



Presentation to the Cemeteries Conference
Ceremonies – Celebrating the Stories
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Tangata Kai Arahi te Ture o Aotearoa

Somerset Maugham once said – *‘dying is a very dull dreary affair. And my advice to you is to have nothing whatsoever to do with it’* and we would all agree with that I’m sure.

However, most of us here today are intimately involved in our daily work in the outcome of the dying process – namely the Big D – Death, and as Michael Marshall wrote in ‘The Upright Man’ –

‘Death’s gang is bigger and tougher than anyone else’s. Always has been and always will be. Death’s the man.’

But, believe it or not, some of my most privileged and treasured moments as a Civil Celebrant have been intimately connected with the process of dying, of death, and of creating ceremonies for funerals or as I prefer to say, Life Celebrations.

Something, I must say, my children find rather weird and scary especially these days when I seem to be taking so many Life Celebrations for friends who have died. It’s pretty scary for me as it reminds me of my own mortality and that I’d better get working on my ‘Bucket List.’

When I was asked if I would make a presentation on the work of funeral celebrants and the importance of ceremonies at the Cemeteries Conference, I was both intrigued and delighted. My children thought I was even weirder!

As the National President of the Celebrants Association of New Zealand (CANZ for short) I talk to a number of groups, to the radio, television and the press but this is definitely the most interesting audience I’ve been asked to speak to I must say.

So what is CANZ? How many of you here have heard of us? Let’s have a show of hands to see.
(Over half the audience, which was encouraging)

The Celebrants Association of New Zealand was founded in July 2000 by a group of like-minded celebrants who decided it was time to come together nationally, to form a professional association.

It was established to foster celebrancy in it’s many forms, provide professional development and network opportunities as well as to support its celebrant members.

A comprehensive constitution was created and professional codes of conduct and ethics were established, to provide the highest service to our clients, as well as a complaints procedure. I am happy to say that in this, our tenth year, we have only ever had to deal with two minor such complaints.

CANZ also provide ongoing professional education and training development through biennial conferences and education fora, and has a system of branches throughout the country, as well as quite a number of members-at-large.

We have a website, a bi-monthly magazine and newsletters, and are at present developing a CANZ Blog and chat-room for members.

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We also promote public awareness of the roles and functions of civil celebrants and ours is not just for marriage, civil union or funeral ceremonies. We have members who create a variety of diverse ceremonies for clients, from namings, renewal of vows, pet and pagan rites.

So why and when did I become a celebrant?

When my husband, Chris, died of Cystic Fibrosis in 1994 and part of me died with him. But when I come to think about it perhaps it was long before that because when my two eldest sons were little a kitten they had died and I decided it was a good opportunity to deal with the 'death' issue.

We dug a wee grave and buried kitty then put flowers and a cross on the grave. I said a few words of comfort and when my eldest son who was four at the time, asked, *"what's going to happen to kitty, Mummy?"* I replied, *"he's gone to Heaven, darling, in the sky and Jesus will look after him in his beautiful garden."*

The boys went to bed sad but comforted by my words – or so I thought. Early next morning my son rushed into our bedroom crying and shouting, *"you told a lie Mummy, you lied! Kitty didn't go up to Heaven, he's still there!"*

He had dug up the grave to check.

This experience taught me two things – the importance and comfort of ceremony and the fact that one needs to be to be honest when dealing with such issues as life and death.

However, no matter how dark life seems at such a time *'Death'* as Philip Moeller wrote *'is the end of one story and the beginning of another.'*

And so it was for me when my husband died.

At the time, I was a florist and Chris had been a photographer so had we worked in the 'ceremony' field so to speak. I was also an amateur poet and writer for our local paper and had been involved with amateur theatre and Toastmistress for some 25 years, so celebrancy seemed a natural progression.

I was appointed a Marriage Celebrant in 1995 but it was the Life Celebrations that were to become a real passion for me.

I came across a quote a few weeks ago when creating a Life Celebration ceremony for a friend and it was from a headstone in Ireland.

*'Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
Love leaves a memory no one can steal.'*

These words touch the very heart of the meaning of grief and loss when you are desperately coming to terms with the death of a love one.

By entering fully into my grief journey, with all its pain and feelings of loss, I learnt to live again and I learnt to live on my own.

My cherished memories helped to open the door to a world of light that I had not experienced before.

I discovered that Love does not die – we die.

I discovered gifts I had never truly realised I had and began to use them.

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But most of all I learnt to celebrate life, my life as well as other people's lives and I discovered that I had a gift to empower others to do this too - through the process of ceremony.

Funerals are more and more becoming Life Celebrations and people are making such ceremonies more real, more human and far more personal.

More and more people are choosing to have a civil ceremony for these very reasons, so they now have a greater freedom on how to celebrate their loved one's life.

No longer do funerals have to be morbid and depressing. No longer do you come away thinking – *'Well I don't know who the officiant was talking about, but it certainly wasn't the person I knew and they couldn't even get the name right!'*

It is also OK to be more honest about ourselves and the old adage of *'you mustn't speak ill of the dead!'* is not so rigidly held today.

We are human so we are fallible, we have our foibles and our failings as well as our good sides. We are not immortal and we are not perfect -however much we think we are, but we are all uniquely individual and each of us has something to be celebrated and most of all – loved for.

People I have known, who have said, *"You won't find me going to a funeral, they're so depressing and sad"* often surprise themselves when they do have to go to a Life Celebration, realising that such ceremonies don't have to be such a negative experience.

People can tell funny stories or share a humorous memory of times shared with the deceased and that's important because laughter helps to oil the wheels of life and helps relationships to overcome the testing times.

Celebrancy can be challenging; it can be enriching; it can have moments of extreme grief and sorrow but it can also be a time of much laughter and real humour.

After all, is not laughter truly the best medicine of all?

It's not a drug, not an anti-depressant so there's no need for doctors or a prescription, there's no unpleasant aftertaste, no side effects apart from the fact that you always feel better, and best of all - it's FREE!

Most of us don't know when or how we are going to die. We certainly don't want to think about it that much do we?

Which reminds me of the court jester to the Caliph of Baghdad who for a long time had served his master and his court, keeping them amused whenever they called upon him.

But in a moment of utter thoughtlessness he had displeased his ruler by casting a saucy eye upon one of the Caliph's wives. An outraged Caliph ordered his favourite jester to be put to death.

"However," said the Caliph, "in consideration of the merry jests you've told me all these years, I will let you choose how you are to die."

"Oh, most generous Caliph," replied the jester, "if it's all the same to you oh mighty one.....I choose death by old age!"

However, we don't all have that choice. Death comes when it will and today I would like to share with you some of the experiences from funerals I have been involved with as a Civil Celebrant over the past fifteen years.

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St. Augustine of Hippo said, *'the care of funeral, the manner of burial, the pomp of obsequies, are rather a consolation to the living than of any service to the dead,'* and he is quite right.

I was discussing this fact with an eighty five year old friend recently, who said, *"Blow that, I want to be there! I want to hear just what people are going to say about me and make sure they get it right!"*

And that goes to the very heart of what a funeral is all about. We want to know that people will say something nice about us and remember us through the medium of memories made and shared.

We may not have a choice when it comes to death, but today we do have choices when it comes to Life Celebrations.

A Life Celebration Ceremony is the forum for storytelling, for memories to be shared, for grief to be expressed and to paraphrase Frank Sinatra's words - *'to do it our way'*.

For a life, no matter how long or short, needs to be celebrated with the deceased in mind and in consideration of those left behind who can pay tribute and honour in words and more often that not, with music and ritual.

As Louis Armstrong said, *"Once the band starts, everybody starts swaying from one side of the street to the other, especially those who drop in and follow the ones who have been to the funeral."*

These are known as the second line and they may be anyone passing along who wants to hear the music.

The spirit hits them and they follow."

And with a 'good' funeral with a ceremony that is rich and full with words, tributes and music, follow they do! As they did at a Life Celebration I took some years ago. Dolly had died in her 94th year and until some months before was still playing the piano at a pub in Auckland. To carry Dolly into the chapel the family chose her theme song – what else but 'Hello Dolly!'

And boy did everyone sing-a-long and clap.

It is also important to remember that a Life Celebration can make or break the beginning of a positive grief process. It can create a sacred space for family to express their grief, to celebrate their loved one's life and provide comfort, acceptance, resolution, healing and finally – a conclusion, where they can reach a place of peace.

Since Marian Barnes first pioneered funeral celebrancy in New Zealand in 1979 we have I believe, led the world in funeral celebrancy and ritual.

Marian and her contemporaries in the celebrancy world of the seventies made some major changes to how we celebrate a person's life, together with the bestowing the gift of choice to the many grieving families and friends wanting to pay honour and tribute for a loved ones life

We have been particularly gifted in New Zealand, with the example from the Maori culture of the ceremony and rituals pertaining to the Tangi, that is a full, moving, powerful and rich time of ceremony and celebration.

The main differences between a funeral and a tangi are the length of time taken and the fact that at a tangi, the body is never left alone from the time of release to the time of burial.

Another difference is that people come and talk to the person who died, not about them. If you have unsaid things, then you have a last chance to tell them.

This is happening more and more among non Maori New Zealanders. Many have the body of their loved one at home today and we see a few more open caskets at funerals as well.

When my husband died we had him at home for people to spend time with him and we also had an open casket at his Life Celebration with the opportunity for people to come up and say their farewells before the casket was closed.

Surprisingly, far more came up than expected and as it was a large funeral our celebrant had to actually stop them so we could proceed with the rest of the ceremony.

Most Maori people are buried and not cremated because Maori believe that we are born of a woman and when we die we will return to Papatuanuku, the earth mother.

Burial is also a tradition with peoples of the Catholic, Jewish and Muslim beliefs.

Bearing in mind that we are at a cemeteries conference I would like to share with you some graveside stories that made an impact on me.

Tears from Heaven for Still Born Twins

One of the most difficult ceremonies I have ever taken was for stillborn twins.

In fact one of the twins had died in the womb and the mother had to wait for full term to deliver both babies. A strong heartbeat gave hope to the couple that one baby would be born normally.

However fate decided otherwise and the baby only lived a few minutes.

What I would particularly like to share with you is what happened as the tiny white caskets were being lowered by the family into the grave. For as I said the poignant words,

*Earth to earth
Ashes to ashes
Dust to dust*

A soft, gentle rain began to fall and a monarch butterfly flew across the open grave.

I quietly said, “*as you grieve for your babies so your babies send their tears from heaven for you and send you a message that they will always be with you in spirit and love.*”

Afterwards the mother thanked me and said that she found the words extremely comforting, despite her overwhelming grief.

The Tonka Truck

The family and friends who came to a friend’s ceremony I took some years ago had a completely different experience.

After the final ceremony of committal at the cemetery there were some forty to fifty gathered around the graveside, as not everyone had come after the main ceremony. It had been arranged for people to fill in the grave but many were somewhat hesitant of this process – this age old ritual.

However, the sons began to shovel the earth from the council truck next to the grave and then one by one we all came forward to do our bit.

Momentum gathered and suddenly everyone wanted to enter into the spirit of the occasion. There was a great deal of laughter and joking and the air buzzed with energy. After all had done their bit there was just a bit left at the back of the truck so the guy in charge said he would do the rest.

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But the youngest son all of 40 plus, said, “*could I tip it up please? My Dad gave me a Tonka Tip-Up truck when I was little and I loved it. Tipping this one up would make my day!*”

Now I am not sure what OSH would say but the son was granted his wish and we all knew he would never forget the experience.

Little old wine drinking me!

One of the most enjoyable ceremonies I have taken was for an old man only a few weeks off a hundred. He had been a wine maker and was originally from Yugoslavia. It was a wonderful celebration with tributes and music and memories galore.

I had asked the family if there were any traditions they would like to honour at the graveside and they said that in the old country the priest would pour a libation of wine over the casket before the grave was filled in.

So they decided to do that and also have a toast for the old man. They came to the cemetery with an old leather flask that had been in the family for generations, for me to pour the wine into the grave and small cardboard cups and wine from the last barrel made by the old wine maker to toast him as a final farewell tribute.

This we did with gusto, then threw the cups into the grave.

It was a magical moment - apart that is from all the grandmothers worrying about the children falling in the grave out of curiosity!

Rugger Mad, Bad and Beyond

I have talked about the power of the ritual of filling in the grave for people and my next story is from a funeral for a thirty three year old rugby mad wild guy who died from cancer. It was a huge funeral in the local rugby clubrooms and a large gathering at the cemetery for the committal.

I had suggested the filling in of the grave but the mother and sister decided it was just another thing to think about so we decided to leave it.

However, after all was complete and family and friends had thrown their symbols of farewell of flowers, earth, rugby memorabilia and little paper offerings of the club colours onto the casket - a layering of love as one friend said - there was a sense of incompleteness.

I took this photo of these guys standing by the grave looking so lost and helpless and I am sure that if they had the opportunity these guys would have filled in the grave with a real sense of purpose and so gained a much needed feeling of completeness.

Digging For Dad

I have found that this is a ritual that men particularly, find helpful in the grieving process as was really exemplified at a recent funeral when the four sons of a local man who also died of cancer, went about the job of filling in the grave with such dedication and purpose and were only sorry to find that there wasn't enough earth to complete their task.

In contrast to this a burial I was the celebrant for a friend recently had a real sense of completion as after a private ceremony on the lawn of the family home overlooking Muriwai beach we went in convoy following the deceased in his truck that was driven by his son, up to Port Albert on the Kaipara harbour.

It was a glorious day and when we arrived at the small Minniesdale Chapel and cemetery, the bronze, bare chested grave digger was waiting beside a beautifully hand dug grave.

I led a short committal and farewell. A family friend shared a reading from Bruce Mason's ‘*The End of the Golden Weather*’ and the casket was lowered. Then the shovelling began and boy did they shovel!

Sweat glistened on the foreheads of the son and his friends as they slowly and meticulously filled in the grave.

When their task was completed to their satisfaction out came the iced cans of Speights (thoughtfully provided) they stood around the grave sharing memories then they all poured the last drops of their beers onto the grave as a final symbol of farewell.

I don't know how often this is done in burials but as a celebrant I have witnessed the powerful healing effects of such a ritual, and I would certainly encourage using it more often in burials although I have to say I have officiated at more cremations than burials.

And this reminds me of a one of my most embarrassing moments as a celebrant.

It was a funeral for a lady who had been married three times with three sets of children who didn't really communicate well. My client was the only child (a daughter) from the third marriage and it was a simple but meaningful ceremony despite the three lots of siblings sitting in separate areas of the funeral chapel.

I concluded the ceremony with a poem whose final words were – 'and now fly!' However for some unknown reason I said 'and now **fry!**'

You can imagine my feelings of absolute horror as I realised what I had said. I was, naturally, appalled at what I had done. But there wasn't a flicker from the gathering. I carried on with the final few words but still no one reacted to what I'd said till I noticed my client and her friend with hankies stuffed in their mouths shaking with laughter.

I felt awful. But afterwards the daughter came up to me and said, "*Now I know my Mum is here. She was always getting her words mixed up and always having me in fits of laughter and that was her way of letting me know that she'll be around.*" Those immortal words of '*to err is human, to forgive is Divine*' came to mind and I felt a little better about my faux pas.

When you think about it, ceremonies and cemeteries have much in common.

Cemeteries are sacred resting places for our dead.

They are sacred places for loved ones to be at one with their dead.

Having just celebrated ANZAC day I thought back to a trip to Italy some years ago and visiting Monte Cassino. I reflected on what it must mean to families from far across the world such as New Zealand, to come and spend time at the grave of their beloved relative who died in the battle for his country.

We see the yearly pilgrimages to Gallipoli by more and more young New Zealanders and Australians as almost a rite of passage as they join in the ceremony of remembrance.

Back home we see families place their loving tributes on the headstones of their loved ones to remember the love and times shared.

Celebrants are the verbal storytellers but cemeteries are the silent repositories of a community's history and people. We read the names of the deceased and we see when they died. We learn of the influenza epidemics and about those who died in war or as tiny babies.

I came across such a plaque in our Te Aroha cemetery just yesterday. It read – Our darling baby 13 February 1946 – 14 February 1946.

I was born on the 13 February 1943 – how lucky am I?

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'For to live in hearts we leave behind is not to die' as Thomas Campbell so rightly said, and although people die, their names and stories live on in the magic of memory and in the silent spaces of a cemetery.

Yes, we share a great deal in common. We provide invisible threads to help people through the bewildering maze of grief.

People need ceremonies as much as they need cemeteries. Between us we provide a sacred space to celebrate the dead.

We help people to tell and record the stories.

We offer comfort and peace and we are a vital part of the grieving process.

Together we provide opportunities for solace, celebration and healing.

My final story is about a bagpiper friend of mine. Being a bagpiper he was once asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man without family or friends.

Not being familiar with the area where the cemetery was he became lost and being a typical man did not ask for direction. He finally arrived at the cemetery in question albeit an hour late. He saw the backhoe and the gravediggers having lunch and walked over to see that the grave was partially filled in. He assured the workers that he wouldn't be long but that he had to do this.

He played his heart and soul out and as he played he happened to notice that the gravediggers wiped away a tear or two. He told me that he played like he'd never played before, from 'Going Home to 'Flowers of the Forest' and concluding with 'Amazing Grace,' then he solemnly walked to his car.

As he opened the door he overheard one of the workers say to the other.

"Well bugger me! I can't believe it. I've never heard or seen anything like that before – and I've been putting septic tanks in for twenty years."

So as Somerset Maugham says, *'dying might be a dull, dreary affair'* but the important thing to remember is that death comes to us all so let's not waste a moment in celebrating our lives.

Carpe Diem! – Seize the moment! That's my motto.

Let's enjoy and celebrate every minute of the time we are given and may we continue to provide opportunities for solace, storytelling, celebration and healing to the grieving families we are all privileged to work with. It has been my privilege to be part of your inaugural conference and on behalf of the Celebrants Association of New Zealand I wish you well in the future and look forward to working alongside you in providing the services we do for our communities.