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It's your funeral

It's a subject most of us try to avoid – and two thirds of us don't make a will. But preparing for your death will make life easier for the loved ones you leave behind.

By Chantal Rickards

Last updated at 8:23 PM on 09th August 2008



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'I hope my website can ease the last rites of passage for the living and the dead,' says Chantal Rickards

We can't all laugh at the prospect of death and old age, although Joan Collins has a wry view on the matter. When asked about what she thought of the disparity in age between herself and her husband Percy (who's more than 30 years younger), she is said to have replied, 'If he dies, he dies.'

Ms Collins has a great attitude to old age and death, almost to the extent of denying it will ever happen. Unfortunately, as Benjamin Franklin pointed out, there is not much we can guarantee in the modern world except 'death and taxes'.

My personal experience of death started when I was 11. On what may have been Take Your Daughter to Work Day, my father trundled me along to a postmortem in Poole, Dorset. I should explain that he was a consultant pathologist at the time. Death was his career; for me it was just Dad's job. For others, and indeed most people, it must seem like a very odd way to earn a living.

Every year, 600,000 people die in this country – six full Wembley stadiums – and of that number only 38 per cent will have written a will. What on earth were the rest of them doing about the end of their life? There are obvious reasons why we avoid dealing with death – but we shouldn't.

The death of someone close is a crushing experience. It's also very difficult for the friends and colleagues of someone who is grief-stricken. No one knows quite what to say and they often misjudge the response, 'I'm OK,' as being true.

In fact the effects of grief and loss stay with us for years and can adversely affect the rest of our lives. Some professionals now believe that many depressive instances are the result of bereavement; it can sometimes take many years before the depression kicks in.

I believe we all have a duty to make the end of our life as easy as possible for those around us. We need to leave our friends and family with happy memories and not ones of fights over the funeral, the flowers, the dog, the will...

A few years ago, my gorgeous mum, by that stage a widow, mother to six children – a doctor, a writer, a therapist, a head teacher, a television executive (me) and a company director – suddenly became quite frail. She was 79.

It had become routine for us all to take turns to be on Mum duty each weekend, and I duly went with my two young sons to her lovely thatched cottage in Dorset where I had grown up. Although it was only three weeks since I had seen her at our usual family gathering for Christmas, it was obvious that things weren't right. My mother was not her gentle, well-spoken, educated self.

I called my sister on the Sunday morning: 'I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is: Mum's gone bonkers. She has become rude, aggressive, is asking for sherry at 10am, is saying I am the most horrible daughter she's ever had, that I have been no support to her whatsoever and that she is cutting me out of her will.' My sister was as perplexed as I was. 'So what on earth is the good news?' 'Oh,' I replied, 'she thinks I'm you.'

My mother's mind became more and more confused. She spent the last six months of her life in a home. By then, for some of the time she scarcely knew where she was. After what can only be described as a living death known as Lewy Body Disease, a complex mix of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, she died. It is a cruel way to leave the planet.

"I do not want my two boys to have an argument over whether to have vol-au-vents or open sandwiches at my funeral"

The reason for the story is that it became obvious to us all at the time she became ill that we had left it too late to ask her how she saw the end of her life, how and where she wanted to die, and which religious service she would have wanted – she was born and died a Catholic but we wanted to bury her in the C of E churchyard where my father is buried. We made sure the last months were as good as they could have been. Black humour became the measure of the day. Although demolished with anxiety, we were able to laugh when she told us she had been run over by a lamppost or had been on the roof checking for V-2 rockets – something she had done at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge during the war.

She ended up not knowing who we were, but aware that she was surrounded by people who loved and cared for her. She lived in good health to see her children grow up and prosper, and she had watched her 12 grandchildren playing in her garden.

But her death was brutal; four of us were there, two delayed at Heathrow. We wept, we hugged, we found solace in the fact she was no longer suffering and we all went into hyperdrive over the arrangements. We drew up a list: undertaker, flowers, service, wake, headstone, announcement in the newspapers, telling family and friends.

Unsurprisingly, six strong people, her children, had different views on many of these things. There was a 50:50 split over where the service should be held – so we had two. There was a lack of agreement over whether Mum's coffin should be at both services, and whether she should be in the coffin or not at the first service. There was even dispute over the food we provided at the wake.

I don't want to give the impression we were warring – not a bit of it – but there were so many details to attend to, and so many different points of view, that I felt like an anatomical drawing, the one with the skin stripped away, every sinew exposed. What we didn't have was a guide to the end of her life, at a time when we most needed one.

Six months later, still barely at peace, still feeling awfully alone, my big brother Pip unexpectedly died. It didn't stop there. In the year after Mum died, not only did I lose my brother but also an uncle, aunt, cousin and both next-door neighbours.

I still find my brother's death hard to talk about, as it was such a shock. Alive one minute and dead the next. Tragically he died in his flat in London, above the hospital where he was a cardiologist. More chaos ensued, more tears, another funeral and a very moving memorial service which 650 people attended. We all arranged his funeral, sharing the pain and trying to ease the load on my sister-in-law. He was buried over the fence from his home in Hampshire. Only recently my sister-in-law told me Pip had once told her he wanted to be buried at sea, which she had completely forgotten in the few days after his death.

But the idea for the website I have just created, lustingpost.com – a sort of handy guide to life and death meets Friends Reunited – came to me at another memorial service, this time for the Countdown presenter Richard Whiteley, a couple of years ago. I was reliving the grief I felt at my brother's event and thinking I needed to share my experiences and try to make them useful to others. Richard had become a good friend over the years, since I had run Countdown in the 90s.

I was sitting in York Minster, listening to Rick Wakeman playing the piano, a piece he had written for the occasion called 'Gone But Not Forgotten', wondering what sort of music I would like to have at my funeral. Richard had asked Rick some time before that when his end came he'd like Rick to play for him, and he did. What would my music be? 'Stairway to Heaven' or maybe 'Bat Out of

Hell'? And then it struck me that I should put it all on paper and organise it.

I sat in the nave thinking I wanted to take all I had been through and put together something that would be practical, supportive and lasting in some way for other people. I need to leave a legacy. I have letters I must write, arrangements that I must make, I want to have fun organising my end. I do not want my two boys to have an argument over whether to have vol-au-vents or open sandwiches at my funeral. A recent survey shows that 66 per cent of people have never even discussed death with their loved ones. In my opinion they are all crackers.

I am sure disagreements erupt because, in our grief-stricken state after the death of a loved one, we are so emotionally disturbed that we say things we don't mean, and become obsessed about the unimportant details which cause tension and bitterness that sometimes never goes away.

Eighteen months ago I sat next to an old friend of my brother Charlie at a dinner party and told him about my idea. I was too busy with a full-time job and bringing up two children to take on the project myself, but luckily George saw lastingpost.com's potential and its role. He brought in a group of like-minded people with varied skills and experience, including an internet designer, a probate solicitor, a GP, and two bereavement counsellors who were happy to join us and work to get it underway.

The website allows you to have your own private site where you can plan everything: music, flowers, nursing homes, wills, life insurance and the like. You can assemble a list of everyone who needs contacting which can be sent out on your death; it will help you to notify your doctor, lawyer, friends, credit card companies, clubs and employer all in one easy move. Furthermore, it becomes a live memorial site when you are gone, notifying everyone of where and when your funeral is to be held and allowing your friends and family to upload all their memories of you. Most importantly it has masses of bereavement information – who to talk to and what to expect. Oh, and it's free.

Death is all around us. Every time I open the newspaper I see another famous name I have worked with who has 'left the building'. Jeremy Beadle, Alan Coren, Patrick Lichfield, Ned Sherrin, Christopher Reeve. I hope they all left with their bags packed and in good order.

I hope too that I'm not close to the end of my life, but I have thought about making it easier for those I will leave behind. I've had a laugh doing it. I shall rest in peace.

Lastingpost.com cannot claim to take away the pain or the aching loss of bereavement. But we hope it can help two sorts of people: the ones who want to leave detailed instructions about their wishes before they die and a memorial site after they have gone, and their relatives and friends who will find the details of their loved one's wishes and intentions already in place. We hope it can ease the last rites of passage for the living and the dead. 'Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.'

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