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The Art of Dying on Schedule

You really need to plan your own death in advance.

by Melissa T. Shultz Published 1.19.2011 From D Magazine FEB 2011

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On Wednesday, the morning after my mother-in-law passed away, my husband, Steve, boarded a plane from our home in Dallas to D.C. He was going to see his mother one last time before her cremation, which would be done at her request. Together with his brother, they would finalize funeral plans, hoping to bring closure to her long and difficult journey with Alzheimer's. My sons and I would follow two days later, for a Saturday morning service. As the only Jew in our multicultural family, I looked a bit askance at the Saturday funeral and the cremation, but I never questioned the speed with which we were trying to have her service. Jewish funerals take place as quickly as possible after the death. Steve phoned me from the plane before takeoff.



Illustration by Clare Mallison/Agoodson.com

"My brother just called," he said. "The burial site has no times available Saturday. We didn't make reservations far enough in advance."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why would we make reservations for something we didn't expect?"

"I guess some people delay the service. And maybe the cremation is complicating it."

"How about a Sunday service?" I asked.

"They're closed on Sunday. But they can do it Monday."

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"We're flying back on Monday," I said. "Our tickets are nonrefundable."

"I'm not even sure her body will be ready for a burial on Saturday," he said. "In my rush to get here, I don't remember if I asked."

"You didn't do anything wrong," I said, and offered to make a few calls from Dallas.

The truth is, funeral plans were made many years ago. My mother-in-law bought a plot next to her husband's. With most of her family in Cuba and her husband's estranged Polish family still estranged, we knew the service would be small, just my husband and our sons, my brother-in-law, and a longtime family friend. I phoned the crematorium.

"I was expecting to go over things with your husband tonight. But the actual cremation takes time," the representative told me.

"I understand," I said. "Would it be possible to put a rush on it so we can have a service on Saturday?"

"It's not possible."

"Is it possible for a fee?" I asked.

"Just a minute," he said, and put me on hold.

"It will be \$150. We have to pay someone to stay late. Tell your husband when he comes to bring a credit card."

"Thanks," I said, and hung up to call the cemetery. "Hello, you've been speaking to my family about my mother-in-law, Isabel."

"I already told your brother-in-law that we don't have any more times available," she said. "You didn't give us enough notice."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. We called on Tuesday," I said.

"People plan these things much further in advance," she said.

I paused.

"We've had the plot for 12 years."

"That just reserved her space, not the service," she said.

"I see. May I speak to a supervisor, please?"

"It won't help," she said, but told me to call back later anyway.

When I did, she put me on hold. After a long wait, a new voice picked up. "Yeah," she said.

I explained it all, how my husband was on a flight from Dallas to D.C., how my sons and I would be joining him soon and that my brother-in-law had been sick, and I didn't think he could take one more thing, and tomorrow is his birthday, and please—woman to woman—could she find a way to squeeze us in? "It will be just us. There's only a small box to bury. I don't even think we'll have a priest. They're all booked. We just want to say goodbye."

"No," she said coolly. "You have to plan these things in advance."

"I'll remember that next time," I said.

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“No,” she said.

“I’d be forever grateful.”

“No.”

“Please,” I pleaded.

There was a long sigh. “Hold on,” she said.

Minutes passed.

“Nine o’clock Saturday morning,” the voice picked up and said. Get here at 8:45. Don’t be late.”

I texted my husband, who had just landed: “The funeral is back on.”

Later, when we talked, we were oddly elated, as if we’d just been granted entrée into a club everyone is dying to join.

This Kafkaesque experience has left me wondering if perhaps morticians know something we don’t: when we’re going to die. Perhaps the best strategy is to call the funeral home weekly to make a reservation for our own funeral services—then cancel at the end of week if we’re still alive. That way, at least we can live in peace knowing we’ve got reservations.

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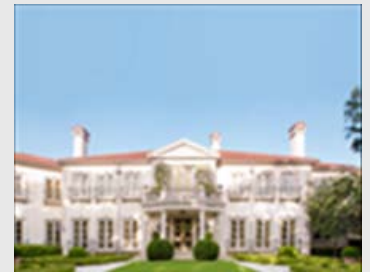
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