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 unsailable 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 stupefying 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.

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Timing usually takes place within a week of death. If a funeral (which includes a burial) is chosen, the cremated. The choice. Memorials are not reserved for those being entirely a matter of family discretion and personal legal duties before having to plan meeting logistics. Freethinkers are very happy to do this, and often 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 powerful 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, Berliner, 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 Streisand. 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.


Below are just a few examples of readings by nonreligious or unorthodox 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.