

Dead Reckoning

By Michael K. Jones

Introduction

I'm at that age when I find myself reading a lot of retirement planning books. I guess it's never too early to start getting things in order for that day when I no longer "work". One thing I've noticed about these books is that they've organized life into chapters. Gail Vaz-Oxlade, for example, talks about "kid", "Teenager", and "parenting" chapters. Her book *Never Too Late* focuses on the retirement chapter.¹ If I were to follow this practice and organize life into a series of chapters I'd suggest that *Dead Reckoning* deals with the final chapter of our time here on earth. It would focus on the end of this final chapter, in particular. It would address those final words we would offer as we gather and say goodbye.

I've learned a lot about endings and the power of words and silence in recent years. Roughly ten years ago the congregation I was serving closed and that process taught me about final chapters and saying goodbye. It was a harsh and frightening conclusion for me because I didn't have any idea what I was going to do once the congregation's doors had been closed for the final time. Fortunately, this conclusion wasn't the end. This conclusion led to the opening chapter of a new story. In the days and weeks following the final service an interesting thing happened. I began receiving phone calls from funeral directors asking if I could officiate funerals for families without a church connection. As the years have progressed I've averaged about 100 services per year. When it comes to funerals I've been through a lot and *Dead Reckoning* is the result of this experience.

In each and every one of the services I've led I've learned a lot about the funeral ritual. For one thing, I've learned how important funerals are in people's lives. Ninian Smart once wrote, "The power of religion does not rest in simple beliefs or theologies; it rests in the deep words and rites which enable us to face death and make a good end to living."² As I have made my way through so many funerals I've come to agree with his statement. Funerals are powerful and that's why we have to invest so much time and energy into them. It's also why we need to work harder at understanding how they work.

To understand how they work we first have to learn more about their structure. Once we understand the structure of the funeral we can learn more about how to lead them with some effectiveness. For me the Christian funeral can be divided into two main components. Christian

funerals have a worship component and a celebration component. There are many who believe that these two components cannot be combined into one ritual act. I disagree and will explain how and why in the pages that follow. When we worship we bring heaven and earth together acknowledging God's place among us as we grieve the loss of a loved one. We also celebrate the life of the deceased whenever we gather for a Christian funeral.

For me, each and every individual is a creation of God and has been created in God's image. Christian ethicist Richard McCormick once said that we are all "of incalculable worth."³ When a person dies we need to learn more about their "worth". We need to hear about their experiences and encounters; we need to hear about what they held to be important and we can also learn about those ideas and things that inspired them. So these two main components can be divided further still. In *Dead Reckoning* I've outlined the six phases to help ensure that worship and celebration come together to help create a meaningful and effective funeral. These six phases are: planning and preparation; the warm up; inspirational; education; transitional and closing. Each phase will have a dedicated chapter introducing us to a different piece of the funeral ritual. Each phase and chapter will help us ensure that we create, lead and offer a service that honours and respects both God and the deceased.

Regardless of how important funerals are, however, each and every funeral is a challenge for the person asked to lead it. It can be difficult to find words to tell the story of the deceased and address the intensity of grief and loss experienced by those left behind. It can be difficult to shape the words we can find into something that brings people together to mark the beginning of a long and often painful road. Edwidge Danticat once wrote, "Through recent experiences with both birth and death, I have discovered that we enter and leave life as, among other things, words."⁴ These words can be memories and stories. These words can help create pictures in our minds that can help us remember the one's whom we've lost. So, as difficult as the funeral task can be *Dead Reckoning* will help us find the words we need to address the loss and grief in people's lives. These words can be offered as statements and prayers. They can be offered as memory and story. They can also be shared as questions.

Dead Reckoning will also help us find the questions we need to ask. We humans are a curious, questioning people. From the very beginning we have experienced strange and confusing things and tried to figure out what has happened by asking a series of questions. What? When? Why? Where? Who? How? Even in the present day there always seems to be

something around the next corner we want to know more about. When confronting the death of a loved one and dealing with the arrangements surrounding this loss people generate lists of questions to ask the individuals to whom they have turned for help and guidance. Perhaps the most frequent question I'm asked by friends and family of the deceased is, "What do we do now?"

What do we do now? This question has a number of possible responses. In *Dead Reckoning* we sift through these possibilities. Perhaps the first response is for friends or family members to go ahead and do the service themselves. It would be difficult yet possible. We do not need a license or credential in order to lead a funeral. For those of us who are asked to do so there are resources available to help those who accept the challenge. There are books, websites and other resources on the "bits and pieces" that comprise religious funerals. What seems to be lacking are books that walk us through the process from beginning to graveside and beyond. Longfellow once wrote, "Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending."⁵

Being asked to deal with beginnings and endings and officiate at a funeral and tell a person's story is a tremendous honour but, as I have already mentioned, it's also a tremendous challenge. It is also one of the toughest pieces of public speaking we will ever do. Most human beings fear two things: Death and public speaking. Of these two death is probably the front runner. Officiating funerals incorporates both and with a much higher degree of intensity and difficulty. This is why it's an extremely frightening possibility. There are different ways in which we can navigate this intensity and difficulty. The first thing we can do is confront the reality of death. Poet W. B. Yeats challenges us to "Cast a cold eye / On life, on death."⁶ In *Dead Reckoning* I intend to focus a "cold eye" on the funeral service itself. I will be addressing issues such as preparation, presentation and content. I will even consider some of the mixed messages offered grieving people throughout the years. On one hand, we have Jesus advising listeners to "let the dead bury their own dead"⁷ while on the other we have churches and other religious organizations placing funerals at the centre of what they do to serve their followers. We'll find a way between both sides.

There is more than enough material available to help us with our task. The funeral service has been studied for centuries. Much of this work has been done under the general titles such as ritual studies. A number of scholars within these disciplines have published a lot of thought provoking material. Arnold Van Gennep, for one, uses the term "Rites of Passage" to describe

rituals like funerals. Perhaps a better translation is “Rites of transition”⁸ as that label more accurately describes what is happening in the ritual and how it is affecting the people sharing in this ceremony. Van Gennep writes, “The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another.”⁹ Funerals are one, if not the most important transition times for individuals, families, workplaces, and communities. An anthropologist by the name of John Beattie labeled rituals such as funerals “transition rituals”.¹⁰ Angela Sumegi argues that for humans funerals mark this transition from a person's physical reality to their bodily place among the ancestors.¹¹ Funerals are a time of “counting the cost” of this transition and being reminded that, to borrow a phrase from the late Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, “the tribe is smaller by one.”¹²

These transition times have been described in many ways throughout human history. What I set out to accomplish in *Dead Reckoning* is build on this scholarly tradition and outline a way we can take this theory and translate theory into practice. This practice will be simple yet challenging. For this reason we will begin *Dead Reckoning* with a review of the literature dealing with the funeral ritual. This gives us a foundation from which to proceed through the six phases of the funeral. Some cultures have compared the death journey to crossing a one-way bridge¹³ and we'll be learning more about this passage. It's a passage that goes by many names and we will explore some of these. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski describes death as being a “gateway to the other world in more than the literal sense”.¹⁴

Building on this and other material we can build on this term “gateway experience” and apply it throughout *Dead Reckoning*. These gateways continue to mark the transition between life and death.¹⁵ Gateways can also give us a slight glimpse of what may lie beyond. Madeleine L'Engle suggests that we are being sent through this gateway and “into the unknown”.¹⁶ Some, including the ancients, would even hint that we are entering upon a new journey of sorts¹⁷ and this notion of gateway helps us visualize and understanding the beginning or starting point. Historically, this journey's destination depended on the religious tradition to which the person belonged. In many aboriginal traditions of North America, for example, the deceased proceeded to the underworld from which they emerged.¹⁸

Even if we narrow and limit our work here to Christian funerals it's important to consider various beliefs of the afterlife and we'll be doing this in a couple of places.¹⁹ Plato, for example, argued that when we die our new journey would include the separation of spirit and body. He

suggested that the spirit was indestructible and eternal and that it continued on its way while the body was left behind.²⁰ In medieval art this is shown as a person's spirit leaving the body through their mouth.²¹ The spirit is believed to leave the body and take flight. Perhaps this is why some visions and descriptions of heaven include people wearing wings. Some pagan traditions use terms like “crossing over” to describe this transition and movement.²² In these traditions it was hoped that the trip was one way and their funeral services reflected that hope and prayer.²³

The oldest of human literature speaks of this search for knowledge about the afterlife.²⁴ The Ancient Greeks, for example, spoke of journeys into the land of the dead. Homer, himself, referred to human beings as being "searchers".²⁵ These works offered descriptions of what happened when we crossed over to this land. The Ancient Roman Lucretius once wrote, “Death is therefore nothing to us and does not concern us at all, since it appears that the substance of the soul is perishable. When the separation of the body and soul, whose union is the essence of our being, is consummated, it is clear that absolutely nothing will be able to reach us and awaken our sensibility, not even if earth mixes with sea and seas with heaven.”²⁶ Victor J. Stenger is more precise when he writes, “...when our brains die, we die.”²⁷

All of this underlines the appropriateness of using a term such as “gateway transition” when describing a funeral. It also supports our work of finding out more about these transitions and how we can create rituals that help us understand this journey more deeply. A critical part of this gateway transition is the naming of the reality of death and the beginning of the grief process for people left behind. This is an important point because death can affect families in deep and profound ways. And it’s something we cannot avoid as we all face death at some future time. As *Star Wars* character, Yoda, said in the movie *Return of the Jedi*, “That is the way of things.”

Religious leaders throughout the centuries have helped individuals, families, and communities confront the movement of our loved ones through the gateway. Perhaps the shaman is the best example of this. Curtis Hoffman writes, “The shaman is a communicator between the worlds...”²⁸ Being this "communicator" is not a job that can be taken lightly. It was and still is a powerful responsibility. Jay Dolan describes the Shaman as being “religious specialists, both male and female, who cured sickness, cast spells, controlled the weather, and predicted the future.”²⁹ Regardless of whether or not we want to admit it much of the Shaman’s work finds its way into the expectations of contemporary service leaders, especially when it comes to working with people experiencing the natural reality of death. In a way whenever we confront the worlds

of life and death we become shamans of a sort. As shamans we help bridge these two worlds for those around us.

Death and funerals may build bridges and be the way of things but we still struggle with them. Wade Davis writes, “Every culture honours its dead, even as it struggles with the meaning of the inexorable separation that death implies.”³⁰ This is true for both religious and nonreligious people. In fact, atheists find themselves extremely “helpless”³¹ when faced with the loss of a loved one. French philosopher Andre Comte – Sponville writes, “For you, there can be neither consolation nor compensation – only sometimes, a faint sense of relief at the thought that at least that person is no longer suffering.”³² Silverstone and Hyman write, “Some widows and widowers, after a short time, reflect this quality in the midst of sadness.”³³ The six phases of a funeral help us deal with the emotions death generates within us.

They can also help us offer a thought or a word to the people around us. Those who join us for funerals may represent a number of beliefs beyond our own but we still gather for one timeless purpose. This represents a bit of a historical shift. There was a time when people turned to the church when they experienced a death in their family³⁴ It was conventional thinking that the clergy in particular would preside over the rituals of life and perhaps many other details as well. Joyce Youngs summarizes this conventional thinking well when she writes, “To all Christian people only the clergy can give a child a name and admit it to full church membership, join men and women in holy matrimony, and preside over the burial of the dead.”³⁵ In most cases this continues to be the case today and this may be surprising.

The world around us is changing, however. Nicholas Wade uses the term “waning” when describing the decline in religious belief across western society.³⁶ To describe the shrinking number of Christians, in particular Philip Jenkins has coined the term “ever shrinking remnant” and it certainly seems to fit here,³⁷ especially in our North American context. In terms of the Canadian experience Northcott and Wilson write, “... Canada is a secularized society; that is, the importance of religion as a central social institution has declined. Church and state are separated, and weekly attendance at church has declined substantially, especially since the mid-twentieth century. Increasingly, death is defined by secular rather than religious elements of society and culture.”³⁸ Retired Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong has noticed these changes happening throughout his career as both a priest and bishop. He agrees that not everybody who attends a funeral is religious. Many attend a funeral because they want to remember and celebrate a life.

They're not there to worship any particular deity. Still others are members of religious communities beyond the Christian community.³⁹ Spong later writes, "A century ago Christian funerals asserted the ability of God to overcome the power of death. Today Christian funerals are more likely to be memorial services intended to remember and extol the virtues and the example of the deceased."⁴⁰ The six phases offered throughout this book help us respect the variety of thoughts and beliefs of those joining us.

As frightening and difficult as these situations may be, on those occasions when people turn to church leaders for funerals we are presented with a unique opportunity. We are also presented with a tremendous responsibility. We need to approach this opportunity and responsibility with both prayer and caution. I'm constantly hearing complaints about clergy being too religious and eulogists trying to force their views onto others. I've also experienced situations in which clergy did not "mind their manners", so to speak. It all goes back to a service I attended a couple of years ago. It was in a large, evangelical church here in Calgary. A colleague had passed away and I wanted to attend the funeral. As I listened to the pastor and members speak about my friend's life a word kept running through my mind. That word was "insider" and it described the service perfectly. It was a Christian funeral for a Christian person and this is where the problem began. The speakers seemed to make it clear that if you did not buy into their particular take on the Christian message than you were somehow lacking something. Even though I am both a Christian and a pastor, I still felt like an outsider. I felt as if I was living beyond some invisible circle that was almost impossible to enter. The exact phrase I wrote on my service bulletin was this: "Insider services create outsiders". As pastors and service leaders we need to be told and reminded that funerals are for both insiders and outsiders. Christian funerals should be more than simply having the pastor at the front "kicking the tires and lighting the fires".

In saying this we need to acknowledge that it's difficult to maintain the balance between the needs and desires of both religious and nonreligious people. It is important to try, however. Both religious and nonreligious people confront the reality of their loss and grief. Grief and the need for mourning cannot be ignored, resisted, or buried. Canadian poet Erin Moure expresses this notion wonderfully when she writes, "To leave this world is not only to vanish ... (it) is to leave a terrible and beautiful bond."⁴¹ Pagan witch and theorist Starhawk defines grief by claiming that "grief is our healing response to loss, and if we let ourselves fully feel it and go

through all of its stages, it will bring us through rage and despair, back to acceptance and restoration.”⁴²

Grief and mourning are closely related but still very different. When it comes to mourning Paul Irion writes, “Mourning, painful though it is, has to be faced if comfort is to follow.”⁴³ Irion also writes, “... the funeral must provide a sense of finality. We have to have an opportunity to say farewell in whichever way we feel is appropriate. Mourning is a process which entails the breaking of ties with the deceased.”⁴⁴ We have to learn to “live with the memory of the deceased.”⁴⁵ Funerals help start the work of rebuilding, regrouping, and reconnecting in people’s lives, regardless of where the grieving survivors are on their spiritual journeys. Again, it’s not something we can escape or run away from. Moving through the six phases of a funeral helps keep us from running away. It’s in working through these six stages that we move forward. Put another way, Alla Bozarth – Campbell writes, “Ultimately, the only way to get through something is to get *through* it – not over, under, or around it, but all the way through it.”⁴⁶ I experienced this in a personal way not too long ago. A brain-injured friend went in for his seventh brain surgery and didn’t come out of the anaesthetic. Because of geography and financial realities his friends and I were uncertain whether or not there was going to be a funeral. His family lived across the country and they planned a service in his hometown. Luckily, parishioners in the church he attended made arrangements for a memorial service here in town. Before we knew about the service things seemed to be on hold since he died. I felt as if I was in a sort of limbo. It wasn’t until I actually experienced the local funeral that I felt I had actually passed through the gateway and moved on in my personal grief journey.

Scholars will tell us that naming the reality of loss is an important part of the funeral ritual.⁴⁷ I recently had a dream about one of the people to whom this book is dedicated. Wib died all too suddenly and I was unable to attend either funeral service held in his honour and memory. In this dream Wib was going about his life as if nothing had happened. He was teaching his adult students and consulting for different provincial government departments. He was meeting people in restaurants for coffee and debating the issues of the day. As the dream progressed its message seemed to be that Wib hadn’t really died. The rest of us were wrong about his death. Whatever news I had received of his death was either a miscommunication or a complete lie. The funeral was an empty and meaningless gesture. When I awoke from the dream I was once again faced with the harsh reality that he had, indeed, died. I had to remind myself that his death was real.

Funerals help us face this reality. They help us break out of that dream state we may find ourselves experiencing following a loss. They help us realize that life has indeed changed and in a bigger way than we may think. Those of us left behind are beginning the long process of rebuilding their lives. We're trying to move towards that point where we can carry on with life as best as we can.

In confronting death we face an unknown future that can be both confusing and frightening. Gateways may offer a hint of where we go when we die but there is often not enough information to be helpful. Regardless of how religious we are we want to know what's going to happen after we or someone close to us dies. We want to know what happens next. Aristotle once said, "All humans, by their nature, desire to know."⁴⁸ But we cannot really know what happens next for the dead loved one so we need a place where we reflect on our questions and uncertainties. We also need a place where we try to come to some understanding of our own belief concerning death and afterlife. We need a place where we can think about what one writer named as "a great perhaps".⁴⁹ What will happen to us when we die? Where will we go? Who will we meet? The six phases I present here will help us bring order to the chaos we encounter and messiness we experience.

We, as leaders and listeners, approach a funeral with all of these questions, dilemmas and more. We gather hoping for a glimpse of not only where the deceased has gone but where we will go as well. The response to these issues and needs have changed as human history has developed and evolved. Ronald Grimes writes, "Whatever the reason, the past two decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the construction of rites of passage." Grimes goes on to add, "Without rites that engage our imaginations, communities, and bodies, we lose touch with the rhythms of the human life course, just as we become temporarily disoriented without seasonal and commemorative rites that recreate our connections to the natural world and the course of human history."⁵⁰ People today want something above and beyond the traditional. They want something that speaks to their particular situation. The families that I have worked with constantly identify the need for a service that combines both personal and spiritual dimensions. They want a celebration of life with spiritual components. The Six phases of the funeral can incorporate all of these needs.

Perhaps one of the more practical reasons for the increase in attention on funerals is simple demographics. As the so-called "Baby Boomers"⁵¹ move into their older years the

frequency of funerals will only increase. More and more people, both religious and nonreligious will be called upon to lead services marking these earth-shattering transitions. Gerald Hodge states that as the population grows older there will be more of a demand for certain “support services”.⁵² While he doesn’t state this explicitly one can only hunch that one of these support services will be the funeral home. I’ll spare you an extensive statistical analysis but at the beginning of the 21st century, for example, the number of seniors living in Canada was 3.9 million. By 2006 this number had grown to 4.3 million.⁵³ Those numbers, alone, speak volumes.

Both religious and secular organizations are going to have to keep up if each person is going to have a meaningful “send off”. Clergy and celebrants will be faced with the challenge of leading more than one type of service. We’ll be called upon to provide an incredible variety of ritual possibilities throughout our working lives. Ron Grimes writes, “To live, rite and the traditions they moderate need constant revision.”⁵⁴ We will not be able to lead the same funeral twice. This will be difficult for those of us having files and books from which we pick and choose services and fill in the blanks with the name of the deceased.

Perhaps Grimes captures this best when he states, “A good funeral is one that celebrates a life, comforts the bereaved, and facilitates working through grief.”⁵⁵ Paul Irion would perhaps add that a “good funeral” also has to include the participation of as many people as possible.⁵⁶ *Dead Reckoning* will help us build services that celebrate a life, comfort and call on people to begin their grieving, and include as many people as possible in the ritual itself. This is not as easy as it sounds, however. There are so many ways we can twist things around and make a situation more difficult than it has to be. One of the ways things can get twisted is when different beliefs are in conflict.

Van Gennepe writes, “Funeral rites are ... complicated when within a single people there are several contradictory or different conceptions of the after world which may become intermingled with one another, so that their confusion is reflected in the rites.”⁵⁷ He goes on suggest that the deceased and survivors are in a kind of neutral space “situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead.”⁵⁸ One of the ways a funeral situation can become more difficult and complicated is when some clergy see the funeral as an opportunity to spread the Gospel and offer an evangelical message to the so-called “unchurched”. Some would call it a “God-sized opportunity”.⁵⁹ While it may seem like a good idea at the time this is not always appropriate, requested, or desired. One pastor has told me that this approach “does not bring

glory to God.” He also said that we "cannot pray people into heaven". Christian clergy can do effective work in a funeral situation without having to resort to what I would call a hard sell approach. I would suggest that this is one of the reasons why so many individuals and families are increasingly turning to so called “secular funerals”⁶⁰ to honour and remember the lives of their loved ones. This does not have to be our reality. As service leaders we can untie whatever gets twisted and offer something that helps bring clarity and comfort. Paul Irion reminds us that the word "comfort" means "*to make strong*"⁶¹ so our efforts can also bring strength to those who both grieve and gather to offer support.

Individual Christians and congregations have done a lot of good work without attaching strings or conditions to what they do. Habitat for Humanity, for example, is an organization that lives out a strong Christian vision without trying to convert the people they serve. Habitat volunteers build houses for people who need it and it doesn't matter whether clients are Christian or not.⁶² The foundational belief at work is that God loves everyone. I've heard clergy say the same thing when it comes to leading funerals for people beyond their congregations.

There are other reasons why funerals often have a bad name, however. Some voices have described them as being “stiff” and “unemotional”.⁶³ Other people have used stronger language to describe what they think of funerals. French writer Gustave Flaubert once talked about the “Grotesquerie (Sic) of the whole ceremony”.⁶⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton once described them as being “the sad pageantry of death”.⁶⁵ Margaret Laurence uses stronger language by referring to them as having a "bizarre cruelty".⁶⁶ Each of these examples may contain extreme language but they capture the thoughts and feelings of many throughout human history. In fact, the negativity would grow to a point where people wondered if we should be having them at all. An ancient Chinese reformer by the name of Mo Ti, for example, claimed that funerals were "useless" and that they should be "abolished".⁶⁷ The six phases of a funeral help us move away from this negativity. The six phases help us focus on the more realistic and hopeful things we can say. The six phases can help us find that place where we can celebrate and offer thanks.

When we focus on the hopeful and creative dimension of our work we can help people realize that there are some real and meaningful advantages to having funerals. Funerals, for one, offer a sense of community and inclusion. There are people around us who share our journeys. Edward Myers writes that funerals “can reassure you of your sense of belonging.”⁶⁸ There can be

something therapeutic about knowing that your family and friends are there to support you throughout this difficult time.

As we will be discussing in the next chapter, funerals can have a certain symbolic power and effect that helps people in ways they may not even know. Symbols help us deal with realities that cannot be described or understood by simply using words. I.M. Lewis states that symbols are "something that connects the known with the unknown."⁶⁹ Symbols also take the big indescribable things in life and put them into words and things. It's difficult to describe and define love, for example so we come up with visuals like hearts in order to help us show or say what we mean. When it comes to things like love and respect gestures can be just as powerful as anything we say. One of the Buddha's most powerful sermons is believed to be that one occasion where he simply held up a yellow flower for his disciples to see.⁷⁰ Symbolic gestures can help us acknowledge the change that has come into our lives. They can help us reflect on the new realities we face when someone dies. People may not always remember what is said at the ceremony itself but they may remember a gesture, sound, or even smell.

It is for these reasons that depriving people of this funeral ritual is extremely risky. People sometimes request that there be no funeral service when they die. While this may seem to be a compassionate and thoughtful gesture it often does little to meet the needs of survivors. People want and perhaps need to do something in response to word that someone they know and have been close to has died. They want to do something tangible and say something helpful. They want some active and communal way to say "Goodbye".⁷¹ This only makes sense. As Betty Jane Wylie wrote in her book *Beginnings*, "...a little howling at the moon might save a little tension later on."⁷² James Turner writes, "deprive individuals of their rituals and you may unglue the whole structure of their beliefs."⁷³ Even though Reformation scholars looked down on the funeral ritual, itself, they called for the deceased "to be accompanied prayerfully by their friends and family to the cemetery." They would also be prayed for during Sunday service.⁷⁴

Dead Reckoning helps with the planning and design of contemporary funeral services. I'll walk you through these six phases of the funeral. We'll see how each of these phases fit together and work as a unified entity. Assistance is offered in the creation, revising, and writing of everything from prayers to meditations to closing dismissals. My hope is that this will be a resource every service leader can use.

Because this book deals with people from a variety of spiritual “places”, perhaps a brief comment about terminology is important here. Throughout this book I will be using terms such as “Client” and “clients” to deal with people we encounter when planning and leading a funeral. I will also refer to "family" and whenever I do so I rely on a broad definition of the word. We're either born into families or we choose the people who will share the journey with us. Professionals use terms like “fellow travelers”⁷⁵ but I find these awkward and slightly "new agey".

Regardless of the words we choose the end product should be our focus. Celebrating a person's life is key. I've already mentioned the importance of telling the story of the deceased. This is something I'll be repeating often throughout this book. Stories are often underrated as forms of communication. Too often we dismiss them as being untrue and without power. This assessment has not always been valid. In fact, stories have been a critical part of human life from almost the very beginning. According to John Shaw entire cultures have been based on the art of storytelling. This is especially true of the Scottish Gaels who eventually found their way to Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. Shaw writes, “There's been a culture whose most important monuments are not in the form of buildings, paintings, or statues but rather in the less tangible but equally real form of stories...that have been enthusiastically transmitted over centuries by the common people.”⁷⁶ Gunter Grass once said in a Nobel Prize acceptance speech that humans have always told stories. He said, "Long before humanity learned to write and gradually became literate, everybody told tales to everybody else and everybody listened to everybody else's tales.”⁷⁷ “Everybody” is one of the key words in this quotation. We all tell stories. Novelist and critic V.S. Pritchett once described the act of storytelling, itself, as being a “universal habit”.⁷⁸ This book will help you bring stories and other resources together so that we can perpetuate this "universal habit" and perhaps give it a more personal touch. What these writers may also tell us is that stories are told in steps and stages. One thing has to happen before another in a particular sequence if the plot is to move forward and tell us something. The six stages of a funeral will help us move in a similar way.

There is a tremendous amount pressure on the service leader to do an excellent job each and every time they are requested to officiate at a service. Family and friends remember even the smallest mistakes. As one baseball umpire once said, “We're supposed to be perfect our first day on the job and then show constant improvement...”⁷⁹ While it's impossible to achieve perfection

from day one, there are ways we can “show constant improvement” and grow in how we officiate at funerals. Peter Urs Bender writes, “When you acquire a new skill or perform a task for the first time, there is an initial start-up period during which the amount of work we put in far exceeds the results gained.”⁸⁰ We can find poems and readings appropriate to the many different kinds of funerals we will be asked to lead. We can develop a filing system where this information can be easily retrieved. We can find courses that help us deal with grief and people’s response to the loss of a friend or family member. This book will offer advice on how to do these things and more through a chapter helping us evaluate our work.

If you find me going off topic please bear with me. Some of my theory is grounded in different disciplines so you may encounter some strange and distant examples and connections. I rely on everything from books on grief counselling to material from the latest business gurus. Don’t worry and bear with me – I’m usually going somewhere with everything I include. Or, to quote a friend of mine, "Trust me - I'm a professional".

Perhaps these phases are necessary because the ground on which funerals are positioned is constantly changing and people are turning to a variety of sources for help and answers. One pastor told me that he has seen a serious shift in funerals. Funerals used to stress order and tradition and that no longer works for many people today. People don’t want funerals that have been described as being “Stifling”, “Stuffy” and “stagnant”. They certainly don't want something that's read out of a book. According to this pastor funerals have developed into something that is more centred on the deceased. Some may disagree with our use of the word “shift” but regardless of our word selection something is happening and not everybody likes it. Thomas Long, for example, suggests that “funeral practices have drifted off course.”⁸¹ Long is correct but probably not for the reasons he would expect. But I will explain all of this as we proceed through the six phases. *Dead Reckoning* is intended to help us recognize the "drift", where we've gone and find our way back on course.

There may be many reasons for this "drift" but for me one stands out from the crowd. This may come across as being rather harsh but many of us simply don't know what we're doing when it comes to funerals. This isn't necessarily our fault either. For many service leaders funerals have not been a part of their formal training. Few clergy have had an extensive introduction to funerals in either seminary or in Bible College. Given the number of funerals we'll be asked to lead in our working and retired lives this is quite simply stunning. But maybe

we should be careful in what we wish for. From what clergy have told me when training is available it is not always helpful. Perhaps the situation is best summarized in a phrase Harvard medical students were once offered: "Half of what we have taught you is wrong. Unfortunately, we do not know which half."⁸² *Dead Reckoning* addresses this deficit by helping us navigate many of the shifts happening in the world and work of funeral ritual.

So as we make our way through the six phases of a funeral let us keep our boat between the navigational beacons and the best way to do this is to start at square one and try to answer a simple question.

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