Dirge Without Music
By Edna St. Vincent Millay (excerpt)
I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground. So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind: Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned. . . ..
Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind; Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave. I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

Immortality
by Felix Adler, founder of Ethical Culture
The dead are not dead if we have loved them truly. In our own lives we can give them a kind of immortality. Let us arise and take up the work they have left unfinished.

I Choose
By Seneca, 5-65 BCE
If I can choose between a death of torture and one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I sail and the house which I inhabit, So will I choose the death by which I leave life.

On Suicide
by Arthur Schopenhauer
It is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person.

Epicurean Epitaph
I was not. I have been. I am not. I do not mind.

No Single Thing Abides
by Lucretius, 96-55 BCE
No single thing abides; but all things flow. Fragment to fragment clings—the things thus grow Until we know and name them. By degrees They melt, and are no more the things we know.

Requiem
by Robert Louis Stevenson
Under the wide and starry sky, Dig the grave and let me lie: Glad did I live and gladly die, And I laid me down with a will. This be the verse you, grave for me: Here he lies where he long’d to be; Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the hunter home from the hill.

Excerpt from Unweaving the Rainbow
by Richard Dawkins
We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively outnumbers the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupifying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

My Own Life
Oliver Sacks
Upon learning he had terminal cancer There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate—the genetic and neural fate—of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.

When Great Trees Fall
by Maya Angelou (excerpt)
Great souls die and our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us. Our souls, dependent upon their nurture, now shrink, wizened. Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away. We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die, after a period peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration. Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. They existed. They existed. We can be. Be and be better. For they existed.

That It Will Never Come Again
by Emily Dickinson (excerpt)
That it will never come again Is what makes life so sweet.

Share this information and read more selections: ffrf.org/secular-funerals
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Secular Memorials & Funerals Without God
Freedom from Religion foundation
Freethinkers believe that a memorial service should celebrate life, not death. Memorials should honor the person who has lived, not be a vehicle to proselytize unsavory dogmas such as sin and salvation, as typical religious funerals often are. It is time to dispense with carbon-copy, fill-in-the-blank services read by clergy who use the occasion to promote religion, instead of honoring the individual. Freethinkers can specify "no religion" in their wills and papers, and freethinking families can likewise make clear they want no religious observances at funerals, the gravesite or memorials.

At the Freedom From Religion Foundation, we often hear horror stories about what happens when religious relatives put on godly funerals for people who were "devoutly unreligious." We have heard of religious relatives throwing out valuable freethought libraries! We receive frequent requests from FFRF members who wish to ensure that their own memorials or those for nonreligious friends and relatives stay secular and true to the wishes of the deceased.

Memorials can be planned with readings from favorite poets and writers, with favorite music, with personal anecdotes told by friends and families, with family photos and other personal touches. Another way to honor the living is to specify secular charities and organizations to donate in memory of the deceased. Friends and relatives who might never consider donating to such a charity often will honor such a request and this is a way for freethinking or progressive concerns to live after you.

Many freethinkers plan memorials rather than funerals, the gravesite or memorials. Freethinkers can specify "no religion" in their wills and papers, and freethinking families can likewise make clear they want no religious observances at funerals, the gravesite or memorials. Freethinkers believe that a memorial service must be followed. Isn’t that nice?

There are no orthodox rules or religious rites that must be followed. Isn’t that nice?

―Anne Nicol Gaylor
Principal Founder, FFRF

Sample Secular Service

- Music
- Welcome
- Selected Readings (if desired)
- Tribute/Memorial Portrait/Eulogy (Prepared remarks)
- Song or Music
- Personal Memories (Spontaneous memories shared by participants)
- Song or Music
- Closing Words or Thank You
- Closing Music
- Invitation to Reception

During the tribute or memorial portrait, a family member or a chosen speaker remembers the person who has died. This talk can incorporate personal anecdotes, achievements; whatever it is that best describes this person. Audience members can be invited to share memories. You may wish to point out the skeptical views of the person being remembered. For example: ________ did not believe in life after death; ________ believed in life before death. But ________ does live on in a natural sense, in the memories of those who remain, ________’s children and grandchildren [if applicable], and in ________’s accomplishments. (This leads to the memorial portrait or tribute).

Most freethinkers craft their own unique program. A friendly colleague or family friend may officiate. Families personalize the event with photo boards or other memorial displays. Don’t be afraid to be different. Even a favorite recipe of a good cook—brownies! etc.—can be served. Talented friends or family can be included in the program. Songs, music, poems or sayings personal to the deceased can be featured. Many memorials provoke as much laughter as tears. Music can begin and end the event, and be interspersed throughout.

Note: If religious relatives are involved, you may wish to include a "moment of reflection" somewhere during the program to keep the peace. It’s up to you.

Music Suggestions

The favorite music of the person being memorialized is an obvious choice, and/or family favorites. There is no right or wrong. FFRF member (and brave church/state plaintiff) Phyllis Grams, who was known for being organized and fearless, planned her own memorial service down to the final period, and chose as her selection a Frank Sinatra recording of “I Did It My Way” (causing a roomful of friends to erupt in affectionate laughter).

If you want your memorial service to include the music of freethinkers, please note the impressive roster of classical composers (and popular standards composers) who have been free of religion. (They may have been commissioned to write requiems, etc., but that was because the wealthiest clients were often churches and religious monarchs.) Nonreligious composers include: Bartok, Berlioz, Bizet, Brahms, Copland, Debussy, Delius (“Over the Hills and Far Away”), Elgar, Fauré, Prokofiev, Ravel, Rossini, Schumann, Shostakovich, Strauss, Vaughan Williams and Verdi. Classical composers who were not devoutly religious, rejected church teachings, or who were Deists include Beethoven, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky. Chopin was not an atheist, but he had given up the Catholic Church at his death.

Songwriters who are/were not religious: Berlin, Foster, the Gershwins, Gorney, Hammerstein, Joplin, Kern, Lane, Loesser, Porter, Rodgers, Sondheim and Strouse. The lyrics to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” a comforting song that is a favorite worldwide, were written by atheist Yip Harburg. “Imagine,” by John Lennon, is another international favorite. Robert Burns was also an irreverent Deist who wrote many beautiful and meaningful songs.

Other ideas: “Danny Boy,” “To a Wild Rose” from Woodland Sketches by Edward Alexander MacDowell; Fifth Symphony (New World), Second Movement, first third by Antonin Dvorak (a believer but he wrote beautiful music), “The Last Spring” by Edvard Grieg, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, “Old Man River” by Jerome Kern.

Poetry and Readings

Below are just a few examples of readings by nonreligious or nonorthodox poets and essayists:

Continuance
by Samuel Butler

I fall asleep in the full and certain hope
That my slumber shall not be broken;
And that, though I be all-forgetting,
Yet shall I not be all-forgotten,
But continue that life in the thoughts and deeds
Of those I have loved.