

CEREMONY FOR WITNESSING THE CASKET'S ENTRY INTO THE CREMATORY RETORT

*"There is love in holding, and there is love in letting go."
—Elizabeth Berg*

To some Western eyes, [the cremation ceremonies at Varanasi, on the gray shores of the Ganges River](#) in India seem brutally stark. Families gather to wrap their dead in a linen shroud and adorn them with strings of marigold blossom. The oldest sibling might light the pyre, and later, gently prod bones deeper in the embers.

But this jarring jolt of reality—stark as a witnessed cremation might initially seem—can actually launch healing in some people. To the astonishment of many professionals in the funeral and cremation business (who wish to spare families anything perceived as ‘traumatic’), more Americans are asking their local crematories if they can watch, or witness, the closed casket’s entry into the cremation chamber, or ‘retort,’ where pressurized heat rising to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit can turn a human body to bone and ash fragment in three hours.

An American crematory ‘witness’ is a much softened version of what occurs in India. No one in the United States, save a crematory operator, is allowed to see the body of a deceased person burn. American crematories keep the casket closed, with the sights and sounds much more controlled. But still, a family can watch the casket being raised to the level of the retort and then guided in. There are sometimes accompanying noises of the crematory’s lift rising to the proper height, sounds of the casket going in, and a small shrill sound of the door of the cremation chamber coming back down. Why would anyone elect to see and hear all that, especially when grieving, you might ask?

The reasons for requesting a ‘witness cremation’ are poignant and interesting:

1. Families may not trust the funeral/crematory personnel to cremate the deceased in a timely manner or on schedule (due to a small number of well-publicized crematory scandals), and the family members may want to maintain the role of the deceased’s ultimate caretaker or custodian. If they witness grandma’s entry into the cremation chamber at 9:45 a.m. Thursday, they know she went in at 9:45 a.m. Thursday. There’s no mystery to it, no waiting for a funeral director’s call to say “She’s over there now.”
2. Families electing to witness may feel aligned with the notion that fire releases the soul from the body, and it may feel liberating to be in the proximity of the casket at its exact time of incineration.
3. Or they may wish to just accompany their loved one ‘the whole way’ and stay as close as they can until they *have* to stay goodbye.

Witnessing a loved one’s casket enter the retort may produce one of the most profound realizations you’ve had in your life: we must all physically separate.

It is also an experience many people will find completely unfamiliar, so it becomes the funeral director or celebrant’s role to tenderly prepare and guide any family through the whole

experience—with detailed descriptions of what is about to come to pass, some poetry, scripture or words to impart the conviction that difficult experiences can become very meaningful ones.

Not every crematory *allows* witnessing, so you'll need to research which of your local crematories is best for this. Mostly, it's the newly refurbished, modern crematories that come equipped with family witnessing areas. There may or may not be an extra charge and special scheduling requirements. (At Green-Wood Cemetery's Crematory in Brooklyn, witnessed cremations occur early in the morning or at mid-day, times the retorts are ready to refill.)

Witness Cremation Ceremony

You may have just completed a crematory chapel committal service, or you may have just come from a funeral home morning viewing with subsequent ceremonial casket closing. In either instance, when you become ready for the cremation witness, you must inform the crematory staff that you are ready. At this point, they often have to program the chamber's computerized weight gauge and timer.

There may then be a pause, and an opportunity for the funeral director or celebrant to remind the family that not everyone in the group should feel forced to come around back for the witness, giving those who are now having doubts an opportunity to say to the others, "You know, I think I'll just wait for you guys out here."

At this moment, the funeral director or celebrant might say, "I have something to read for you all that might be of comfort while we wait for the crematory staff to get ready for us back there and take _____'s cremation casket to the proper area."

Then you could choose one of these --

Readings for a Witnessed Cremation Service

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,
we have a building from God, a house not made with hands,
eternal in the heavens. —2 Corinthians 5:1

Epitaph

(this poem can easily be shortened or adapted)

When I die
Give what's left of me away
To children
And old men that wait to die.

And if you need to cry,
Cry for your brother
Walking the street beside you.
And when you need me,
Put your arms
Around anyone
And give them
What you need to give to me.

I want to leave you something,
Something better
Than words
Or sounds.

Look for me
In the people I've known
Or loved,
And if you cannot give me away,
At least let me live on in your eyes
And not your mind.

You can love me most
By letting
Hands touch hands,
By letting bodies touch bodies,
And by letting go
Of children
That need to be free.

Love doesn't die,
People do.
So, when all that's left of me
Is love,
Give me away.

-- Merrit Malloy

To Those Whom I Love & Those Who Love Me

(excerpt)

When I am gone, release me, let me go.
I have so many things to see and do,
You must not tie yourself to me with tears.
Be happy that I have had so many years.

I gave you my love, you can only guess
How much you gave me in happiness
I thank you for the love each have shown
But now it is time I travel on alone

So grieve a while for me, if grieve you must
Then let your grief be comforted by trust
It is only for a while that we must part
So bless the memories in your heart.

--Mary Alice Ramish

...When thou hast made him ready, all possessing Fire, then do thou give her/him over to the Fathers,
When s/he attains unto the life that waits her/him, s/he shall become subject to the will of gods.
The Sun receive thine eye, the Wind thy *Prana* (life-principle, breathe); go, as thy merit is, to earth or heaven. Go, if it be thy lot, unto the waters; go, make thine home in plants with all thy members. — *Rigveda 10.16*

Music

This is your witness cremation, and it is fine to bring music, drumming, singing, and chanting into the space. Bose speakers from iPad mini work beautifully as they are small yet resonant. We've heard music of all sorts played for the witness itself--from The Beatles '*All You Need is Love*' to Mozart's famous choral '*Requiem*.' People we've worked with have also made their own music. One time a female shaman drummed. Another time, Tibetan monks chanted.

Cremation

You have now stepped into the area of the crematory where the cremations actually take place. In some crematories this area is a little industrial or garage-like. (One would hope your region has a prettier crematory; many cremation facilities are taking welcomed steps to redecorate.) In any case, all eyes are generally on the casket--often cardboard or pine (sometimes decorated by family with photos, letters, or with paint and magic markers).

Regardless of the constraints of the room, this is sacred space. Every group creates their own kind of experience. Your group may stand in respectful silence. Some families pray, or cry or wave goodbye. Many just stand in total silence. As the casket is lifted to the proper height, and the door

of the retort is opened, you may hear a soft roar. The crematory workers then place rollers the width of the retort into the doorway of the chamber so that the casket might gently roll forward on them. The workers then push the rear of the casket gently in.

You may have prepared the family to push the button on the wall that lowers the crematory door to seal the retort and commence the cremation. Some families are interested in doing this, others aren't. This is something like holding the torch at the shores of the Ganges. There is no looking back, only forward. The relationship will continue; the body will come back in a different form.

Stand there for another fifteen seconds, then indicate to the group that there's nothing more to do.

Slowly, gently, lovingly, usher everyone out. They may be shaken but amazed by their own resolve and courage. Some may be wiping their eyes and blowing their noses. Hugs will be exchanged. You'll hear "Oh my God, I've never seen anything like that. That was so shocking in some ways but also so amazing. It's so strange, but I'm glad we did that."

You might remind them, "Look, you accompanied the whole way. You took it as far as you could, and you took exquisite care. You did it all and saw it all."

They may say, "Boy, we sure did." They may feel devastated, separated, but also incredibly proud of themselves.

You might guide everyone to find cups of water at this point. Perhaps you came with little cookies (a really good idea). It is always nice when the weather is good and it's a sunny, welcoming day.

If you've read one of the poems above, you might try another if the group seems to need something else. Give it a moment. No one should feel rushed, but it is truly time to think about a meal to be shared, a home to go back to, a new phase of grieving.

Remind the family that the box or urn of remains will be ready for pick up or delivery in two or three days. But that they can wait until they're ready for it.

You can close with this little conversational, optimistic benediction—

"I will be in touch, and I am still here for you, but go in peace for now, everybody go in peace, and may the source of peace grant you each peace, and grant peace to all who mourn. Please take care, and goodbye everyone!"