Opinion

Daniel Pink

Why not attend your own funeral?

It's a chance to celebrate a life well lived.

Today at 6:30 a.m. EDT

Opinion

Daniel Pink

Why not attend your own funeral?

It's a chance to celebrate a life well lived.

Today at 6:30 a.m. EDT

((Illustration by Ileana Soon/For The Washington Post))

One Saturday morning in August of 2021, more than 200 people assembled in an Arlington church for the funeral of Richard Hanneman, a onetime Capitol Hill staffer and longtime trade association executive who died of lung cancer at the age of 78.

Four of Hanneman's seven children spoke at the service. So did two of his grandchildren and his best friend. Some of them told stories of blood drives and lobster bakes he'd organized. Others described his deep religious faith. A few choked back tears. Karen Hanneman, his wife of 54 years, sat in the front pew. Congregants sang a hymn at the beginning of the ceremony and the "Hallelujah" chorus from George Frideric Handel's "Messiah" toward the end. The service concluded with two of Hanneman's friends playing taps.

But the most compelling presence was the third speaker on the program, a white-haired man in a dark suit.

Dick Hanneman himself.

Earlier that summer, learning that he had perhaps two months to live, Hanneman decided to organize his own funeral and to hold it in time to attend. And on that August morning, with tubes stretching from a cannula in his nose to a portable oxygen tank, he told the crowd how grateful he was for the life he'd lived and the people he'd loved.

For the last year, in The Post's Why Not? project, I've been proposing ideas that aim to push past the cynicism of our times and expand our sense of possibility. I've examined ideas for reimagining politics, education, civic life, sports, traffic and more. For my final column, I want to tackle a topic that will eventually touch us all: death.

Maybe Dick Hanneman was on to something. Why not attend your own funeral?

A final to-do list

Human beings have been constructing rituals around death for at least 100,000 years, according to archaeologists. Whether those customs involve intricate rites and elaborate offerings or simple words and somber clothing, they help us mark a moment and find meaning in pain. The rituals are often rooted in religion. Catholics hold wakes. Muslims perform the Salat al-Janazah. Jews sit shiva. Sometimes the deceased's body is present. But almost by definition, the living person is not.

Yet in some corners of the world, that has been changing. "Living celebrations" (sometimes called "living funerals" or "pre-funerals") began slowly wading into the mainstream in 1990s Japan, where the practice is known as seizenso. Versions have sprouted in South Korea as a way to help people reckon with their mortality and learn the principles of "dying well."

Dick Hanneman didn't know about seizenso back in the summer of 2021. But he did know he was going to die. Soon. He'd battled lung cancer for years, one of the few nonsmokers to suffer from the disease. And although the cancer had slipped into remission in the past, the menace had reappeared with a vengeance and his options had run out. So, in early August, Dick sat down in the tidy office of the house he and Karen had lived in since 1973 and got to work.

He'd always been a planner, Karen told me, a man energized by projects and to-do lists. "When I found out he was going to die, I was glad he could do it the way he wanted to do it," she said.

He decided on two events. The first was a rollicking gathering, a farewell party of sorts, in their church social hall. On a Thursday night in late August — with Dick seated in the front of the room, and attendees planted at tables adorned with artifacts of his life — colleagues, acquaintances and relatives came to the microphone to recount memories and to thank him for his guidance and friendship. Several people, including Dick, wore leis. One friend played a ukulele.

Two days later was the more formal ceremony, held in the church sanctuary. It began with dozens of family members posing for photographs, almost like they were attending a wedding. But the gathering itself bore all the trappings of a traditional funeral — prayers, music, a mix of eulogies and remembrances. "We gave him just the send-off he wanted," Karen told me. "He was a happy man."

Life (and death) imitates art

The dramatic possibilities of attending your own funeral have made it a staple of storytelling. In "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," Tom, Joe and Huck hide in the gallery of a church listening to others eulogize them, then stride down the aisle to freak out Aunt Polly. From John Green's young adult novel, "The Fault in Our Stars," to the film "Get Low" to an episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," pop culture has repeatedly enlisted the trope.

Now life (and death) is imitating art. While there's little reliable data on living celebrations, Kate Woodthorpe, who co-directs the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath, says they're becoming more common. For much of history, funerals were about family status and the fate of the soul, "but today we're seeing a decline in the solemnness of death and the reverence around it," she told me. A living funeral "reframes the moment in a way that feels less somber and more positive."

Several forces are powering the trend. Connections to organized religion are fraying. For instance, regular attendance at religious services has declined by more than 25 percent in the past 20 years. Some 30 percent of Americans claim no religious affiliation at all. And cremations have recently accounted for well over half of end-of-life arrangements, making the presence of the body less central to the process of mourning.

Perhaps most important, the individualization of everything has come for funeral rites. Much as they've done for weddings, divorces and cohabitation, baby boomers are seeking to do death their way. They can now hire "end-of-life doulas" to help them navigate dying and event planners that specialize in celebration of life ceremonies.

Of course, this alternative ritual works only in certain circumstances. The person's demise must be foreseeable and somewhat imminent. And the person being honored must have the capacity both to plan the event and participate in it. This approach doesn't satisfy everyone, though. For some attendees, the timing might not provide the sense of finality and closure they need to fully mourn.

But Woodthorpe argues that one of the deepest benefits of funerals is social cohesion. "The living funeral achieves that but with the dying person as an active participant. They become a conduit between different groups, reintroducing people to one another, which gives everyone a great sense of comfort."

Living celebrations afford the dying person a rare measure of control over their final days, a chance to find clarity and peace amid uncertainty. They can also be less burdensome, logistically and emotionally, for families. (Hanneman arranged to donate his body to science, sparing his family the responsibility of cremation or burial.)

'Showing up'

Most of all, these new rituals can remake our relationship with the end. Death is a strange combination. It may be the most ubiquitous human experience. (The Grim Reaper will someday get us all.) Yet it is also one of the most taboo. When we talk about it at all, we speak in whispers.

Living celebrations raise the volume of the conversation. Contrary to what we might expect, those facing death aren't always racked with terror and despair. Research has shown that people at the end of their lives exhibit more positive emotions than a typical living person. Likewise, when the rest of us contemplate our own demise, as pre-funerals prod us to do, our sense of well-being climbs. Why not normalize the inevitable and use death to affirm life?

Dick Hanneman spoke in a strong, unwavering voice when he stood before his friends and family and said goodbye. Acting on his philosophy that "80 percent of life is showing up," here he was — showing up to describe the love "I've felt every day of my life," to profess his faith in God and to offer "my heartfelt thanks to you for all the support you've given me." Besides, he joked, "All the good ideas that I've been given credit for were mostly Karen's anyway, so you're not going to be losing those."

One evening a few weeks later, Sept. 20, 2021, his granddaughter made him dinner and Dick watched an early season game of his beloved Green Bay Packers. That night he told Karen, "I've done everything on my to-do list."

The following morning, in his own bedroom with his wife and family by his side, he passed. The tears had been shed. The words had been said. It was, in its way, a beginning.