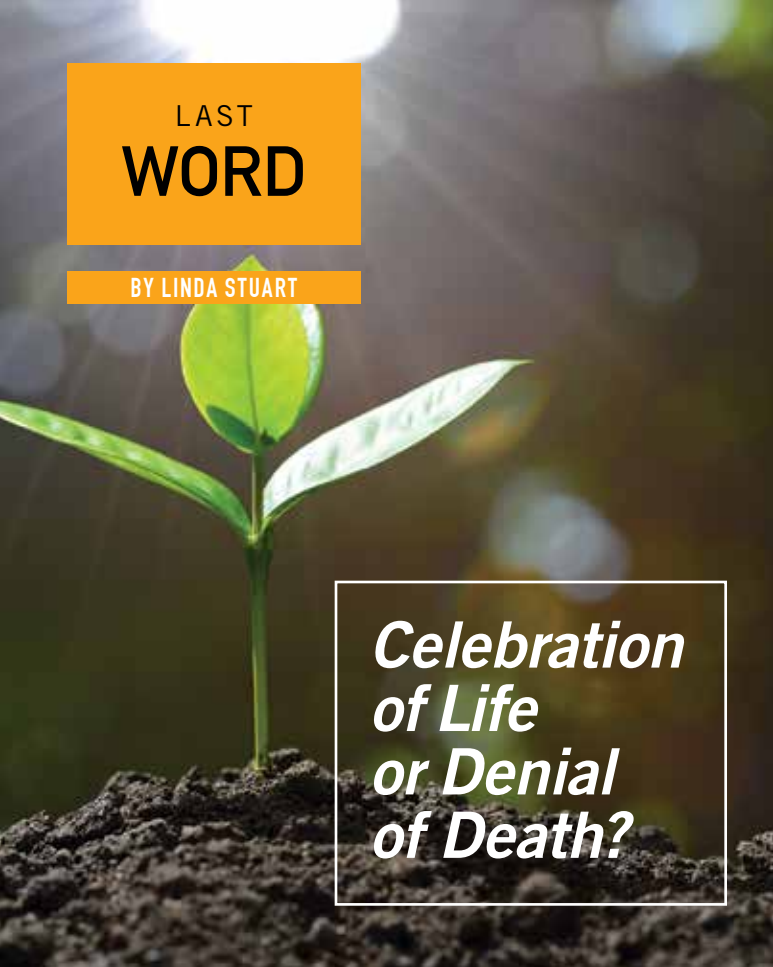


LAST WORD

BY LINDA STUART



Celebration of Life or Denial of Death?

People are often surprised when they learn of my love-hate relationship with the term “celebration of life.”

“But you’re a celebrant!” they say. “Doesn’t that mean you like to celebrate?” Well, yes... and no. It depends.

Let’s take a look at Google’s definition of the word: the action of marking one’s pleasure at an important event or occasion by engaging in enjoyable, typically social, activity.

Call me a killjoy, but I’m not a huge fan of the “happy funeral” trend. I’m also concerned that the term “celebration of life” puts unnecessary pressure on a family to “make it fun.” I hear it all the time: “We don’t want people to feel sad.” But sad is what we are supposed to feel when someone we care about dies. To deny ourselves that safe space to feel sadness is to deny and diminish the value and purpose that funerals offer us as human beings.

When a “celebration of life” is rooted in relevant and meaningful ceremony, I’m all in. But when it’s essentially a party that downplays the reality that someone has died, I question the benefit of that experience in the context of grief.

You May Want a Party, But You May Need a Funeral

And when it comes to funerals, there are no rules. A good, authentic funeral can be modern or traditional, uplifting or solemn, casual or formal. It can have elements of lightness and laughter, but the primary goal should not be to put the “fun” in funeral. The purpose should not be solely to make people feel happy.

Our society’s cultural obsession with the pursuit of happiness has rendered many people unwilling or incapable of dealing with painful life experiences, especially death. But happiness is only one of many emotional states. To embrace the human experience means embracing the full spectrum of human emotions, even the ones that don’t bring us pleasure.

Recently, my husband opened up about the grief he has been suppressing since the death of his mother last year. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he confessed. “I just feel so sad.” It upset me deeply to learn that he had been suffering in silence but also that he actually thought something was wrong with him because he felt sad. The relief on his face was visible when I suggested that there was nothing wrong and everything right with how he was feeling. His mother, with whom he was extremely close, had died. Of course he’s been sad.

Sadness Is Not a Disease We Need to Cure, It’s a Feeling We Need to Feel

There is, of course, a difference between the normal experience of sadness that accompanies grief and a diagnosis of depression, and natural grief can sometimes turn into something more serious if you find you can’t shake your dark thoughts. In either case, talking to a professional may help you navigate your unfamiliar feelings.

Personally, my darkest moments have provided me with my greatest opportunities for growth and reflection. They have taught me empathy and compassion. And while they are moments I sometimes find difficult to reflect upon, I am grateful that I lived through them. They have strengthened and stretched me and illuminated what is really important.

For me, the feeling of contentment and aliveness is most prevalent during moments of deep connection with other human beings. Perhaps this is why I am so passionate about ceremonies – even (and especially) funeral ceremonies. Good funerals provide a safe space for all emotions to be acknowledged and expressed. Good funeral ceremonies not only help people begin to accept the death of someone they love but also foster connection through a transformational shared experience remembered by all in attendance.

Maybe the key to happiness is not merely in being happy but rather in feeling whole. As the poet Rumi said, “The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

So go to a funeral and celebrate a life. But don’t forget to also mourn a death. That’s how the light gets in.

Linda Stuart is a Life-Cycle Celebrant and speaker.