

Ask *the* Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

Perhaps Frank Sinatra was not only a great singer, but something of a visionary when he sang the lyrics of his classic, "My Way," in 1968. This song, written by French composers with lyrics reworked especially for Sinatra by Paul Anka, is about a man reflecting on life as his end nears. As the song goes, he walks you through his story of trials and tribulations, but keeps coming back to that famous line: "I did it my way." Not only has this become an extremely popular song to close out funeral services, but it defines the modern day funeral and cremation experience.

We saw this first hand just recently with the passing of Joan Rivers – an iconic comedic star who was of the Jewish faith, which has traditional rituals and customs when a death occurs. According to news reports, Joan wrote to her daughter Melissa late in her life that, "I want it to be Hollywood all the way. I don't want some rabbi rambling on; I want Meryl Streep crying, in five different accents. I don't want a eulogy; I want Bobby Vinton to pick up my head and sing 'Mr. Lonely.' ... And I want a wind machine so that even in the casket my hair is blowing just like Beyonce's."

Ms. Rivers was stretching it, but now we are seeing unique funeral requests right here in our home towns. Farmers having tractors carrying the casket, rather than being escorted by the hearse. Friends and family gathering in a comedy club rather than a church or synagogue for a service to honor the recently departed's love of laughter. Perhaps this unique way to experience a tribute to a life is brought about by the increasing popularity of cremation, or is it just simply the fact that today's consumer wants a unique experience. A recent survey found that nearly three-fourths of respondents do not want a typical funeral. The survey also suggested that the funeral and memorial experience will become a time to share in that person's life adventures, and in a sense, to walk into that person's life one last time. In other words, it doesn't always have to be the traditional way of things. As the industry survey indicates, and Joan Rivers' last requests bear out, the majority of us will want it done "My Way."

Services can be uniquely designed, but the bigger question remains: What do we do with the casketed remains or urn after

the service? Can a final resting place incorporate the "My Way" theme as well?

For most of us, we have the choice of either ground burial at a cemetery or a niche in one of those columbarium walls. These typically only provide the personalization option of engraving one unique design on the monument, marker or niche plate in attempt to tell the story of that person's life. However, there is more to a life than just a name with dates. Cemeteries are starting to acknowledge these desires. Today we are finding some cemeteries that offer scattering ponds that are inhabited by black swans or a memorial garden surrounding a putting green, all on the grounds of the cemetery. In a South Carolina cemetery there's an early design for a lazy river to be winding its way through the grounds. Closer here to home, we have a themed Chesapeake Bay Cremation Garden, consisting of a nearly nine-foot-tall memorial in the shape of a Chesapeake Bay lighthouse, surrounded by native grasses. Lazy rivers and lighthouse memorials, putting greens and black swan-inhabited ponds are only a few of the examples of cemeteries offering "My Way" options.

If this is not your cup of tea or just a tad over the top, monuments can be crafted for traditional gravesites that can be unique but less flamboyant. We have seen monuments created in the shape of a fireman's helmet with a life-like fireman standing next to it for a local firefighter who was laid to rest after dying in the line of duty. Another example is a six-foot monument that was created as a replica of a tree with the individual's initials carved into it as high school sweethearts might do in a schoolyard.

Today, almost anything can be done in order to keep a person's life "living" in both areas of end-of-life commemoration – the funeral service and the cemetery. The goal today should be to tell that person's story in a way that may be remembered for generations to come.

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