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Funerals play to different audiences

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I think I'm better at funerals than weddings.

I find sadness easier to come by when I'm not that sad than happiness when I'm not that happy. Glumness hangs out on my corners like convenience stores. Joy, on the other hand, requires focus and spontaneity at the same time, qualities that are hard to cork in the same bottle.

I'm talking, of course, about the funerals and weddings of others, not my own.

I was very happy to attend the wedding of my wife, Melissa, 28 years ago, and I intend to show up at my own funeral...if the eats are Food Lion or better.

Unlike weddings, no one expects me to dance at funerals, even my own. This spares me from the fast ones that require moving both feet while fighting with Melissa over intellectual control of our marriage. Her position boils down to one of bossy-girl competence: I know how to dance, and you don't, therefore, I lead. My position is based on gender and divine right: I'm the boy; therefore, I lead.

I'm generally more popular with the bereaved than with wedding parties. As a writer, I am often called on to offer a few words about the deceased as well as the likely future of the newly betrothed. It's much easier to make something bad that happened in the past funny than to make something bad that will happen in the future laughable.

"Good luck and best wishes" is the best toast I have in my wedding repertoire. I've also used it at funerals. I ignore the mutters among the bereaved about my send off, because I've never heard a word of complaint from the departed.

Some funerals are genuinely sad, particularly for those who have endured a long, hard ending or went too young. But a lot end up with most attendees laughing over shared memories. Remembering the fun helps fill the hole.

Funerals are put on for three audiences. First, the deceased must approve. This gets a little tricky when the departed won't answer his cell or sends a reply indicating he's not in a service area. Second, there is the family—the immediate family, the less immediate family, the fairly remote immediate family and the people no one has seen for three decades who are hoping for a

piece of furniture. The third audience is whoever else shows up.

I think the deceased's preferences trump the others, but my view is not widely shared.

Every death raises questions about what will happen to the three audiences and never quite settles the historical issues over what happened among them.

I've been thinking about funerals, because Melissa's Dad, Carey, died two weeks ago at 91. I liked him and even got along with him. He had a deep sense of duty to family, church, community and country.

Every deceased turns out pretty good in the official recap at the funeral. I once heard a minister sum up a business history as, "She was in real estate." The woman in question was widely known to have behaved badly, unethically and often incomprehensively in various deals for 40 years. Had she been a human cannonball shot from a circus cannon twice a day, this minister would have said, "She was in air transport."

Funerals are not good occasions to go into details.

People blurt things at funerals that they mean less of than what actually comes out. Death loosens filters, even the ones rusted in place.

Some folks like to stir the pots in which funeral arrangements are cooked. Here is my favorite example.

Thirty years ago, I buried my father in a plain pine box, as he specifically requested in his will. Those in attendance were uniformly appalled. They were accustomed to trophy coffins. The funeral-home director threw an apoplectic fit. He was the same guy who had ripped off my father for \$15,000 (that I know about) 10 years earlier when he paraded Bob through his coffin inventory and clucked-clucked over any model that was affordable. My Dad did me a favor by making this decision.

Bob's coffin was cheaply made. I requested an upgrade, but it was the only pine box this funeral home would provide. A rumor began that the coffin was so chintzy that its bottom gave way with Bob falling out on the way to his grave. When I first heard this report a few months ago, I laughed for several days since had it been true, I and the others following the casket would have tripped over him. Which did not happen.

As Chico Marx put it in Duck Soup, "Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?"

When Chico died in 1961, a man stood at his funeral and began an

impromptu eulogy that totally misrepresented Chico's addictive gambling and womanizing. It's reported that Harpo -- the brother who never spoke on film; he preferred honking -- leaned toward Chico's widow, Maxine, and whispered: "When I go, do me a favour and hire a mime."

It's hard to know the right words of comfort to say when services are opened to the audience to offer their memories. Here are several I've used, with mixed reviews:

He was widely known to pay small bills within three months of receipt.

She knew a lot about everyone in this room, which she liked to share.

He did not confine his inappropriate remarks to friends and family.

His hand was always extended, helping others—the less fortunate, the more fortunate and himself.

She knew the difference between who and whom, and how to use both in a sentence as well as in other places.

He'd watch your back in business, but watching was about it.

He could tell a Knock-Knock joke with the best of 'em.

His humor was never mean or offensive, and it was rarely funny.

She always said: If you can't say something nice about a person at a time like this, talk about someone else—just don't mention names.

I think I should stop going to funerals so that nobody will come to mine.

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