

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

During the late '70s, a series of books were created called *Choose Your Own Adventure*. These books allowed the reader to assume the role of the main character and make decisions that will ultimately determine the plot outcome. The reader was directed to turn from the front, to the back and to the middle of the book following page numbers based on the decisions that were made. What was interesting about these books was that no matter if the reader chose to go through the door, or around the door, the character ultimately ended up outside. One to four endings were offered, no matter what decisions were made. How does this relate to planning a funeral or cremation? There are known endings (burial or cremation), but how do we write the story of the "adventure" that comes first? What decisions can we make now to get us to our desired ending?

Most people have an ending in mind. For example, "I would like to be cremated and scattered in the ocean," or, "I would like to be buried next to my wife in XYZ Cemetery," or, the infamous "Put me in a pine box and bury me out back." Whatever ending is chosen, the steps leading up to it need to be explored. Will there be a visitation or gathering? Should a service be held, and will it be formal or informal? Should I choose burial or cremation? Every time one of these questions is answered, more decisions arise, including what kind of merchandise may be necessary, such as a casket or burial vault.

Think of chapter one of this plan about whether or not a visitation or gathering should be held to give family and friends a time to gather and share in the stories of a life lived. It is common to think that if "no one comes to see me when I'm living, then I don't want them to see me when I'm gone." To challenge this thought, this gathering could be viewed as a time when people can come together and share in stories and memories. Think about this for a minute. The last time you went to a visitation, where was everyone located in comparison to where the deceased was ... two opposite ends of the room, right? Where everyone most likely gathered was near the memorabilia, pictures and items that told a person's life story. Why? Because we want to share that person's life and witness how we may have affected their life story as well. A closed casket, no casket, an urn or just memorabilia and flowers are all choices within this chapter. The location of this event is something that will require some consideration as well. A church is often requested for a more formal event, private venues are good for a very casual event, and then there is the good old funeral home for everything in between. Don't get too hung up on the timing of these events, but concentrate on the style and location.

Chapter two would be the ceremonial aspect of this plan. Many individuals today choose to incorporate a religious ceremony into their final farewell. This can be done at any location. Much like the gathering, it can be formal at a church, informal at a private venue, or a mixture of the two at a funeral home. Often families want to have the informal gathering, but then elect a traditional religious ceremony at a church. Others may want to have an informal gathering, followed by an informal "time of shared memories" with loved ones, perhaps even with wine or champagne toasts to close out the ceremony. These choices are viewed differently and vary in many ways, so it is imperative to make your preferences known.

The third and final chapter is where most plans may have started before you read this column. That is, the method of disposition, or burial versus cremation. When burial is elected, the decisions are quite easy: Where and what type (traditional or green burial). Cremation throws a bit of a wrench into this chapter. It is not unusual for surviving family members to wonder, when presented with the urn containing the cremated remains of their loved one, "What am I supposed to do with this ... I thought she took care of everything?" In order to eliminate any confusion and the chance of this life story ending abruptly, let's tie in a proper ending. A few of the many options people turn to today when cremation is chosen would be burial at a cemetery, placement in a columbarium (an above-ground granite structure), scattering or taking the urn home. Progressive cemeteries are creating unique columbaria that focus on telling a life story. Veteran's cemeteries, including Arlington National Cemetery, offer columbarium interment. It is good to take some time and weigh these options so that the right closing to this story is created.

Perhaps the author of those *Choose Your Own Adventure* books started where we all do – at the end. Designing a plan is essential to create a unique life story, but it must be shared with the ones we love. Let's pave the way for them, and leave a map that leads to the perfect farewell story.

Ryan, owner, supervising mortician and preplanning counselor at Lasting Tributes on Bestgate Road in Annapolis, offers solutions to high-cost funerals. He can be reached at 410.897.4852 or Ryan@LastingTributesFuneralCare.com

