

Chapter 1: It Started Like This ...

The first time I sat down with a family to hear the story of a person's life – so that I could take their funeral – it felt as though I had been doing it for all of my life. It felt entirely natural. Not strange or worrying, just normal.

At one point in the conversation, a son of the woman who had died asked, 'You must meet lots of interesting people doing this?' I knew that it was not the time to reply, 'Actually, you are my first family', so I said, 'Yes, I do'. It was the truth after all, they were interesting people and his mother had had a very interesting life, not least learning Serbo-Croat when working in the Balkans.

Across the next 34 years, I have heard the stories of many lives. Some of which stand out in my memory because they were interesting families or, on most occasions, because the person was interesting. But it is also fascinating how similar many of the life stories are, as they lived in overlapping times. I have learnt a social history of the UK in the 20th century.

When I started, I was taking the funerals of people born before and during the First World War, as well as a few from the 1890s, all of my grandparents were born 1898–1900. At the other end of the scale are the funerals of those born in the 21st century. From all these stories I have learnt much about humankind and, unexpectedly, of my own family and myself.

That first family visit went smoothly and, three days later, I took the funeral of Mrs Jean Peters, aged 71. This was at the West Hertfordshire Crematorium, in Garston just outside Watford, which has become my 'local'. It was Thursday 23rd May 1991.

I was confident all would go well, I had been involved in public speaking from the age of 11 and had received excellent training from Nigel Collins of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK). I had time with a colleague as a refresher and made a reconnoitre of the crem two days earlier to meet the staff and they had been welcoming. It was clear that I

was a rare fish to them as they could not remember the last time they had a Humanist funeral. That year they held 3,858 funerals and I took 12 of them!

I was also fortunate that, during this first funeral, three people were to give tributes and the family had selected their music, so I did not have a great deal to do. I was mainly a master of ceremonies, which gave me an easy ride. I thought.

It all started fine. The funeral director, John Worley, arrived on perfect time with the hearse, as he has done ever since. The mourners almost completely filled the 160-seat North Chapel. When I took my place at the lectern to welcome the family and mourners, I felt quite at home and not in any way fazed. As with when I had met them – it felt usual and normal.

The ceremony went well with touching tributes, and soon it was time to play the music for Quiet Reflection. Families usually choose quiet music for this to give them time to take in what has happened and that we are moving towards the formal close of the ceremony, for those with a faith it is a time for private prayer. I sat down at the lectern and, with the music in the background, ran over in my mind what I had to do next.

Then I started to sweat ...