You are giving a speech beside the remains of someone who was living and is now gone with mourners crying beside you. For that reason alone, this is not an easy task. Done well, this is an honorable task celebrating a life and giving survivors a reason to be proud of their loved one.

Preparing the eulogy

I suggest the following steps to prepare a memorable eulogy in this article:

1. Gather material on the deceased
2. Choose the material that best fits into the narrative
3. Organize the presentation in a logical flow

Each step is important to provide a clear message and prevent purposeless rambling. If you gather stories but do not fit them into a logical framework, your audience may be lost and frustrated during the presentation. Some eulogies are a series of numerous repetitive stories that do not have a coherent theme or purpose other than filling time.

The key word in a memorable eulogy is "story." A eulogy is a brief story of someone's life that highlights matters worthy of tribute and example. Any good story requires quality

source material and intelligent editing. Remember, you are not a reporter or detective trying to sift out the facts or present a case. You are telling the mythos of a person's life—how they viewed themselves and their loved ones saw them. You weave the tapestry of a person's life by selecting the stories that represent who the person was, knowing that humbly emphasizes the good and graciously omits the failures.

Gathering material on the deceased

The first work will be gathering data from which you will select stories. When getting material from people, do not promise a particular story will be in the eulogy. Tell them that you are trying to make sure you present a complete picture of their loved one and deepen your understanding of the deceased and their impact on other. Therefore, you may hear many stories that you would love to include but cannot but would appreciate any information that helps honor their loved one.

The first source is, of course, **the immediate family**. After the initial shock of the loss, often the family is ready to discuss their loved one. Perhaps it is our way to begin the process of keeping memories fresh or the comfort of telling stories of our loved ones brings them alive in our minds and hearts again. The closest family members: parents, spouse, and children will often know what to emphasize in the loved one's life. They know what was important to them. For one funeral, the wife wanted me to make sure that the audience knew that he was a good businessperson and proud that he was able to take care of his family so well. Another family fondly remembered their mother's attention to family and her love for the classic movies. These points of pride can become anchors that allow you to build the foundation of the speech. You do not want to present someone as one dimensional but you don't want to neglect what everyone close to the person knew was important to them.

The close loved ones usually have the best stories. I usually keep a notebook and capture the highlights (dates, locations, key events, and key quotes) but you could also tape the conversation as well. Ask some questions to help bring out the stories. I have found this works best in a group setting. One story will spark another and sometimes you will see matters of agreement and emphasis on certain characteristics of the deceased that will point you to significant things to address in the eulogy. Remember, you are not going to use everything you hear but the more material to select from, the better.

Here are some questions to consider asking:

1. Were there some important life lessons or quotes that <the loved one> recited frequently? (Especially good with children and grandchildren)
2. Was there an affectionate nickname used by the kids or grandkids? This can be useful when referencing a story from one of the kids or grandchildren. ("Charles, or as the grandkids called him, Grandy, used to say...")
3. Did the deceased have a brush with any personal heroes or famous people that made an impact on their life or that they were proud of?

4. Were they passionate about a sports team, car brand, event, etc. The key here is *passionate*. Frequent family comments or memorabilia might indicate a fan and adding a comment, if appropriate, adds color to the character.
5. Did they have any hobbies that were important to them? Again, you are trying to differentiate between passion and mild or passing interest. For example, my mom collects bells, not because she is passionate about them but she received a few, put them on display, and people assumed she collected bells and kept giving her bells. She is not a bell aficionado but she has a lot of them.

Inevitably, one of the children or other family members will offer to send you some other stories after the conversation. Welcome this request but give them a time limit. You do not want to arrive at the funeral home to have the person hand you five pages of stories and quotes. Explain that you will need it by a certain time so you can read and reflect on it. This is also helpful if some of the close family members are out of the area. You can have them email their recollections or observations.

- **Managers/Leaders:** Other people you may interview are current employer managers and the leaders in religious, service, or social clubs of which they were active members.
- **Online:** Look at their social media accounts, such as Facebook, if they have them. If they were in business, they may have a LinkedIn profile that can provide some great material on their professional life.
- **Other tributes:** A speech from a retirement ceremony, silver anniversary, or other special tribute event can provide good source material. If the person was employed at the time of death, the company may have sent out an internal email to its employees and/or customers that highlighted some things in the person's professional career and what they meant to the company. Likewise, their social or religious organization may have sent out a message with information that included service the person provided to the group.
- **The pre-deceased:** You may be asked to do a eulogy by someone who has a terminal disease and can interview them to determine what they want to emphasize and stories they want included. You can also find out if there are things that they do not want emphasized. Even if you have the chance to interview them, still talk to their loved ones to get additional material to round out their story.

Choose material that fits the narrative

Start by listing some of the key dates and events (birth, wedding, death) that must be included. Also if you are telling parenting stories, be sure you have reminiscences related to each of the children (assuming good relationships here). You should ask the closest survivors, such as a spouse or close siblings, how to handle strained relationships in a dignified way. If you find yourself drawn into old and long-lived family quarrels, you may

have to choose material that emphasizes another part of the person's life and deal with the thorny issues with the wisdom of a diplomat.

More than writing, editing is the toughest job. If you have sufficient material, it may be hard to reject certain stories or events if they do not fit into the overall portrait you are painting. Some things you may keep but only by a brief reference instead of narrative account. Some stories are repetitive so look for one or two short stories that emphasize the characteristics you want to highlight and you can say "there are many more stories like these that prove <the deceased> was helpful and dependable in a time of need." Focus on representative stories.

Be sure the selected material is appropriate to the audience. Good stories are positive memories of the deceased and important life lessons taught. It is comforting to know that the loved one had a positive impact on the lives of others. Do not talk about how you used to party or get into trouble together as this may not have been a positive characteristic in the eyes of the grieving (know your audience as this might be exactly what the deceased and survivors celebrate).

Another way to enhance the presentation is to include poems, song lyrics, and historical events that reflect on death and meaning. An Internet search with "quotes" and the theme often yield good results. For example, in one eulogy I used the following:

During a time of great plague and disease, Andrew Jackson wrote a letter to his beloved daughter-in-law, Sarah, to calm her fears for his health. In that letter, he said, in part: "My Dear Sarah, Knowing that we have to die we ought to live to be prepared to die well, and then, let death come when it may, we will meet it without alarm, and be ready to say, 'The Lord's will be done'."

After most of the stories, offer words of comfort to the family and friends. As a Christian, I find many comforting passages from the Bible. Remind the family that the mourners are there to support and comfort them during the difficult days ahead. Additionally, it is comforting to know that the future days bring greater appreciation for the departed and the sweetness of the memories that remain.

Choose an organizational method

Having gathered source material, you know the person's mythos well enough to design the flow of the story. If you have sufficient material, the natural flow may be very evident and you will know whether to emphasize their professional achievements, service to their fellow man, or family involvement. Even though all of these will likely be involved, a common theme in a person's life often emerges. The ultimate theme in the life story allows you to make sense of this life among the sea of humanity.

Hollywood calls this planning process "storyboarding." You want to move from a natural beginning (birth is usually good) to the final chapter. Along the way, the character experiences humor, drama, setbacks, and triumphs. There are achievements and the

common pleasure of everyday life. The subject may have had a brush with fame or a unique place in significant moments of history. All combined, you have a life that made some kind of significance in the world and the life of others, even if it insignificant to the world at large.

Organization types

Chronological: The most natural organization flow for a life story is chronological. Start with birth and their parents as this is a great way to weave the obituary article details into the eulogy instead of reading it like a phone book at some part of the service. Connect the life events of family, service, and professional life until you introduce their death, citing the time of departure and reading the list of survivors.

Topical: Another logical flow is to highlight important life areas. Introduce topics and themes of their life and work in chronological details as they fit into the broader life areas. While not common, this way can be very effective if there were several strong areas that defined their life that seem to overshadow the simple progression from childhood to death.

Ending the eulogy

Regardless of the organizational approach, it is important to conclude in a way that peacefully transitions to the conclusion of the service. For example, after telling the life story, offer words of comfort and sympathy, then conclude with a final story that helps provide closure to the life story. Choose a story that will bring peace to the mourners and celebrate the person's life. Sometimes it is a loving thing shared in a last encounter or a story that encapsulates a tender loving aspect of the person's character. Presented well it is as if, through the story, the person is providing the words of comfort to their loved ones.

Sometimes I will conclude with a message to the family and a tribute to the person. In one eulogy I ended this way:

<Deceased name>, at 74 years old passed from this world on Christmas Day about 5pm. He left this world surrounded by those he loved and who loved him to depart to be with his God who loved him even more than we did.

We thank God for the time we had with him and hope to meet him again in eternity. He was preceded in death by his parents <names>. He is survived by his wife, <name>; sons <names>; his daughters-in-law whom he considered the daughters he never had, <names>; grandchildren: <names>; and a host of nieces and nephews. To you we offer you our sincerest sympathy and prayers. May your memories of <deceased> be always vivid in your mind and offer you comfort, strength, and encouragement as you grieve the loss of one who meant so much to you.

A good way to weave the newspaper obituary into the eulogy

And to <deceased first name> we simply say, good job on a life well lived, thank you for brightening our lives, and we look forward to seeing you again at the glorious coming of our Lord.

I have a similar ending to the example eulogy at the end of this article.

Concluding observations

Most funerals are a celebration of life. When writing the eulogy, consider how you might describe the person's life so that that an acquaintance or friend of the family attending the funeral might walk away with greater appreciation for the deceased and the loved ones will be proud of the one who has gone. The eulogy is the proclamation of one's transition from life to memory and a final public tribute of a life now gone. The loved ones honor you by asking you to speak on such an important occasion. Prepare the eulogy so that you honor the memory of the deceased and provide an important service to the family.

Example Eulogy

This is the eulogy I presented at my Grandmother's funeral (names changed) with organizational format notes **in bold**:

Welcome On behalf of the family, I want to thank the friends who have come out to mourn with us and give much needed comfort in our time of grief.

Memories told from my point of view but selected because they were shared by others

I stand before you today, not to tell you how Jane Doe died, but how she lived. When I was younger, mom would take the family to visit grandmother and granddad in Birmingham. My sisters and cousins probably remember times at her house trying to pry the marbles from the wall in their backyard and the croquet set she kept in the shed for us to play with. Grandfather would grill the best hamburgers—topped with his homemade barbecue sauce—and Grandmother would prepare the rest of the meal. She had the best chocolate chip cookies for the kids to eat for dessert (though I often stole a couple before supper). Afterwards we would watch *The Lawrence Welk Show* and *Hee-Haw*—shows she and grandfather would watch every Saturday night. We always felt the love in their home.

Grandmother would always remember to send a birthday card with some spending money to us kids. When we visited her, she would listen with great interest to our latest achievements and adventures. Her brightened face when you entered the room evidenced her love for her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and friends.

Over the last several months, I have been doing research on my family history. A couple of months ago I visited with Grandmother in the nursing home and we talked for a long time about her younger years. Through this visit, and stories from my mom, I began to appreciate Grandmother even more and my understanding of her broadened.

Life story: I chose a chronological format and key moments from transitional periods

Childhood story that illustrates growing up in tough times

She had a good relationship with her sisters and brother and spoke fondly of them. Their youth in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee was not easy but they had some good times together. When she was a young girl, she would help her mother who hired out to work in other people's houses and picked corn and cotton. She would contribute her earnings to the family fund. Once, when shopping for a school coat for the next school year, she eyed a beautiful pair of shoes. She wanted to get them but her mother told her to pick a less expensive pair. Her dad admonished her mom saying, *"The kid worked for her money, let her spend it the way she wants. If them shoes is what she wants, get them shoes."* She told me she wore those shoes until they were so tight she could not wear them anymore.

Meeting her first husband and starting a family

When she was older, a friend offered her carfare if she would drive her to the packing plant to apply for a job. While she waited for her friend to fill out her application, the hiring man asked if she wanted a job. She accepted and worked in the packaging plant where she caught the eye of Bill, her first husband. She was on a platform above the plant when she saw him standing around the products and liked what she saw. They were eventually married and she gave birth to my mom, <name>, and my aunts <name> and <name>.

Anecdotal story of the fun times of young adulthood

Sometimes, her front porch would become a stage where Grandpa Bill would play steel guitar, <family friend> played fiddle and mandolin, and <family friend> played guitar and grandmother would sing. Sometimes other bands would come turning her porch into a "Grand 'Ol Opry."

Personal trial of burying a husband, raising their kids, and comforting words from the children expressed by the deceased

Grandmother faced struggles early in life when she had to nurse, comfort, and finally bury her husband who died of a painful disease. She had to work to support the family and her daughters quickly assumed responsibilities around the home. She told me of the sorrow she had for her daughters but her pride with the women they became.

Marrying her second husband

Later, she married a friend of the family, Grandpa Joe, a fun loving man who again brought joy to her life. He was a hard worker and influential pioneer in the Birmingham Trucking industry. It is unlikely he would have been able to accomplish what he did without her love and support. Today we bury her beside that loving husband.

Words of encouragement inspired by her faith shared by many in attendance

We approach this graveside with sorrow and hope. Sorrow for we have lost one who is dear to us and we know how she physically struggled in the waning years of her life. Yet we have hope and joy knowing that her pain has ended and she rests from her labors.

We have this hope because many years ago, she heard the story of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice to save those separated from God through sin. Though she was not a bad person, she knew that, like all people, she sinned. She changed her mind towards sin and Jesus and decided to serve God. She confessed Jesus as God's son. She was then baptized in order to wash away her sins just like the apostle Paul in Acts 22:16. At various times she has worshipped with Christians at the <churches she worshipped with>.

Like all of us, she had times where she struggled spiritually but turned again to Jesus. On several occasions in the latter part of her life, she recognized times when she felt she could have been more active in the work of the Lord's church. Thankfully, when we have a change of heart and resolve to do better the Lord forgives us freely.

Hebrews 10:35-38 tells us, "Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 'For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him'." God promised eternal salvation to those who remained faithful to Him and in her last days, Brother <name>, an elder of the <local> church and Brother <name>, the preacher at <church she attended> visited her on separate occasions and prayed with her. These godly men comforted her and she felt at peace in her relationship with God and prepared to depart this world to be with Him.

We have hope and joy because her life has not ended but the reality of her existence has only begun. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul answered their question of "How are the dead raised up?" When the seed is buried in the ground, its death gives birth to the grain. Even after 92 years, we are in the infancy of our existence and, as the seed, we must perish that a glorious life may begin. Paul wrote, "So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." Read verses 50-58.

Grandmother has no more concern with the things of this world. There is a world without sorrow, death, parting, and weeping that surpasses the richest blessings of this world. My hope, and her desire, is that we will join ourselves to Christ that we may enjoy this place as well.

Impact of her life tied in with expressions of sympathy and comfort for the family

What does Grandmother leave behind? She left some earthly possessions that have sentimental value for the memories we associate with them. Her greatest legacy is the many grandchildren and great-grandchildren who live today because she lived. She leaves memories, unique to each one of us, and lessons we have learned from her.

She also leaves behind three daughters. Mother, Aunt <name>, and Aunt <name>, we love you and know you are hurting right now. As Christians, you do not sorrow as those who have no hope but know that as Jesus died and was resurrected, God will wake those who sleep in Jesus. Yet you sorrow for the loss of one so precious in your sight. May God bless you with comfort from loving family and friends, and may He ever preserve the good memories you have of your mother and your time with her.

Concluding thought is from a poem and addressed to the deceased to provide closure

For Grandmother, I simply offer these words of Sarah Doudney:

Sleep on, beloved, sleep, and take thy rest;
Lay down thy head upon thy Savior's breast;
We love thee well, but Jesus loves thee best—
Good night! Good night! Good night!