

'A gift and a thief'

The losses and affordances of funerals
during the Covid-19 pandemic

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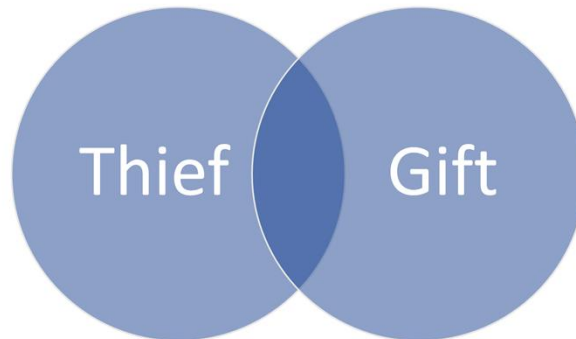
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525 years
of pushing boundaries

We began the project recognizing the challenges pandemic restrictions on funerals have caused -yet noting that these had also prompted some creative innovation and demonstrations of great care. Data collection is ongoing, but we are beginning to understand what those challenges and creativity have looked like. There is an emerging pattern in terms of losses, affordances, and their interactions.

'A gift and a thief'

Covid has robbed people of the funerals – or aspects of funerals – they wanted, needed or valued.



People have found 'Silver-linings,' creative practices and (often small) joys experienced amid pandemic funerals, albeit necessitated by the pandemic

- 1 - Numbers allowed to attend funerals
- 2 - Livestreamed funerals
- 3 - 'Straws that break the camel's back'

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One interviewee framed this as 'a gift and a thief,' a phrase I've borrowed for today's presentation. Covid has been a thief in many ways, and to many people –that is, it has robbed people of the funerals, or aspects of funerals, that they wanted, needed and valued. However, and perhaps more surprisingly, it has been a 'gift' to some, and in some ways. The word gift perhaps has unhelpfully positive overtones –in this presentation, I'll use it in relation less to mean things which are straightforwardly good or pleasant, and more to refer to unexpected silver-linings, creative practices and often small joys experienced amid pandemic funerals, necessitated by the pandemic.

Importantly, I also hope to show that for many, the pandemic has been both gift and thief in relation to their loved-one's funeral—the overlap in the Venn diagram. I am going to use three phenomena to illustrate this pattern and, insodoing, offer some insight into the rich data we've gathered so far. Those are: the numbers of people allowed to attend; live-streaming; and 'straws that break the camel's back'.

Loss and anger – restrictions on numbers and travel

*“My brother couldn’t come, he wanted to and it’s a regret of mine that I dissuaded him from coming, which I know would have been breaking the rules, but [...] when a few weeks later we found out that Dominic Cummings had gone to Barnard Castle, **I was really angry**...Because my brother missed his own father’s funeral [...] [And] there is no point in me standing up and speaking for 10 minutes about my father’s life to my husband who already knows it, and to one other person. [...] it was 10 minutes [...] so it was just a **non-event**, if that doesn’t sound harsh, a non-event. [...] I feel robbed, completely robbed. **Robbed, angry and stuck.**”*

Bereaved participant describing her father’s funeral

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Limitations placed on the numbers of people able to attend a funeral service have been a feature of many newspaper headlines, capturing public imagination. This restriction, and related decisions about who ‘gets’ to come, have often been a painful reality for those we’ve interviewed. For example, this bereaved woman felt ‘angry’ and ‘robbed’ following her father’s funeral, which had just a handful of people in attendance, and was trimmed to 10 minutes, describing it as a ‘non-event’—and feeling ‘guilty’ as a result.

Loss, grief and guilt – restrictions on numbers and gathering

*“Usually people would have been in the house, you’d be providing food and drinks to people, memories would be coming up, but that couldn’t happen. And I feel... well, I suppose... I just don’t know. **I feel guilty.** [Tearing up] [...] I just feel a sense of I **haven’t carried out her wishes properly.** Obviously I know it wasn’t possible, I do know that. But no, you feel as if... I feel I **should be past the grieving stage now but I still haven’t completed everything for her.**”*

Bereaved participant describing her mother’s funeral

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Similarly, another bereaved participant felt guilty that her mother’s 10-person funeral was so small, and suggested the significantly reduced size of the funeral, and the absence of a wake, had exacerbated her grief. In this case, and in others, her sense of loss was also exacerbated by comparing her mother’s pandemic funeral to her father’s five years previously, which had had some 300 attendees. Many have found it additionally difficult that even those few able to attend have had to remain socially distant, wear masks, and avoid hugging. Hugging has been a recurring theme – not being able to hug others has felt alien to many; one celebrant considered it “inhumane”.

Additionally, some participants have explained how particularly unfair funeral restrictions have felt while other aspects of UK restrictions were being lifted. Surely – they have suggested – if ventilation and space allow, limitations on funeral attendance should be adjusted at the same time as leisure activities are? One participant described it as a “bitter pill to swallow” when she compared the numbers allowed at funerals to the thousands gathering at Wembley for the Euros.

Creative responses to limits on numbers

“[T]here were four different people giving the eulogies about four different parts of his life, so [...] I needed space for someone from the Navy, someone from the band which he played in and someone from the Scouts which is what I wanted because they represented... a big part of his life and then... yeah. I mean it was a bit of a blow when I was told it was [just] 18 [allowed]”

Bereaved participant describing her husband’s funeral

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However, attendance limits have also inspired creativity, and –for some – had silver linings. This quote highlights an approach we’ve seen several families take, of ensuring a shortened guest list incorporates ‘representatives’ of the deceased’s life –in this case, she found ‘space’ for four, and they each contributed a eulogy. In these cases, a numerical limit was present, and often challenging, but at least permitted close family and friends, including those who could highlight the deceased’s personality, interests and rich life. In other cases, families have found that attendance limits have nevertheless accommodated a person’s loved ones in a fitting or obvious way.

Creative responses to limits on numbers

*“What we did was we made a route that could go past her workplace so that people could come out socially distance on the pavement and social areas [...] that was the type of thing that was specific and ever so slightly different. I think it’s something that traditionally used to be done quite a lot but it went out of favour and **Covid’s brought it immediately back into favour.**”*

Bereaved participant describing his wife’s funeral

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Others have accommodated those who can’t attend by giving out plants and seeds; with funeral teas packed into picnics; by putting orders of service in an email or in the post so people can follow and reflect on a service they can’t participate in; and by sharing synchronous shots of Jack Daniels in tribute to a whiskey lover.

Among the most widespread is the revival and adaptation of organizing a route for a hearse to follow, marking significant locations for the deceased, and sharing its details, often through social media. Interviewees in all our recruitment groups have commented on how moving this has been, and many hope to see it continue. Often, this decision, and other creative responses, are clearly accompanied by clarification that were it not for the pandemic, they would never have thought to organize something like this

Smaller funerals – a gift?

*“I do feel that this limited attendance has **brought a sense of focus** for those who are there. [...] **there was more presence there**. And I think that has been a really good thing. Because I think sometimes people turn up at funerals for the sandwiches or for the wake, you know. And it’s just [...] **Almost like a sacredness to the experience**. [...] No matter how few people have attended. If I think about the services where [...] I’ve only had a couple of people and sometimes services where I’ve had none. It’s just been me. And that has been very, very special.”*

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Celebrant describing funerals with small numbers in attendance

Finally with regards to numbers, some interviewees have expressed their often faintly surprised- or even faintly apologetic -gratefulness for the intimacy and ‘presence’ afforded when funerals have been attended by only the deceased’s very nearest and dearest –or, as another celebrant put it, those who really ought to be there. That gratefulness has related to relief from having to ‘perform’ for the scores of people in attendance, from greeting and speaking with relative strangers, and from having to ‘play host’ at either a service or a wake. For some this has been a silver-lining, even where attendance limits have also proved challenging –a gift amid a loss. But in some cases, this restriction on funerals has more straightforwardly been a gift. Where a smaller funeral was a family’s preference irrespective of the pandemic, the Coronavirus restrictions provided the perfect opportunity to have it without hurting people’s feelings.

The 'gift' of livestreaming – practical and emotional benefits

[There were] 500 viewings and [...] a lot of people said, [...] "You might think this is, you know, a strange thing to say, but it's the best funeral I've been at."

Bereaved participant describing her father's funeral

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We move on now to livestreaming funerals, which I use as shorthand for the videoing, live-broadcasting, recording and sharing of funerals via digital media – a phenomenon greatly accelerated by the pandemic and its limitations on gathering for funerals, and which many now see as a powerful, valuable tool which ought to be retained for the future. In many ways, it's a prime example of a 'silver lining' gift – a means of responding to the loss of limited attendance.

But for this participant, it was also a gift in other ways – not only did it let 500+ people view her father's funeral, it also left her with a welcome sense of just how many people wanted to pay him their respects. She also had other mourners relay their positive emotional reactions to the streamed service back to her. Others have also found streamed services powerful and moving

Livestreaming as loss – negative/ambiguous reaction

*“My uncle died beginning of January, and [...] we were hoping to come down, but we didn’t, so that I watched on-line and that was **a very odd experience** [...] [T]hey finished whatever the last section was, and then we could just about make out that people were leaving, and then [...] **you were just left sort of hanging**, it was just **a really surreal thing**, it was like you were watching a film almost [...] I found that was **really upsetting, because I so wanted to be there.**”*

Bereaved participant describing her uncle’s funeral

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However, livestreaming funerals was not always a ‘silver bullet’. In some cases and phases of the pandemic, a videographer would have counted towards already limited numbers; or venues didn’t have the facilities. Even that is to assume that the person watching isn’t digitally isolated –an issue which we’ve also noted in relation to the digitisation of death registrations. At the moment, it’s also predominantly one-way technology –people can watch a livestream, but can’t readily speak from their homes into a funeral service. And in one case, a livestream that was already seen as a second-best option for a bereaved daughter who could not attend her mother’s funeral as she was in hospital with covid herself-only for the technology to fail. In addition to practical limitations, others have described livestreamed funerals ambiguously and negatively. This woman describes it as ‘odd’ and ‘surreal’ for example. It’s been presented as a ‘second best’ –or as a reinforcement of the loss they feel at not attending in person, as in this example. One bereaved participant described the ‘grim’ experience of watching a gloomy livestream of the backs of people’s heads, which highlights that funeral livestreams, are not equal -the particular approaches and shots used have an effect. Finally, some people feel very uneasy about the prospect of their loved one’s funeral lurking in the corners of the internet for time immemorial. Some were not bothered, and had even rewatched a loved one’s service, finding it very beneficial. –another ‘gift’ of digitized funerals. But others find the prospect of re-living a service ghoulish and unhelpful.

Particular 'straw(s) which break the camel's back'

*[M]ost families would be okay with the restrictions but there was **always one or two things** [...] like, "Oh, we're only going to be five people anyway, we don't care that there's a restriction on numbers, but **we really want to be able to sing.**" In terms of visiting the deceased, some families felt very strongly [...] I had one lady [...] and it was one of her parents who had died, and she just couldn't... because **we couldn't dress him in his suit** because the risk to the embalmers was too great [...] she just started screaming at me because **that was the thing that, for her, was the most important.***

Funeral director describing working with families during the pandemic

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Thirdly and briefly, we have come across cases where EITHER one particular restriction has felt particularly acutely painful, OR people's otherwise 'good' or 'proper' experiences of funerals during the pandemic have been good despite particular painful restrictions. To frame that in terms of the idiom, these are either the straw that breaks a camel's back, or that disrupt an otherwise good funeral. One funeral arranger framed this as 'one or two' things –not always predictable –which particularly bothered them. In addition to singing, these have included not being able to view the body of the deceased, or to dress them, or being denied the chance to hold one of the cords to lower a coffin into a grave (particularly in Scotland), for some religious participants, being unable to perform ritual washings, the absence of particular family members, and having to leave loved ones in 'body bags'. Many of the people who have noted such things have nevertheless come away with a sense of having given their loved one a 'good' 'proper' or 'fitting' funeral, albeit with perhaps a sharp edge of incompleteness, or a sense of 'what might have been.' A sense of loss which lingered—a thief who had their way, however slightly.

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