

# FUNERALS ARE US

**K**IM LEEVERS AND HER FOUR SIBLINGS all had their own ideas about the type of funeral they wanted for their mother, June, who died of cancer a few months ago. But on at least one point they were unanimous: the service would have no religious content. Even years ago, when the children were attending Sunday school, Leever's sensed her mother was less than devout: "She used just to drop us and leave." So on her passing they chose Sydney celebrant John Hill to conduct the service, which featured speeches from June's two sons, a song from one of her granddaughters, many references to her great passion—gardening—and none to God. About 100 people attended the service. "And many of them told us how wonderful they thought it was," says Leever's. "We know Mum would have approved."

Civil funerals aren't new. They've been happening in Australia since the mid 1970s and for almost as long in New Zealand. But the proportion of people choosing them is growing fast. Acknowledging "a massive

conduct substantially more than half of the funerals. And services themselves are evolving as celebrants and the public grapple with a question: what, precisely, is the purpose of a non-religious funeral?

Adhering to Judeo-Christian principles, funerals in both countries used to be predictable. Between prayers and hymns, a clergyman spoke briefly about the departed before commending his or her soul to God. Change flowed from the secularizing of another rite of passage: weddings. Troubled that the only option available to couples who didn't wish to marry in a church was a legalistic ceremony performed by a poker-faced official in a registry office, Australian Attorney-General Lionel Murphy in 1973 launched the Civil Marriage Celebrant Program, which soon gave couples the option of a personalized service. Officiating at funerals was a natural progression for many celebrants, of whom there are now more than 1,800 in Australia and nearly as many in New Zealand. "We're leading a process of change," says Wellington-based celebrant Bill Logan. "We're guiding people toward

merous, and if there are fewer today it's because clergy have adopted some of the celebrants' practices, such as longer, more personalized eulogies and multiple tributes from family and friends. While Australia and New Zealand remain the only countries where celebrancy has a firm foothold, fledgling movements have also arisen in the U.S. and Britain. "Funerals are in a state of flux," says Melbourne celebrant Dally Messenger, a movement pioneer. "Clergy have responded to the stimulus of competition. In my opinion, the best funerals in the world happen in Melbourne."

But what's a good funeral? Here, celebrants' views diverge. Like the Leever's' Hill, a former Catholic priest who scours books for new perspectives on death and dying, Messenger insists there must be meticulous preparation—many hours spent interviewing loved ones, writing and rewriting the eulogy, carefully selecting music and quotations. Combined with the stress of dealing with the bereaved, it's a process that leaves Messenger "drained . . . I'll need a day to recover after the service." He won't do more than one funeral a week, and is dismissive of celebrants who average more than one a day. These people may come cheap, he says, but their eulogies can consist of "six sentences read from the back of an envelope . . . They're our shame. It gets me in the guts." Regarded as a poser by some celebrants, Messenger isn't cheap: he charges \$A95 an hour and recently billed a family for \$A1,800. "But people don't have the slightest problem with my bills," he says, "[because they realize] there's no shortcut to a good funeral."

By offering non-believers an alternative to religious ritual, the early celebrants saw their move-

“The minister may not know **who he's going to bury.** The

**celebrant brings alive the deceased in a special way.” —JOHN HILL**

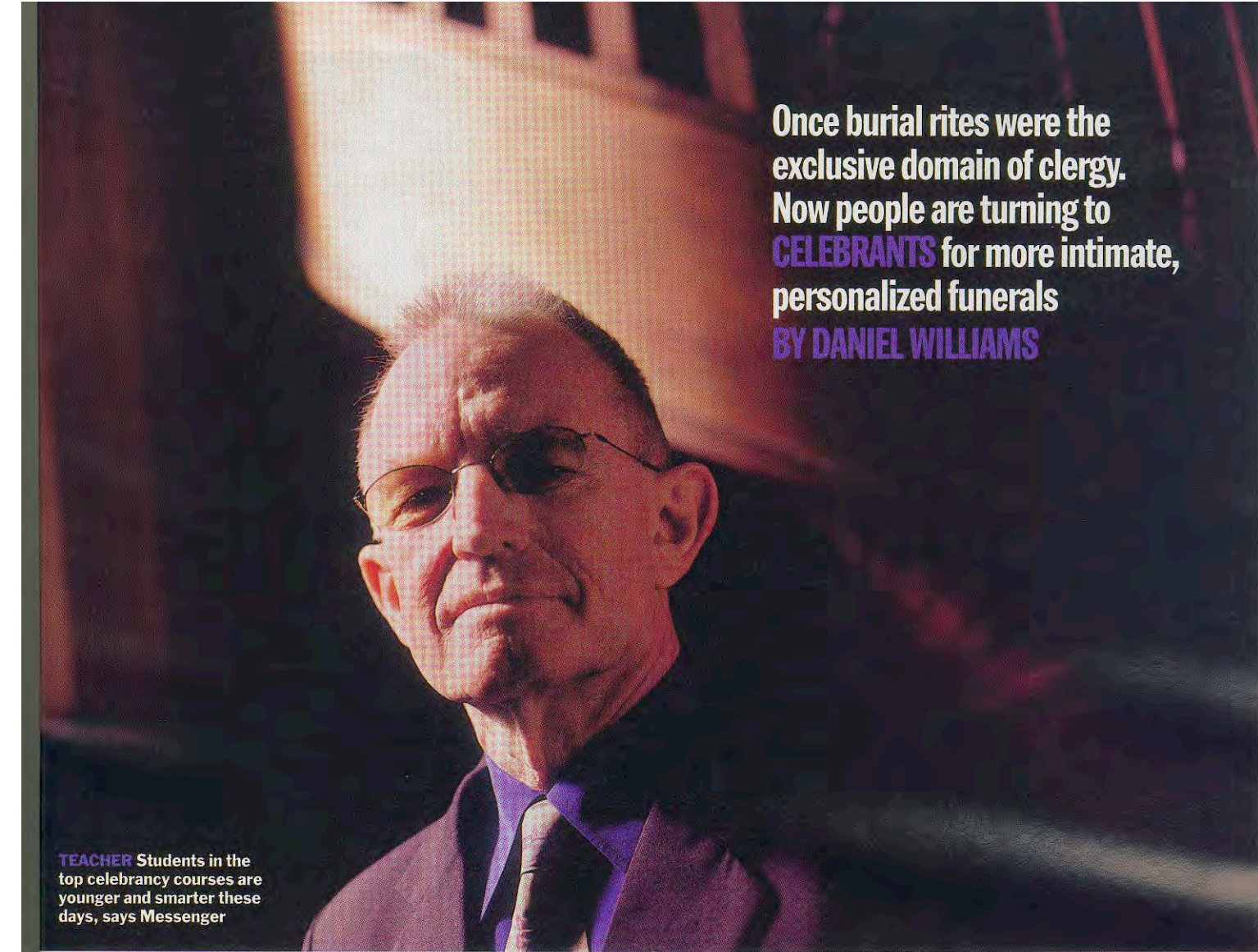
cultural shift” toward secularity in urban Aus-

tralia, the Anglican Bishop of South Sydney, Rob Forsyth, predicts secular and religious funerals “will eventually reach a point of equilibrium.” While that's probably some years away in most Australian and New Zealand cities and not even close in the bush, celebrants in the more liberal centers of Melbourne and Auckland already

better relationships with death and with the memories of loved ones who've died.”

By making the deceased the focus instead of God, and concentrating on the earthly life at the expense of the afterlife, civil funerals distinguished themselves from traditional ones right away. Over time the differences became more nu-

ment as a quest for authenticity. Today, many celebrants try to honor that principle by leading funerals that accurately portray the deceased. Researching a eulogy for a Melbourne man, Messenger was getting nowhere until the deceased's youngest daughter interjected: “Tell Dally the truth,” she said. “Our father was a bastard and



Once burial rites were the exclusive domain of clergy. Now people are turning to **CELEBRANTS** for more intimate, personalized funerals  
**BY DANIEL WILLIAMS**

**TEACHER** Students in the top celebrancy courses are younger and smarter these days, says Messenger

we're glad he's dead." So Messenger's eulogy explored the man's decline: haunted by his service in Europe during World War II, he'd turned inward and then to drink. "Make it real," says Wellington's Logan, who believes a congregation switches off if the flaws and foibles of the deceased are ignored. "We are learning from Maori that it's good to speak ill of the dead."

There's Maori influence, too, in another practice that's become the norm in New Zealand: the celebrant invites anyone present to say a few words. Logan—who in addition to his work as a celebrant practices what he calls "narrative counseling"—is all for it, believing the more stories the better for making sense of our memories of the dead. But these free-for-alls occur at only about 1 in 10 civil funerals in Australia, where many celebrants, worried about the potential for rambling and repetition, keep a tighter grip on proceedings. "As soon as I hear someone with no notes is going to speak from the heart, I'm a nervous wreck," says Messenger, who suggests that some

celebrants condone the practice only because it means less work for them.

It seems some celebrants see their funerals almost as works of art, as theater, albeit with a commitment to accuracy. Perhaps that's to be applauded, but it does raise questions. Are civil funerals for the living or the dead? Are they a farewell or a tribute? "The funeral launches the grieving process," says Judy Watt, coordinator of the Graduate Diploma in Civil Ceremonies at Melbourne's Monash University. "But it would be a mistake to see it as a means of closure. I dislike that word. The best one can hope for is a new kind of life."

Sydney celebrant Hill, who's still profoundly spiritual if no longer theistic, believes a funeral is for "telling the story of a person who's graced our world." This story, he argues, settles in the congregation's "collective unconscious" and ensures that "the memory of the deceased will live on forever." Auckland-based Mary Hancock, another movement pioneer, is on a similar wavelength. In New Zealand, one of the

most secular countries in the world, "there's a huge hunger," she says, "to have some way of addressing the meaning of life outside a religious context."

Civil funerals aren't to everyone's taste, of course. While stressing that people have the right to compose funerals in line with their beliefs, Bishop Forsyth worries that a lot of civil services "glorify the individual and imply we're not part of a greater community." Though an atheist, Mira Crouch, from the school of sociology and social anthropology at the University of New South Wales, tends to agree. Services at which many speakers deliver intimate outpourings strike her as "mawkish and sentimental," and insofar as they often say more about the speaker than the deceased, such speeches are in a way "self-serving." Still, the rise of celebrants suggests their perspectives on death are striking a chord. Grieving families are finding that even if they lack religious faith they can still lay to rest loved ones with respect and tenderness—and without burying the truth along with them. ■

ROSS BIRD FOR TIME