



# The Funeral Discourse – Drivers of Change in Scotland

Pharos

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Good afternoon. To be honest, despite my link with Bath, I am not really an academic and this paper was always going to be more of a reflection than a formal treatise. I conducted my first funeral 48 years ago. After five years, I had abandoned the study of law to train as a Church of Scotland minister, and that summer I was running an adventure playground on a demolition site in a very poor parish in east Edinburgh. A young lad came to me and said that his grandad had died and his mum wanted to know if I could do a funeral. A bit like being asked to speak here today, I had two reactions: first PANIC – I can't do that, then second, CONFIDENCE – yes of course I can. On both occasions I would have been better to stay with PANIC! I had never attended a burial, and only ever attended one cremation.

I consulted a minister friend who told me I would have no problem. The funeral directors would run things, and he would lend me his *Book of Common Order* as the Church of Scotland missal was called. All I had to do was read the words which he had long ago underlined.

I assume I visited the family, and learnt enough about Jimmy's grandad to make an effort at a eulogy, but I remember nothing of that, indeed I remember very little of that day. But I do have flashes of recall:

- The fact that it transpired the funeral director and the cemetery were both connected to the Roman Catholic Church – which nobody had mentioned – and which made me wonder if I should be there at all,
- The fact that many of the mourners had met in the pub across the road before the service started, which meant they seemed to have little or no interest in what I said,
- And the fact that, when we got to the cemetery, and having placed the coffin over the open grave, the grave diggers and the funeral director retired to behind the family to light up cigarettes, from where I had to call them back to come and lower grandad to his final resting place.

But my strongest memory is of embarrassment that I simply stood where I was told, and read words from a book which were in a religious language that seemed to hold little meaning for the family. However, I had committed grandad with the promise of eternal life, which seemed to be what was expected of me, albeit I had done it in a totally impersonal way, with words which were long out of date, and with almost no sincerity on my part. However the main purpose of the funeral had been met and the body had been disposed of.

I remember promising myself that it would be different next time. And I hope it was, because of course over the next few years there were other funerals and I found other books to read from, using more modern language, and with

more accessible readings. In time, I became quite adept at crafting a eulogy from the limited information I could glean in a half hour visit to a family I didn't know.

And I began to understand that there was more to a funeral than simply disposing of the body. As I listened to families, I realised that the funeral was a chance to remember the person, gathering stories and life events into some kind of narrative which families seemed to find

helpful. Oh, there were times I got it wrong – sometimes horribly wrong, though thankfully that was

usually for one side of the family while the

other side felt I had got it just right. I

learnt how fickle memories are, and

how important it was to keep a

balance in the grief dance of families

at war.

And then, with the help of other

funeral directors, I learnt some of the

rituals of the funeral. I learnt the slow

march, the deep bow, respectful pause.

And, although I found these unnatural, I

recognised that they were indicative of the third

factor that went to make up a funeral, the ritualisation of

death. I learnt that a funeral was an important learning

opportunity for people who had seldom thought about

anyone's mortality, but who began to see that death was to

be respected and treated with dignity. The formality around

the funeral gave them a structure – a framework – in which

they could visit the idea of death, and recognise the finality

of life. Then, maybe, with the closing of the grave or the

shutting of the curtains they could leave mortality behind

till the next time.

But the funerals I conducted were still grounded in my

Presbyterian beliefs and my Scottish middle-class culture.

- It was on that basis that I selected readings that I thought would be helpful,

- It was from my belief about death that I guided their thinking,

- And it was from that stance that I made declarations about eternal peace.

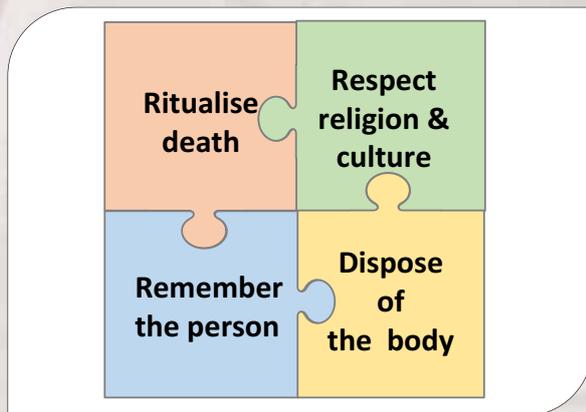
And that was all OK because Scotland had not yet embraced post-modernity. There was still a big narrative ►

And, although I found these unnatural, I recognised that they were indicative of the third factor that went to make up a funeral, the ritualisation of death.



which most people subscribed to, even though they did not necessarily believe it. And so I recognised the fourth factor that went to make up the funeral: respecting religion and culture – that in some way the funeral was seen as the gatekeeper of the afterlife.

It is my contention that these four factors are largely how people see a funeral – that they come together into what I like to call the 'funeral discourse' – a phrase borrowed from sociology suggesting that this is the accepted way of thinking about a funeral, and that they are held there by this black band.



Slide 1

These were the functions I performed, on a weekly and often bi-weekly basis, over two decades of ministry, until in 1996 I left the parish ministry and went to work whole-time as chaplain in a district general hospital in Tayside.

But the hospital I went to hadn't had a full-time chaplain before, and they were not quite sure what to do with one. What they did know was that when someone had died, that was a good time to send for the chaplain. In time I persuaded them to contact me *before* someone died, and I sat with many families while they kept vigil with a dying relative, as I had done with both of my own parents when they died a few years before. (Slide 2)



Slide 2

Part of my role included oversight of the mortuary, and I spent many hours chasing cremation certificates. And with a busy maternity unit, including a special care baby unit, I developed a particular interest in the funerals of stillborn babies and neonates, and, later, also of earlier pregnancy losses. (Slide 3)



Slide 3

In 1998 I attended a conference where Dr William Worden was explaining his 'Tasks of Mourning'<sup>1</sup> and I was hooked. Bill Worden became a personal friend, and two years later I became the first Chair of the newly devolved Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

I became fascinated by the grieving process, and by both the morbidity and the mortality of grief. And I became frustrated by the way the health service in Scotland largely ignored the grief of the families when someone died. (Slides 4 & 5)



**The Four Tasks of Mourning**

1. To accept the reality of the loss
2. To process the pain of grief
3. To adjust to a world without the deceased
4. To find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of a new life

*William Worden*

Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy. 4th Ed.2010. Routledge

Slide 4

With the support of my hospital authorities I spent the next years developing training in bereavement care for health service staff, and also for Cruse Scotland. And there it might have ended if it hadn't been that all of a sudden things started moving in Scotland.

The fears prompted by the organ retention scandal, which had started in Alder Hey<sup>3</sup> in 1988 slowly spread across the UK, including Scotland,<sup>4</sup> and years later I found



Slide 5

myself in Tayside speaking with parents for whom an earlier post mortem examination had now resulted in them being told of retained blocks or slides, and sometimes of whole organs missing. People now struggled with the idea that they may have held a funeral for an incomplete baby or foetus. And some now wanted another funeral for tissue or organs which had been retained. Faith in the medical profession and in the funeral industry took a bad knock! (Slide 6)

And as we emerged from the organ retention scandal, Dr Harold Shipman<sup>5</sup> was convicted of killing 15 of his patients, and suspected of killing around 250 more. In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, attention was focussed on how we could prevent such a horrific crime happening again. While people, for the most part, trusted their own GPs something had clearly gone wrong that these deaths had not been questioned earlier and once again the system took a severe knock. (Slide 7)



Harold Frederick Shipman was convicted at Preston Crown Court on 31 January 2000 of the murder of 15 of his patients while he was a General Practitioner. He was sentenced to life imprisonment.

'None of your victims realised that yours was not a healing touch. None of them knew that in truth you had brought her death, death which was disguised as the caring attitude of a good doctor'.

**The Honourable Mr Justice Forbes,  
when sentencing Shipman on 31st January 2000**

Slide 7

In 2005, the Scottish Minister of Health set up a working group under the chairmanship of Sheriff Robert Brodie, to review the burial and cremation legislation – and the context was, in part, the aftermath of these scandals. The commission reported<sup>6</sup> in 2007, but the consultation on its recommendations did not take place until 2010.

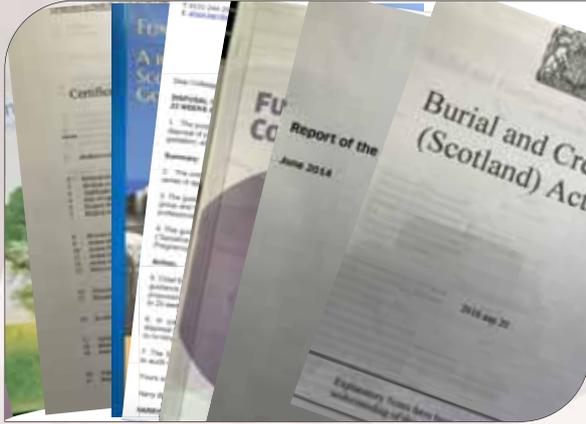
At the same time the Scottish Government commissioned a review of bereavement care in Scotland. The report of that study,<sup>7</sup> carried out by Peter Wimpenny and Audrey Stephen at Robert Gordon University, was published in 2006, but, like Sheriff Brodie's report, it got lost in the preparation for the 2007 Scottish parliamentary election – the one which swept Alex Salmond and the SNP to power. (Slide 8)



### Numbers declared to Review Group on Retention of Organs

|                              |       |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Argyll & Clyde               | 75    |
| Ayrshire & Arran             | 30    |
| Dumfries & Galloway          | 7     |
| Fife                         | 0     |
| Forth Valley                 | 4     |
| Grampian                     | 154   |
| North Glasgow                | 4,453 |
| South Glasgow                | 174   |
| South Glasgow Neuropathology | 1,479 |
| Yorkhill                     | 432   |
| Highland                     | 1     |
| Lanarkshire                  | 19    |
| Lothian                      | 558   |
| West Lothian                 | 0     |

Slide 6



Slide 8

Many of us were determined that these reports should not get lost. In 2008 I made a cheeky request to Scottish Government Health for funding to attend the International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, which was being held that year in Melbourne. Against all my expectations they agreed, on the condition I helped them when I came back, to develop bereavement guidance for NHS Scotland. That, as they say, was a no-brainer, and in January 2009 I was seconded to work for the Health Directorate to develop what became known as *Shaping Bereavement Care, a framework for action for Bereavement Care in NHS Scotland*.<sup>8</sup> This remains the extant advice for our health service in Scotland.

The following year I was charged with developing guidance on the disposal of non-viable foetal remains, and Scotland moved to become the first part of the UK to ban the disposal of such pregnancy losses as clinical waste, opting instead for disposal of all pregnancy losses at a crematorium or by burial.<sup>9</sup>

And thanks to pressure from the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) and the Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors (SAIF) through the newly formed Cross Party Group on Funerals and Bereavement, Sheriff Brodie's report also came back into focus and led to the Certification of Death (Scotland) Act,<sup>10</sup> introduced in 2011. While England struggled – and maybe struggles still – to find ways of preventing any repetition of Shipman, Scotland recognised that nothing would ever totally prevent a rogue doctor going on such a killing spree, and so in Scotland we focussed on improving the quality of the MCCD (medical certificate of cause of death), introducing a randomised oversight of a percentage of certificates, at no cost to the

family, and ensuring incidentally that in future burial and cremation would require the same paperwork – doing away with those cremation certificates I had spent years chasing round the hospital in Perth, and consequently saving bereaved families the cost of that certificate. The treatment of death and the care of the bereaved were now clearly on the Scottish Government agenda.

But two more major drivers were to come into force before things really moved forwards.

In 2012 Scottish members of ABSCO (the Association of Bereavement Service Co-ordinators) raised concerns about the number of people who were finding it difficult, in times of increasing austerity, to meet the costs associated with funerals. They asked me to raise this at the Cross Party Group – which I did, although initially there was little uptake.

It was not until Simon Cox coined the phrase 'funeral poverty', I think in the 2014 Sun Life Report on the Cost of Dying<sup>11</sup> – which the press, and then the general public took up this concern. That year a group of us formed the Scottish Working Group on Funeral Poverty, and engaged directly with Scottish Government on the impact of the rising cost of funerals. In 2015 I was asked, by the Minister for Social Justice to prepare a report, in conjunction with Citizens Advice Scotland on Funeral Poverty in Scotland.<sup>12</sup> The recommendations of that report are currently being implemented, both in the detail of the new Scottish Funeral Expense Allowance and in the Scottish Government's Funeral Costs Plan.

The other major driver that emerged at the same time was when it was revealed that an Edinburgh crematorium had been secretly disposing of the ashes from the cremation of babies, having told the families there would be no cremated remains. Another scandal was developing, which would engulf a number of crematoria across Scotland, and which led to two major reports – one on the issues at the Edinburgh crematorium, and the other a Scottish Government commission chaired by a retired High Court Judge, Lord Bonomy, which looked at the picture across Scotland and was charged with bringing forward recommendations for changes in legislation and practice. The commission reported in 2014,<sup>13</sup> and their recommendations were joined with the remaining recommendations of the Brodie Commission in the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act<sup>14</sup> to which both Natalie McKail (Inspector of Funeral Directors, Scotland)

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and Robert Swanson (Inspector of Crematoria, Scotland) have referred.

But there is one final driver to which I want to refer. I mentioned that in the early days of my ministry, 40 years ago, Scotland had not yet embraced post-modernism. In those days almost all funerals were religious, with the funeral acting as the passage from this life to the next.

But in the past 20 years that has changed. Just last month, on the eve of the Church of Scotland's Annual Assembly the media proclaimed that the Church could cease to exist in 30 years' time. While one UK source suggested in a survey that 62% felt religion had played some part in their funeral arrangements, an Edinburgh company I spoke with last week told me that 60 - 70% of the funerals they conduct are now non-religious. (Slide 9)



Slide 9

So what of the funeral discourse? Have these drivers had an effect? My contention is that the traditional model is in the process of blowing apart.

- No longer a religious event, but a secular one,
- No longer a focus on remembering, but of celebrating,
- No longer a ritual that teaches us about death, but a source of debt and poverty.

The funeral is in danger of becoming, for many, simply the disposal of the body.

The rise in direct cremation, whether for financial reasons or for philosophical ones, seems to me to be the culmination of that, indicating a change greater than anything I could have dreamt of when Jimmy asked me to bury his grandfather.

It is a change that I think I welcome – breaking out of the straitjacket of the funeral discourse. But the challenge is to ensure that these other factors still find a place – we must ensure that, if not at the funeral, then somewhere,

- We ponder the meaning of death,
- Develop our own framework of belief about what life means for us,
- And that we remember and celebrate our dead.

Our sanity in grief depends on us doing all of that. Or so I believe – but there is no robust evidence as to how the funeral impacts on people's grief over time. And that takes me back to the beginning: I explained that I was not an academic, but this final slide is my justification for being listed as a Visiting Research Fellow at Bath. With my colleagues here, we are undertaking a longitudinal study looking at the impact, if any, of decisions around cremation funerals on the grief of the bereaved. We will be reporting in two years' time.

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# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

## Ruth Jardine – Roucan Loch Crematorium, Scotland

John, I accept what you are saying that we need to embrace change whole-heartedly and I can tell you that last year, Roucan Loch has been analysing my statistics and 75% of our services were conducted as non-religious services, so obviously things are on the rise. What I am particularly interested in is how do we ensure that the quality of these civil services or non-religious services, and I am aware of one particular institution, and Anne Barber is here today representing Civil Ceremonies, who is the only course in the UK providing a diploma, and my experience of people who are trained with Civil Ceremonies is that of excellence and I welcome whole-heartedly those people to the crematorium. My experience of people who are trained elsewhere, unfortunately, is not as great. It is not to say that that is across the board, but I just wondered what your views would be on having a standard that should be met that is recognised nationally?

## John Birrell

I think if Jimmy's grandad's funeral had been held at Roucan Loch, you might have questioned the training that some of us as ministers received, in conducting funerals also. I think the quality and sincerity of the celebrant is really important; I suspect that, on occasion, quality and sincerity conflict rather than come together. So I whole-heartedly agree with you that good training for people conducting funerals is hugely important and that training is not just about the conduct of the funeral, but it is about the ability to empathise with the bereaved, not just in planning the funeral but in supporting them through it. The number of people that I have heard say to me, in a counselling situation, 'I don't remember anything about the funeral, I was too upset', and yet we can spend hours carefully crafting the funeral service, but that isn't necessarily the most important bit for the bereaved people, it is what they meet in the person conducting the funeral that is as important. ■



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## Biography

*John is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Death and Society and the Department of Social and Policy Studies at Bath University. A former healthcare chaplain and NHS bereavement lead, he worked with Scottish Government for a number of years to develop a range of guidance on bereavement issues for NHS Scotland, and chaired the Scottish Working Group on Funeral Poverty until this year. He previously chaired the Board of Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland for six years, and regularly writes and delivers training for them. He is a member of the International Work Group on Death Dying and Bereavement.*

*John's research interests are around the efficacy of bereavement care and the causes and consequences of funeral poverty. He is currently a member of a team exploring the relationship between cremation and grief in the two years following a death.*

