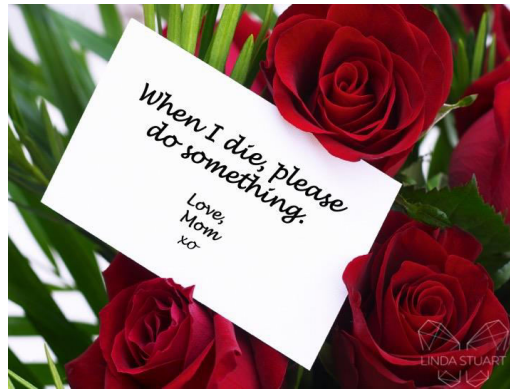


When I Die, Please Do Something

By Linda Stuart



In her dresser drawer, they discovered a hand-written note that read, “When I die, please do nothing.”

She had just taken her last breath.

And so began the distressing dilemma that many families face: Honouring their loved-one’s request to do nothing or honouring their own desire to do something to mark their loved one’s life.

Anguished, my childhood school friend called me in a panic. “How can I do nothing?” she asked. For Judy, doing nothing was the equivalent of sending out a loud and clear message that her mother didn’t matter. That her mother wasn’t special. That her mother’s life was forgettable and not important.

I asked Judy to imagine her mother was still alive. Could she have a conversation with her mother now, knowing her final wish of “nothing”? I encouraged Judy to imagine telling her mother why it was so important that her daughter be given the opportunity to say goodbye, to receive support, to publicly declare her love, and to take the first of many steps towards healing her broken heart. Judy needed that important space to help her accept the harsh reality that she was now motherless.

Then I asked: “What would your mother say in response?”

Judy told me that her mother, first and foremost, always put her daughter’s wellbeing and happiness before anything else. She told me that her mother thought she was being selfless with her request to do nothing, but that, ultimately her mother realized that she was robbing her loved ones of the opportunity to start the grieving and healing process.

Some people feel guilty when they’re made a fuss of. “I’m nothing special,” they think. “My family should spend their time and money doing something fun instead of crying over me.”

But your funeral is not a gift you give to yourself. Your funeral is a gift you give to those who love you. It is a gift you give to those who wake every morning and ache with the realization that your arms will never wrap around them again. It is a gift you give to those who go to bed every night with the hope that you will visit them as they sleep.

Judy's family found a compromise: They hosted a visitation they believed that their mother would have agreed to had they had that conversation while she was alive. As a result, Judy received real hugs, not the virtual kind all over Facebook. Friends and family gathered to remember, support, and collectively grieve. Judy, along with her father and sister, listened to stories they had never heard and came to really comprehend the impact that their mother and wife had had on others.

The experience was so healing that Judy's father, who also had a "do nothing" request, changed his mind and has taken steps to plan the details of his own funeral.

I will likely pre-plan my funeral one day. I'm only 50 so I think (hope) I still have time to take care of this task. But my final wishes will be based on what my family needs. As a [Life-Cycle Celebrant](#), I also realize that they may not even know at this point what that is, so there will be lots of wiggle-room, space, and suggestions for creative rituals that will help them move through the stages of their personal grief.

I want them to make a fuss. Not out of some ego-driven need to be the center of attention, but because I know from my years of working with the grieving that a fuss is what's necessary when we lose a loved one. I want red wine and pink roses and a chocolate buffet. I want my family to feel and hug and connect. I want an uplifting ceremony overflowing with tears and laughter and applause. I want them to look at me one last time as they simultaneously say goodbye and hello to their new life without me in it.

When I die, I want them to do something.



[Linda Stuart](#) is a Certified Life-Cycle Celebrant™ who creates and performs one-of-a-kind ceremonies for life's milestone occasions. A passionate speaker, Linda frequently talks to funeral and cemetery professionals about the importance of personalized memorials, particularly for families who have lost children. She has always been in the caring professions and her family has been involved in funerals since she was a girl. Her longtime connection with the bereaved, coupled with her passion for Celebrancy, led her to found the Toronto Death Café, a space where people gather to discuss death in order to better understand how to make the most of their finite lives. She also serves as chair of The Unforgettables Fund Toronto Chapter, an organization providing financial assistance for the costs of a dignified funeral to families caring for dying children.