



# Happy Anniversary!

By Glenda Stansbury, CFSP

NFDA Training in Brookfield

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**1999.** We saw dead people in the movie *The Sixth Sense*, our hearts broke over the Columbine shootings, my city, Oklahoma City, had a massive F5 tornado that killed 38 people, My Space was a brand new way to interact online, Putin became the leader of Russia for the first time, and everyone was waiting for the world to end with Y2K when the computers melted down on New Year's Eve. It was the cusp of a new millennium, and no one quite knew what that would look like or what to expect.

October 1999. Doug and I arrived at the Mt. Ida College New England Institute for Death Education in Newton, Massachusetts for the inaugural premiere of Celebrant Training. We walked into the Dodge Auditorium overwhelmed, excited, and fearful. This was either going to go well or it would be over before it started.

For three years we had been dreaming about creating the concept of Funeral Celebrants and agonizing over how it would work, what would be necessary, who would want to come. Following Doug's trips to Australia and New Zealand where he encountered a whole set of professionals called Civil Celebrants who were licensed by the government to perform weddings and funerals, this had been the main topic of conversation in the offices of InSight Books. Why you might ask?

For those of you who were in the funeral profession in the mid-90's, you are familiar with the sea changes that were occurring. Cremation was beginning to be a significant factor. Nationally the cremation rate was hovering around 25% but showed no signs of slowing down or reversing. The Catholic Church began allowing cremated remains to be present at funeral Masses in 1997, which significantly changed the attitude of many who were hesitant about the process.

We were ten years into the FTC regulations and still trying to figure out how to live within the stringent language and inflexible options.

After a steady growth of religious adherence and fervor from revivals or televangelists or the enthusiastic participation after Vatican II, in 1997, the term "spiritual but not religious" was being used for the first time in public discourse. This was

the beginning of the pattern of the "nones" which would grow bigger each year. The times they were a-changin'.

From our vantage point at InSight Books, we constantly heard from funeral directors and leaders in the profession that client families were making different choices. That the same casket, the service folder with the gold cross, Rev. Billy Bob reading the same verses and preaching everyone into heaven for the 45th time, with a nice arrangement of How Great Thou Art thrown in, were not cutting it. Cremation allowed families to have options, to delay, to be mobile, even to decide to not have any type of service. And, as more people stopped identifying with a church or denomination, the traditional funeral home offering was often not very appealing.

Since our goal at InSight Books has always been focused on facilitating a healthy grieving experience, and since we believed that a funeral was an important first step in the healing process, we could see that these steps to avoid an experience that did not fit them could be disastrous for individuals and families and for the funeral profession.

What Doug had seen in his Australasia (isn't that a great word?) travels was a transformation of service. The funeral professionals in both countries had recognized that their families had little or no interest in traditional, religious funeral experiences. A poll by Win-Gallup International found that 48% of Australians claimed no religion, 37% were religious, and 10% declared themselves "convinced atheists." 42% of New Zealanders stated they had no religion in the most recent census and 4% made no declaration.

So why would they continue to insist on a minister or priest to officiate services for people who had no connection or belief in the words or the rituals? Enter Civil Celebrants. While they were originally licensed by the government to perform civil weddings, they quickly moved into the funeral realm. If you can do a wonderful, personalized wedding for me, then can you do a funeral that is unique and customized? This began in 1975. There was a lot of pain and growth and even blacklisting of funeral celebrants by the Attorney General for a time (resistance to change is not limited to the borders of our great nation), but

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NEI First Celebrant Training



Doug, Glenda, and Arnold at First Celebrant Training

by the 1990's when Doug visited, they were well established and effectively providing services for those who did not wish to have a religious service.

Doug was amazed when he saw this concept and decided on the spot that we needed this choice—a trained, professional group of people who were prepared to listen to the stories, to craft a one-of-a-kind service, and to be the trusted voice of the family—in North America. Let's do that!

Thus came the days, weeks, months, and years of discussing, brainstorming, and agonizing over how to make this a reality. We offered the concept to national funeral organizations and national funeral corporations. Everyone patted us on the head and said, "Everyone wants a religious funeral," and sent us on our way. Celebrants? We don't need Celebrants! Silly kids.

When NEI contacted Doug about coming to conduct a grief seminar on campus, we talked them into giving us a weekend. We have an idea. Let us run it up a flag pole and see if anyone salutes. Thankfully, they agreed. And the first Celebrant training was born. We had no computer or projector or notebooks. We had a flip chart and a bunch of ideas about how funerals could heal people. OK, here we go!

On that weekend, fifty intrepid people came to Newton. They had no idea what they had signed up for. We had no idea what we were going to do. But together we determined that this was something important and special and the Celebrant movement was born in the Dodge Auditorium. Twenty years ago. Wow.

Arnold Dodge sat at the back of the auditorium with Doug and I as we watched the first presentations of services and we were blown away. Arnold leaned over to us and said, "If all funerals were like this, all of our problems would be solved." We agreed. We still agree.

So, what has happened in twenty years? We've conducted 190 trainings and almost 4,000 people have come through training. That doesn't mean that we have 4,000 practicing Celebrants around the world, but it does mean that 4,000 people understand the value of the funeral, and what storytelling and ceremony and customization of the

service can mean to a family. The training is now part of the curriculum at two mortuary schools. We are hoping that will grow as well.

We've held private trainings for some of the largest funeral corporations. We are now sponsored by all three of the national funeral organizations and many state associations. We are scheduled for 12-16 trainings each year in the U.S. and Canada. Attendees from all over the world have joined us—from the Philippines, Brazil, Guatemala, Singapore, the Netherlands Antilles, South Africa, Bolivia, just to name a few. This year I will be conducting a training for ALPAR, the Latin American Funeral and Cemetery organization, in Bogota, Colombia. I haven't told my husband that I'm flying to Columbia yet, so I'd appreciate it if you keep that a secret.

The road was not easy. There were times when Doug and I looked at each other and sighed and asked why we were doing this? The age-old problem of resistance to change in funeral service has pushed back and pushed back and pushed back. "We are fine here with our rent-a-ministers. Everyone's happy. All of my families go to church. Don't bother me with new ideas." There were some dark and discouraging days when we questioned why we were spending time, effort, and money to sustain an effort that was not embraced by the profession as a whole.

But, because of progressive and creative funeral professionals and leaders, the resistance has gradually lessened. Funeral homes in all corners of the world have proven that people respond to a well-done, personalized service that fits them. And none of them are turning back the clock.

We have seen the future and it includes a wide buffet of options for serving families. And the cornerstone of that change has been incorporating Celebrants as part of the norm, rather than for the occasional or weird client or for that atheist family who walks in the door. Celebrants are good for families. Celebrants are good for business. Celebrants can be a part of the renaissance that brings people back to the funeral home.

So, allow us a moment to pop a cork and have some pride in how far we have come. A little four person publishing company in the heartland decided to make a difference and start something important. We are so grateful for everyone who has come along side in support, encouragement, and partnership. We are especially thankful for the Dodge Company and Arnold and Mike, who believed in us from the beginning.

What does the next twenty years look like? I don't know and I'm pretty sure I won't be around to write about that anniversary. Our goal, our hope, our vision from day one has always been that everyone who walks into a funeral home knows that they have the ability to have exactly the right funeral with exactly the right officiant and that they understand that the only place to find that service and that guidance is from the creative and responsive funeral professional that they have chosen. That will be a good day.

*Happy Anniversary Celebrants!*

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Glenda Stansbury, CFSP, MALS is the Dean of the InSight Institute of Funeral Celebrants, VP of InSight Books, adjunct professor for UCO Funeral Service Department and a practicing Certified Funeral Celebrant. You can contact her at [celebrantgs@gmail.com](mailto:celebrantgs@gmail.com)