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This is your funeral: the ultimate gatecrashers



As a news junkie, rolling news sites occupy my TV from morning to way past dusk. The great irritant is the constant advertisement breaks to finance the channels.

I admit I have not carried out an empirical study, but it seems the vast majority are currently either about encouraging gambling - probably sensible given the parlous economic situation in the UK currently - or, more extremely, the burning need of life insurance policies. I hate them.

I am perfectly aware that death is as inevitable as taxes; it must entail the highest demand of any commodity and it is a highly lucrative industry.

So when I am forced to watch an apparently healthy, harmless retired man effortlessly segueing from the subject of his surfeit of garden-grown parsnips to persuading his next door neighbour to part with a shedload of her hard-earned savings for a cluster of life insurance policies that will benefit only her legatees, I get cross.

Funerals are a different issue

Apart from funerals, of course. They are expensive. They fall within the umbrella of life insurance policies. And they have a strange symbolic stranglehold, certainly on my generation, and that of my parents.

Shiny gravestones providing respect for lives and lasting monuments are nothing new. Sophocles wrote in *Antigone* of the fundamental human need to bury your dead respectfully.

I have seen and heard about attending one's own funeral in disguise as a criminal investigation tactic.

Bewigged with sunglasses, the "victim" is not, in fact, dead. It seems that frequently, putative

murderers like to attend their victims' funerals, so for the purposes of identification, it sounds like a good strategy.

As a bonus, you will be able to establish how many people actually shows up, are genuinely upset at your untimely, violent death, and what you overhear what your nearest and dearest are saying about you.

But, like everything, fashion snatches the limelight. A recent "prank" played by one David Baerten, a Belgian gentleman who also operates under the alias "Ragnar le Fou", went to extraordinary lengths to hammer home a message to his "unappreciative" relatives, who "never visited him", by faking his own death and hiring an expensive helicopter in order to interrupt and publicly gatecrash his own funeral. Which he did with some panache. Needless to say, a film crew was present.

Some of his friends were thrilled and relieved that he was not, in fact, dead. His daughter - one of the accused of neglecting him - had already written tributes to him on social media. But according to Baerten, words were too cheap.

Viewers of his subsequent TV interview generally found it less amusing and somewhat "cruel".

There were also reports last week of an Ecuadorian woman who knocked frantically on her coffin at her own funeral to convey that she had been misdiagnosed as dead by the worst doctor on the planet.

Had she been a gatecrasher, this would have been a high risk strategy with accompanying drama. But given that she genuinely died a week later, it does not seem like any kind of prank.

Not a one off...

“Living funerals” are in fact increasingly popular, particularly in Japan, where they are known as *seizencos*, in the US, and reportedly now in the UK, where they are called “Celebrant Funerals”.

Death is no longer a precondition for your own funeral: you may organise a celebration of your life and achievements, of which you are centre stage.

Religion is now superfluous for the majority, so you may fly in the face of convention - popular venues are woods, beaches and gardens.

Death is less of a taboo, frightening subject now, and can be discussed more openly. Or for some people, there is a thin line between self-justification and plain old attention seeking.

Is this some kind of ego trip?

Motives vary. A report of a qualified “Celebrant” recounted a choice of a terminally ill man who wanted a “pie and a pint” with his friends before the event of his death.

He held his funeral in his local village hall, and chose to stroll from table to table, recalling anecdotes from his friends, who regaled him with stories about how they met, and memories of their relationship.

That does not sound narcissistic; possibly more memorable than a dirge-laden depressing hour that many people attend out of duty rather than desire.

Unless you are Scottish, when you can endure Calvinist lectures in the safe knowledge that whiskey and its like will be on tap shortly afterwards.

But could it not be rather cloying, embarrassing and frankly a tad showy? Psychiatrists have concluded that dreaming of

attending your own funeral could signify that you need to make some life changes, pronto.

Or you have a health problem your brain is desperately attempting to convey to you. Or you are insecure, vulgar, needy or deeply unhappy? Who is to judge? Probably everyone.

Here is where it could go badly wrong

I will end with a quote about the funeral of Hollywood director Louis B Mayer - I believe he was the first person to attract this comment - “the only reason there was such a huge turnout was that everyone wanted to make sure he was really dead”.

I have no evidence that Mayer gatecrashed his own funeral, nor that, by the sound of it, he would have cared less about the various comments.

I will not gatecrash my own funeral. It would be much better to have a traditional birthday party. At least you will be more likely to receive some cards and presents.