

# “Being prepared for death only serves to heighten life”

## Supporting non-religious people at the end of life

By Alice Fuller, Policy & Parliamentary Affairs Lead, NCPC and Trustee of the British Humanist Association



The title of this piece is from one of the letters I received following an article I wrote for the British Humanist Association (BHA) newsletter during Dying Matters Week in May. My premise was that despite holding a non-mysterious, naturalistic view of death, humanists appeared to be no better at planning for the end of their lives.

Many of those who wrote said they wanted a humanist funeral, but few talked about their plans for the last months, weeks or days of life. There are few prompts in a non-religious person's life to think about this; no sermons confronting one's mortality, no named person in the community offering words of wisdom when some close dies. Do non-religious

people need spiritual support during this time of life? Do they want it? I took a closer look at the letters in an attempt to find some answers.

### The humanist view of death

Humanists are atheists or agnostics who seek to live an ethical, fulfilling life without belief in a god or the supernatural. They view death as the final experience a person will (or is likely to) have, and don't believe in an afterlife. As one reader put it:

*“To me as an atheist when I die all that will remain of me is the memories others have of me, and the influence and impact that I have had on their lives. Physically my DNA will pass down through my daughter and spread out into the population through her children. I can only hope that the better parts of my personality do likewise through those I meet and influence in my life.”* - Stuart Preen, BHA member

Humanist funerals are focused on what that person said, did and achieved during his or her life, providing an opportunity for celebration and reflection. The BHA trains celebrants to conduct these ceremonies for its members and the public.

## So do humanists talk about it?

The following key themes emerged from the 39 letters I received from humanists:

1. Many had discussed the sort of funeral they wanted, and that it should be non-religious in keeping with their beliefs. Several described how frustrating it is organising a funeral for someone who'd not made it clear what they wanted:

*“My father’s funeral was a strange and incongruous affair. He was non-religious and it was our (his children’s) wish to have no priest. It was his family’s wish to have a ‘traditional funeral’. The result was a stifled compromise, that although not religious still followed the structure of a religious ceremony with a ‘humanist priest’. It felt inappropriate. My father had never officially expressed his funeral wishes before he died. His children knew instinctively how to mark his life but his family, unsure, went with what they felt was socially acceptable and ‘appropriate’.”*

2. A desire to help others after their death was common, with many people saying they planned to leave their body to medical research. One reader, who owed his life to medical science, described this as a way of ‘redressing the balance sheet’. Another, who had Multiple Sclerosis, said that his family found organising this a way of coping with the illness. Someone else said that they’d prepared by donating some of their many books to the local bookshop, raising £750 for Oxfam.

3. Many feared dying in pain or without dignity, echoing the recent Dying Matters research that more of us are scared of dying in pain (83%) than being told we are dying (67%). In many letters this was directly connected with a desire to see assisted dying legalised, as a way of ensuring people didn’t have to die in (physical or emotional) pain. Clearly the promotion of palliative care, which offers solutions to pain, is relevant here.

4. A naturalistic view of life makes death easier to understand and eases the taboo. Readers didn’t think that the promise of an afterlife, or

a ‘celestial waiting room’ as one person put it, made death easier to deal with.

*“Having older parents and many older relatives, I grew up with it as a natural part of the life-cycle, it wasn’t some awful secret that was whispered about behind the hands. They hadn’t gone to the shops, or gone to be a star in the sky - they had gone, and it was OK to cry and miss them and treasure photographs or trinkets, for as long as felt right for you.”* - Sue Atherton, BHA member

Aside from a desire to avoid pain, few people described concrete preferences for the last months, weeks or days of life. Most comments related to what they’d want when they were dead (i.e. their funeral or legacy), with few apparently thinking about end of life issues, outside of the assisted dying debate which dominated the discussion.

## Support for the non-religious

Would non-religious people be more likely to deal with this issue if there was dedicated support available to them? Non-religious people, like everyone else, have philosophical, relational or spiritual questions they need to explore. Some humanists don’t approve of the word ‘chaplain’ or even ‘spiritual support’ but I think support of this kind would be valuable.

The question of why such support doesn’t exist will become increasingly pressing. The last British Social Attitudes Survey found that over half of people in the UK describe themselves as non-religious. Concurrently there is a national drive towards helping more people to die in their preferred setting, which for most of us is in the community. If more people are going to die in the community and half are non-religious, shouldn’t we be commissioning and delivering services which are proportional and appropriate to this group?



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# Interview:

## Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association

Q: Why does dying matter to humanists?

A: Dying is the one certainty of life. For a humanist, believing that death is the total end of personal existence as well as a physical end, dying matters because it is the last thing we will ever do, and we will all do it.

Q: What does the BHA offer by way of support to humanists with regards to this aspect of life?

A: Our funeral celebrants, who are trained and accredited to perform highly personalised and meaningful ceremonies for the non-religious, do visit dying people who have already decided that they want a humanist funeral. They can discuss what the dying person wants, and give them the comfort of knowing that their wishes will be carried out. We also have a few members who are available to visit dying people at certain hospitals, but this is something that we want to expand. We have identified a gap in provision for non-religious people who do not enjoy the benefit of a chaplain as dying religious people do, and we are hoping to organise volunteers to fill this gap in the future, if we can secure funding for a pilot scheme.

Q: What's positive about the humanist view of death? What's negative about it?

A: The positive side of a humanist view of death is that it is what gives structure to life - the fact that a story comes to an end is what makes it a story, rather than a meaningless, infinitely ongoing series of events. This is reflected in the way that humanist funerals were described by one of my predecessors in the 1950s as 'more of a harvest ritual than a tomb ritual', the 'bringing in' of a life. For some people the negative side of this arises when there is not much life to round off: the life of a child, for



The humanist view is that death gives structure to life

example, or the death of someone whose life was hard and seemingly purposeless.

Q: You say this issue is important. Have you practiced what you've preached, so to speak, and planned for your own end of life?

A: Yes, I have. I have an Advance Decision which my family and partner are all aware of. They also know that I want a humanist memorial service and I have completed the paperwork necessary to leave my body to to the London Anatomy Office for research and education. If I die at a time when they will not take my body, I am going to have a woodland burial. It's a comfort to me and a comfort to my family that my wishes are known.

Q: What do you most want to do before you die?

A: Live for 106 years in perfect health.