

How to write a eulogy

A final gift to a loved one

After polls determined that our number one fear is public speaking—topping even death—writer Peggy Noonan observed the implications: At a funeral most of us would prefer lying in the coffin to standing at the lectern. Will you be ready when your time comes (to deliver a eulogy)? This particular speech is doubly daunting because a grief-stricken friend or loved one will ask you to do it, on very short notice. It helps if you don't think of eulogy as a performance art, but as a gift. You are not expected to replicate televised eulogies given by professional entertainers and politicians. Your task is to console, not to entertain—though sharing amusing memories may be a welcome part of what you offer.

Reading your eulogy is appropriate and expected, so write it out. Start by considering what you cherish about your subject. This might involve how the deceased looked. No detail is too small. Novelist Katherine Anne Porter's tribute to her colleague Flannery O'Connor, who died at age 39 of lupus, captured a precise image: "I want to tell what she looked like and how she carried herself and how she sounded standing balanced lightly on her aluminum crutches, whistling to her peacocks, who came floating and rustling to her, calling in their rusty voices."

Eulogist Mario T. Garcia offered a visual portrait of César Chávez addressing a privileged Yale University audience, an image very different from the dynamic civil-rights leaders of his era: "Here was César, a small, Indian-looking, modest leader of farm workers with his usual checkered shirt, the kind you buy at Penney's or Sears. He was a humble farm worker with little education, who spoke softly and with little emotion. It was hard to believe that he was one of the most important labor leaders in the country's history."

Stanford Professor Tobias Wolff recalled his fellow writer/teacher Andre Dubus, clad in a U.S. Marines T-shirt and a Rambo headband, jerking his wheelchair around a room: "Andre had about him a loud blustering maleness—one of my sons, then quite young, called him Yosemite Sam."

Expand your memories to consider what a novelist might call an elucidating moment. Did your subject ever say anything that revealed the essence of who (s)he was? Eulogist John Taylor recalled maxims his brother, Maj. David G. Taylor, often recited before he was killed in Iraq: "Life isn't fair—get over it. No whining. You are probably not entitled to anything you didn't work for. Freedom isn't free, someone has to pay the price, and it might as well be you."

Speaking at the funeral of the witty host of PBS-TV's *Firing Line*, William F. Buckley, Jr., his son Christopher's anecdote evoked loving laughter: "I was with him in Connecticut . . . last October at a fundraiser for the local library, billed as 'A Bevy of Buckleys.' An article had appeared in the local paper, alerting the community. . . . My eyes alighted on the sentence: 'The Buckleys are a well-known American family, William F. Buckley being arguably the best known.' I handed [him] the clipping and waited for the reaction I knew would come. Sure enough within seconds, he looked up with what I would describe as only faintly bemused indignation and said, 'Ar-guably?'"

Jim Forest's tribute to activist Dorothy Day, revealed that virtuous people—even pacifists—can have sharp edges. He recalled some typical Day retorts: After someone told her she was too hot-headed, Day shot back: "I hold more temper in one minute than you will hold in your entire life." When a

journalist who told her it was the first time he had interviewed a saint, she snapped, "Don't call me a saint—I don't want to be dismissed that easily."

A reminder of the faith or wisdom that influenced the deceased can be the best way to summarize the meaning of a life. At a eulogy for New York Giants owner Wellington Mara, his son John recalled that after a string of losses a sportswriter—referring to the elder Mara—asked: "What can you expect of an Irishman named Wellington, whose father was a bookmaker?" The sting from that was still fresh a few days later when Mara decided to answer that question at a kickoff luncheon:

"I'll tell you what you can expect. You can expect anything he says or writes may be repeated aloud in your own home in front of your own children. You can believe that he was taught to love and respect all mankind, but to fear no man. And you could believe that his abiding ambitions were to pass onto his family the true richness of the inheritance he received from this father, the bookmaker: the knowledge and love and fear of God, and second to give you (our fans and our coach) a Super Bowl winner."

Former speaker of the House Tip O'Neill's granddaughter Catlin said it all when she told mourners that O'Neill called the Sermon on the Mount "the best political speech ever written." She then read that section of the Gospel of Matthew, known as the Beatitudes.

Finally, keep it short. A brief, well-thought-out eulogy that acknowledges even one trait you cherished about the deceased will be appreciated far more than the kind of long, rambling tribute that invariably begins focusing on the speaker rather than his subject. Your heartfelt remembrance, simply told, is one of the sweetest gifts you can give, because it calls for grace under pressure, and usually courage. You have said "yes" to comforting those who mourn, even as you are one of them.

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