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DELIVERING A EULOGY

Before I trained as a funeral celebrant I considered myself an excellent public speaker and assumed that the skills required for delivering a key note speech at a conference or presenting a report about a young offender in a Magistrates' Court, which is where I had learned to speak in public, would be transferrable to the task of delivering a eulogy.

To a degree, my assumptions were correct but, in undergoing training to be a celebrant, I was made aware of some very key differences and have learned to apply them.

In my experience the effective delivery of a eulogy can be summarised in 4 P's:

1. Pace
2. Projection
3. Poise
4. Practice

PACE

The pace of your delivery is critical, and you have to teach yourself to speak slowly. People attending a funeral, especially those most directly affected by the death, are in a particular emotional state, where listening and comprehending become more challenging. A normal reading pace is likely therefore to prove to be too fast for mourners to properly take in what you are saying. The rule of thumb is to attempt to deliver 100 words per minute and to ensure that there are clear pauses between sentences and paragraphs. Most funeral ceremonies, especially cremations, are time limited, and the whole ceremony needs to be done and dusted within a period of between 30 and 45 minutes, including allowing 5 minutes at the beginning and the end to get people in and out of the chapel. To that end, if you assume there will be some music or a hymn and a reading or a prayer, plus some words at the point of the formal committal of the coffin, a eulogy needs to be no more than 10 minutes long and more usually no more than 8 minutes long. So, any eulogy more than one thousand words long will either have to be read too quickly to be properly understood, or will cause the ceremony to overrun if read at a proper pace. The latter scenario is likely to land the funeral director with a fine which will not please them.

PROJECTION

It goes without saying that you need to make sure your words are heard properly, so volume and diction are important elements of delivering a eulogy. However, the size of the audience may differ significantly, requiring you to adjust your approach. Funeral audiences may well also contain a number of older people who have hearing difficulties and effective projection and enunciation are the best means of enabling everyone to hear your words and feel a part of the ceremony. There may be audio equipment, microphones and a hearing aid loop system etc. there to assist you (ostensibly) but, in my experience they can sometimes add to the challenge, because you have to stand uncomfortably close to the microphone for it to pick up your voice which feels unnatural and constraining., so be aware of this. There will almost certainly be a lectern on which you can place your written eulogy and it is absolutely essential that you raise your head and look at the audience when you speak. Being able to look down at your written text and look up again to deliver the words at regular intervals is a skill worth developing and you may find annotating your text in some way to ensure your eyes return to the correct section each time is a useful pre-delivery exercise.

POISE

If you look at people delivering speeches at public events, they tend to move about and use their hands and arms for emphasis; the use of the body in this way helps make the delivery somehow more dynamic and interesting. This was how I would approach a speech at a conference for example. However, when I trained as a celebrant I was told to *stop* moving because it was too distracting. When I looked at video of myself I had to agree, and I had to force myself to stand still and not move my hands at all. In many ways this remains the hardest challenge for me with regard to delivering a eulogy. Fortunately, the availability of the lectern means you have something you can grip which forces you to keep your hands still and if you are gripping the lectern you are not really in much of a position to move the rest of your body! I'm getting better however at standing and reading with my hands behind my back which I think is the most dignified method.

PRACTICE

Whatever else you do, *do* practice reading your eulogy allowed several times and if possible involve a third party as a critical friend. Pace, projection and poise can be tested out and tweaked, but most of all reading allowed helps you spot poor and potentially challenging phrasing in advance to ensure that on the day you are word perfect. If at all possible make the effort to practice delivering your eulogy at the actual venue, so you get a sense of the acoustics and the physical lay-out of the auditorium. You cannot afford to stumble over your words. This is someone's funeral you are speaking at and, in the audience, will be people who are feeling desperately sad and seeking comfort in a ceremony that properly reflects the life and character of their loved one. It needs to be perfect *every* time. You *must not* treat the task of preparing and delivering a person's eulogy with anything but the greatest respect each time.

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