

### *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 unassailable 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.

Share this information and read more selections:  
[ffrf.org/secular-funerals](http://ffrf.org/secular-funerals)

Photography by Andrew L. Seidel

© Freedom From Religion Foundation  
PO Box 750, Madison, WI 53701  
(608) 256-8900 | [FFRF.org](http://FFRF.org)



*Secular Memorials  
&  
Funerals Without God*

FREEDOM  
FROM RELIGION  
*foundation*

Freethinkers believe that a memorial service should celebrate life, not death. Memorials should honor the person who has lived, not be a vehicle to proselytize unsavory dogmas such as sin and salvation, as typical religious funerals often are. It is time to dispense with carbon-copy, fill-in-the-blank services read by clergy who use the occasion to promote religion, instead of honoring the individual. Freethinkers can specify “no religion” in their wills and papers, and freethinking families can likewise make clear they want no religious observances at funerals, the gravesite or memorials.

At the Freedom From Religion Foundation, we often hear horror stories about what happens when religious relatives put on godly funerals for people who were “devoutly unreligious.” We have heard of religious relatives throwing out valuable freethought libraries! We receive frequent requests from FFRF members who wish to ensure that their own memorials or those for nonreligious friends and relatives stay secular and true to the wishes of the deceased.

Memorials can be planned with readings from favorite poets and writers, with favorite music, with personal anecdotes told by friends and families, with family photos and other personal touches.

Another way to honor the living is to specify secular charities and organizations to donate in memory of the deceased. Friends and relatives who might never consider donating to such a charity often will honor such a request and this is a way for freethinking or progressive concerns to live after you.

Many freethinkers plan memorials rather than funeral services. Memorials have the advantage of giving grieving family and friends the chance to recover from the shock of sudden death, to make travel arrangements, and to fulfill obligations and legal duties before having to plan meeting logistics. Whether to hold a funeral or a memorial service is entirely a matter of family discretion and personal choice. Memorials are not reserved for those being cremated.

If a funeral (which includes a burial) is chosen, the timing usually takes place within a week of death.

Individual state laws regulate when a burial must take place. Funeral homes can help a family consider the myriad small details, and there are also memorial societies that can help individuals plan details in advance of their deaths and save on expenses. No clergy is required to participate in any aspect of a funeral or burial.

FFRF is often asked: How do I make sure I am not given a religious burial? These requirements may be left with final papers, an “After I’m Gone” list left with trusted family, executor, or as a stand-alone instruction with your other important documents, clearly marked and signed. Do not rely on placing such a provision in a will, which likely will be read after burial or cremation! In the state of Wisconsin, the Department of Health has a form, “Authorization for Final Disposition” which allows someone to detail arrangements for a funeral or memorial (see “Religious Observances or Special Instructions”). Your own state may offer such a form.

There are no orthodox rules or religious rites that must be followed. Isn’t that nice?

—Anne Nicol Gaylor  
Principal Founder, FFRF

### *Sample Secular Service*

- **Music**
- **Welcome**
- **Selected Readings (if desired)**
- **Tribute/Memorial Portrait/Eulogy (Prepared remarks)**
- **Song or Music**
- **Personal Memories (Spontaneous memories shared by participants)**
- **Song or Music**
- **Closing Words or Thank You**
- **Closing Music**
- **Invitation to Reception**

During the tribute or memorial portrait, a family member or a chosen speaker remembers the person who has died. This talk can 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 roomful 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, Berlioz, 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 Strouse. 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.

Other ideas: “Danny Boy,” “To a Wild Rose” from Woodland Sketches by Edward Alexander MacDowell; Fifth Symphony (New World), Second Movement, first third by Antonin Dvorak (a believer but he wrote beautiful music), “The Last Spring” by Edvard Grieg, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, “Old Man River” by Jerome Kern.

### *Poetry and Readings*

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.