

The role of stories in humanist ceremonies

Everybody loves stories. They connect us, they reveal us, and they bind us.

'What's the story?' asks the archetypal news editor. And if it's good enough, that story will go on the front page, or lead the bulletin – because stories sell newspapers and win viewers and listeners. In every walk of life, stories sell. That's why businesses spend millions sending their staff on storytelling courses: so that they can learn to communicate more effectively with each other and with customers.

Humanist ceremonies are no different. Whether we're honouring the dead, celebrating romance, or marking a new life, we need stories to engage people, prompt tears and laughter, and create that bond among families and friends that makes a ceremony precious and memorable.

I remember walking across a car park after a funeral and hearing the people ahead of me discussing a story they had just heard. I had found the story fascinating myself – which is why I had included it in the script. And it's why, when I go to see a bereaved family, I always ask what kind of home the person grew up in. What did their parents do, at home and at work? Did they have siblings, family traditions, a garden, pets? With a little bit of prompting, you can usually unearth stories, often long forgotten, that add crucial threads to the tapestry of a person's life.

Then, of course, you hope you'll have friends or family members who will tell more stories – funny, touching, revelatory stories that you might even be able to refer to at the end of the ceremony as you try to leave everyone with what William Wordsworth described as 'a consciousness... deposited upon the silent shore of memory, images and precious thoughts that shall not die, and cannot be destroyed'.

There will be other stories that are passed on from generation to generation. At my own wedding, I told a story that my father had told me many years earlier. Who knows, maybe my grandchildren will tell that same story many years hence – I've told it to them often enough!

Which brings me to weddings – and the couple's story. This is the bit that traditional church weddings often miss out: in my experience, you rarely find out how the couple met and how their relationship developed, let alone the circumstances of the proposal or the ways in which they now feel they complement each other.

How fortunate we are, as humanist celebrants, that we can concentrate on the real human story and get our audience gripped early on, so that by the time a couple comes to make their vows, all their friends and relatives are rooting for them, ready to erupt in spontaneous applause at the moment when you pronounce them married, and they embrace.

So what's the best way to get the story, or stories? Whether it's a funeral, wedding, or naming, I always ask myself round to their place. You want them to be at home, where they feel most relaxed, and where there will probably be photographs, maybe other people, living things, or objects with stories attached. Glean what you can, run it past the people concerned, and everyone will think you've known them for ages.

It's a bit different with a naming, of course. The child's story has yet to be told, so everyone has to use their imagination and look ahead. You may still remind everyone how we got to this point, tell some of the parents' story, the family's story so far, and probably some little vignettes from the infant's early months, travels, struggles, and encounters. Thereafter, you can make the point that as humanists we have nothing pre-ordained or laid down for us. We are free to make our own stories. It is an exhilarating prospect, and an unfinished story is no less compelling.

Let's be honest, though. Even humanist ceremonies can be duds. The things we are inclined to criticise about religious ceremonies – that they concentrate on ritual and pious platitudes instead of the real people involved – well, we can fall into that trap too. It's all very well to light candles, recite poetry, and offer your reflections on life, death, and morality. Just keep those elements to a minimum. Concentrate on the stories that give meaning to our lives, glean as much colour and detail as you can, and tell them for all you're worth.

Rupert Morris,
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