

2026 EDITION

60
PRACTICAL
TOPICS

What Happens After the Last Goodbye

A Practical Family Guide to Funeral Choices, Costs, and
Written Wishes

ARTHUR VANCE

Clear explanations for difficult family decisions

Large print

2026 Edition

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Written Wishes

Arthur Vance

What Happens After the Last Goodbye · 2026 Edition

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A NOTE FROM ARTHUR

A little steadiness before the next call

You do not have to settle every question today.

Dear reader,

You may have opened this book with a funeral home waiting for your answer. Perhaps you are sorting papers after everyone else has gone home. Or you may be planning ahead, hoping to leave your family fewer unanswered questions. Each is a good reason to be here.

I'm Arthur Vance. My purpose in these pages is straightforward: to help you understand the choices in front of you, put useful questions into words, and keep a record you can return to when you are tired. A calm explanation ought to leave you better able to make your own decision.

There is a particular kind of pressure in being the person everyone calls. Someone needs an address. Someone else wants to know what the service will cost. A relative remembers a conversation differently, and the notebook with the telephone number has disappeared beneath the post. None of those problems is solved by telling you to be strong. You need something more useful than that.

This book gives the practical work a place to sit. Some pages help you prepare for a conversation with a provider. Others help you divide family responsibilities, check an invoice, protect personal information, or write down your own preferences. The aim is to make the next task smaller and clearer, without pretending that a checklist can take away your grief.

The information is being checked against official consumer guidance, government instructions, and the organizations responsible for the processes described. Where a rule depends on your location or circumstances, the text tells you what to verify before you act. Research notes are kept with the manuscript so that factual statements can be checked and revised. The practical examples show how a process might work; they do not promise an outcome for your family.

You will find ordinary words throughout. If a provider uses a term you do not understand, you are allowed to ask for an explanation you can write down. A conversation that leaves you uncertain has another question left in it. Sometimes the most useful sentence on a page will be the one you can read aloud across a desk.

You need not read from the beginning to the end. Use the contents to find the problem that is actually waiting for you. Start with the communication pages if relatives are receiving different updates. Turn to the purchasing pages before you accept an arrangement. Save the later chapters for the records and follow-up work that continue after a gathering has ended.

The action boxes give you a sequence. The suggested words help you begin a difficult conversation. Worked examples follow a task through the places where misunderstandings tend to arise. The caution boxes mark a boundary, including situations where a qualified professional or the relevant agency needs to answer for your circumstances.

Keep a separate sheet beside you as you read. Write the question, the person who can answer it, and what remains undecided. You may discover that you already have enough information to take the next step. When you do not, a precise unanswered question is more useful than a page of hurried guesses.

Please use these pages at a pace you can manage. If another person can make a call or collect a document, give them a defined task and let them finish it. Accepting practical help does not mean handing over decisions you need to make yourself.

For now, choose the question that matters next. We can begin there.

Arthur

One point of contact for a scattered family

Set up one reliable update, a backup contact, and a clear boundary around who can authorize decisions.

8 min read

Your phone rings while you are already on another call. A cousin wants the service time. Your brother has heard a different date, and someone has told the funeral home that the family wants a decision you have not discussed. By lunchtime, answering questions has become a job of its own. You can spend the day repeating information and still leave people unsure.

Give the updates a clear home. You need a person who gathers confirmed information, a backup who can take over, and a short written message relatives can return to. That arrangement can reduce crossed wires without giving the coordinator permission to decide everything. Start by separating those responsibilities.

Separate sharing news from giving permission

Being the family contact is a practical role. You collect questions, pass on an agreed update, and keep track of which answers are still missing. It does not follow that you may sign every form, obtain every record, or give every instruction.

Check before you sign.

Different decisions may need different people. Ask the funeral provider who can authorize the arrangements in your circumstances and what documents they need. Avoid treating the first name in a group message as proof of authority. The purpose of a contact list is to make communication easier, not to settle a legal question by accident.

Medical information has its own boundaries. A deceased person's health information can remain protected, and access depends on the request and the requester's authority. Some relevant information may be shared with relatives involved in care, but that is not unrestricted access to the medical record.

The useful distinction is simple: someone may be able to collect questions without being entitled to receive every answer. Write that boundary into the plan before a difficult call makes everyone defensive.

Give the update a home people can find

A family message group is convenient if everyone uses it, but a paper beside the telephone may work better for a relative who does not have a device or a reliable connection. Choose a method that reaches the actual people involved. You do not need a new app while you are trying to arrange a funeral.

Keep the main update brief. Put confirmed arrangements first, unresolved questions next, and the time you intend to check in again at the end. Label a proposed date as proposed. An idea repeated often enough can start to sound like a booking, especially when a relative forwards an earlier message without the sentence explaining that you are still checking availability.

Think about who belongs in each conversation. Relatives travelling to the gathering may need the location and parking instructions. They probably do not need a photograph of an identity document or a debate about who will pay an invoice. Keep sensitive discussions in a smaller conversation with the people who need them.

A shared note helps only if the information stays current. Put the date and time at the top and replace outdated details in the main note. If you correct something significant, send a separate correction so people who read the earlier message will see it.

Put a small communication plan in place

STEP BY STEP

- 1 **Choose a coordinator who agrees to the job.** Ask what they can manage today. Being nearby, retired, or usually organized does not mean they can remain available without a break.
- 2 **Name a backup.** Give that person the current note and explain when they should take over. Do not make them reconstruct the situation from a pile of missed calls.
- 3 **Record who handles each decision.** Include the funeral arrangements, payment questions, and any estate or medical-record enquiry that has arisen. Where authority is uncertain, write “needs confirmation” and identify who will check.

- 4 **Agree on the next update.** Choose a time that fits the decisions actually pending. Explain that a confirmed urgent change will be passed on sooner.
- 5 **Collect questions in one place.** Write the question, the person who will ask it, and the answer received. Mark an unanswered question as open rather than letting a guess fill the space.
- 6 **Send the same confirmed message to everyone who needs it.** Arrange a telephone call for anyone who cannot use the chosen message group. Ask them to repeat back travel details if a misunderstanding would cause difficulty.

Have the provider's contact details, the appointment information, and your question list beside you before a call. If you are checking a previous instruction, keep the actual email or written statement open. Your memory has enough work already.

When you contact the funeral home, explain the communication arrangement and ask whether staff can record it. Confirm how the provider will verify instructions, who should receive routine updates, and whom staff must contact for an authorization. Do not assume a family agreement automatically changes the provider's procedures.

Use words that make the boundary clear

WHAT TO SAY

To relatives: "I'll gather the questions and send the confirmed arrangements this evening. Please send changes to me so we can check them before they go into the family update. If I need a break, Elena will handle the messages."

To the provider: "I'm coordinating the family's updates. Please tell me which instructions need authorization, who you can accept that authorization from, and how you want us to send it."

When someone asks for private details: "I can share the service arrangements. That document belongs in a smaller conversation with the person handling it. I'll pass your question to them."

You can say these things warmly. Clear limits do not require a speech about difficult relatives. Often a short explanation prevents someone from taking a delay personally.

Keep your tone ordinary.

If a family member dislikes the arrangement, ask what information they are missing. They may need a call rather than another text. A person who feels excluded can send repeated questions because the answers keep arriving in a format they cannot use.

Follow a change from first call to final message

FOR EXAMPLE

Consider a family in which Maya lives near her father's home, Elena lives out of state, and their uncle uses a landline. They agree that Maya will coordinate updates while Elena keeps the shared note current. The uncle will receive a call after each confirmed arrangement.

Maya asks the funeral home how it will establish who may authorize the arrangements. She records the answer privately and keeps it separate from the travel update. The family does not assume her communication role settles that question.

The proposed service time is Thursday afternoon. Before it is confirmed, a cousin asks whether Friday would allow more people to attend. Elena records the request under “questions to resolve,” without changing the proposed time at the top of the note.

Maya checks with the person handling the arrangements and the provider. Thursday remains available; Friday does not. Once the booking is confirmed, Elena changes the heading to “confirmed,” adds the location, and sends the updated message. Maya calls the uncle and checks that he has written down Thursday.

Later, a relative asks Elena to add an extra service. Elena records the request and passes it to the person who can decide. She does not tell the funeral home to proceed. Before arrangements are accepted, the family checks the itemized written statement for the selected services and prices.

That evening Maya needs to stop answering calls. Elena takes over with the same note, including the open question about the extra service. Nobody has to rely on the phrase “I thought someone told you.”

The family has not eliminated disagreement. It has made the disagreement visible before it becomes an instruction. That is enough to make the communication plan useful.

No special software required.

Correct crossed wires without starting another argument

COMMON MISTAKE

Two relatives are calling the provider separately. Ask them to send their questions to the coordinator first. Then check with the provider for conflicting instructions already received. Put the correction in writing using the provider’s agreed process.

A tentative date has become a family announcement.

Send a plain correction: “The earlier date was proposed. The confirmed booking is Thursday.” Tell the relatives who already arranged travel directly; a correction buried in a busy group is easy to miss.

Someone cannot answer all the questions. Leave the unanswered ones visible. Add a name beside each enquiry so relatives know it has not been forgotten. Avoid promising an answer by a time the provider or agency has not agreed to.

A stalled answer needs a better next question. If staff say they cannot discuss a matter with you, ask what they can explain about the process and what the authorized person needs to provide. Do not try to overcome a privacy restriction by repeatedly calling different staff members.

If you discover a mistake you made, correct the actual detail first. A long account of how the confusion happened can wait. “I sent the old address; please use this one” gives someone who is about to leave the information they need.

You may also need to reduce the coordinator's workload. Ask a willing relative to handle travel questions or meals, with a clear handover. Give that helper the relevant details, rather than the whole file. A smaller job is easier to finish accurately, and a helper who knows exactly what you need is less likely to come back with another decision for you to make.

Know when a shared note cannot settle the problem

BE CAREFUL

A communication plan cannot establish legal authority or resolve a contested right to control arrangements. Requirements differ by jurisdiction and circumstances. If instructions conflict, tell the provider promptly and ask what needs to be resolved before it acts. Seek advice from the appropriate local professional when authority remains disputed.

Keep access limited to what each helper needs. A broad family message is a poor place for identity documents, account credentials, medical records, or information someone has asked you to keep private. Ask the relevant organization for its secure submission method when documents are required.

Some families cannot safely use a shared conversation. Hostility, harassment, or an estranged relationship may make a smaller contact arrangement necessary. You do not have to bring everyone into the same message group to keep essential arrangements clear. Discuss practical boundaries with the provider and get local advice if the dispute affects an instruction.

Before you stop for the evening, look at the open questions. Hand the backup the current note, say which decisions are still pending, and agree how an urgent change will reach you. Then put the phone down for the break you arranged.

IN SHORT

- Choose a willing coordinator and give a backup the same current note.
- Keep proposed arrangements separate from confirmed ones.
- Ask who may authorize each decision; sharing updates does not settle that question.
- Give relatives a clear next update and a way to submit questions.
- Keep sensitive documents out of broad family messages.

A task list that separates today from later

Turn an overwhelming list into a small set of confirmed next actions, with an owner and a reason for each deadline.

7 min read

Someone has handed you a checklist that seems to contain the rest of your life. There are calls to make, papers to find, arrangements to discuss, and a cupboard nobody wants to open. Each line looks equally urgent because none explains what happens if it waits. You keep starting another task before finishing the one beside it.

Set that list down for a moment. You need a working order, not a test of how much you can bear. Start with immediate safety and the official process already under way. Then separate a confirmed deadline from someone else's wish to have an answer. You can make a useful plan without finishing it all today.

Ask what makes this task urgent

The first steps depend on where and how the death occurred. A hospital, hospice team, or other responsible authority can explain the process for that situation. Do not replace those instructions with a general checklist from a book or a relative.

Once the immediate process is being handled, examine each request. Is there a safety issue? Is someone waiting for an authorization you can properly give? Has a provider given you an actual deadline, or has the family assumed everything must be chosen before the next telephone call?

The distinction matters. A confirmed transport arrangement and the choice of a photograph for a later gathering may arrive in the same conversation. They do not necessarily need an answer at the same moment. Ask the person making the request what depends on it.

Write the answer beside the task. “Needed before the appointment” is more useful than “urgent.” Better still, record the appointment and the person who explained the requirement. Your list should tell you why an item sits near the top.

Check the reason first.

An unknown deadline needs checking. It does not become harmless because you move it lower down the page. Give “confirm the deadline” its own short action so uncertainty does not disappear into the category marked later.

Use a page that can change

Divide a sheet into “next,” “waiting,” and “later.” These are working categories, not promises that every later task can wait indefinitely. Move an item when you receive new information. Leave enough space to add who is handling it and what will release it from the waiting column.

A task belongs in “next” when you know the action, know who can do it, and have the information needed to begin. Dealing with insurance is too broad a heading. Ask a helper to find the insurer’s name in the policy folder. That is a job they can actually finish.

The waiting column is especially useful. If an office must call you back, repeated checking may not move the process forward. Write the contact, what was requested, and when you were told to follow up. That makes waiting visible without pretending the task is complete.

Put preferences and ideas somewhere separate. A relative's suggestion for music is worth keeping, but it should not obscure a question about an appointment. You can care about both without giving both the same place on today's page, particularly when a provider is waiting for an answer and the music can be discussed with the family later.

Build the next round of work

STEP BY STEP

- 1 **Check the immediate situation.** Follow the instructions of the responsible clinical team or local authority. If there is uncertainty about a person's condition or an emergency, seek emergency assistance rather than using this planning exercise.
- 2 **Gather the tasks already requested.** Use the notes and messages you have. Avoid spending the morning searching for more checklists before you have understood the requests in front of you.

- 3 **Ask for the reason behind each deadline.** Record who supplied it and what will happen if it is missed. Where the answer is unclear, make a specific enquiry your next action.
- 4 **Break large headings into small actions.** Replace “sort the house” with the particular action needed now, such as arranging care for a pet with the appropriate person’s agreement.
- 5 **Assign a willing owner.** Check that the helper has the information and any authority the task requires. Collecting an address does not mean accepting a contract.
- 6 **Choose a stopping point.** Review the page after the next appointment or agreed update. Leave a note explaining what is waiting so another person can take over without starting again.

Keep the active list short enough to read when you are tired. Other tasks remain recorded, so you are not relying on memory to protect them. Finishing a small action is more useful than opening several complicated ones and losing the thread of each.

Put ordinary needs on the page if they are being missed. A meal, a lift home, or someone staying with a relative may deserve an owner just as much as a telephone call. Those arrangements support the person doing the administrative work.

Ask a provider to separate now from next

WHAT TO SAY

“I have several requests written down. Which answer do you need next? Which choices can wait until our appointment?”

“Please tell me whether that date is a legal requirement, a condition of this arrangement, or your available booking time. I want to record the reason correctly.”

“I’ll look for the document today, but I cannot promise to complete the application until we know who is authorized to submit it and what else is required.”

You are asking for an order you can follow. A professional may have good reasons for needing an answer soon. Knowing the reason helps you decide what to interrupt and what to delegate. If an answer carries a fee or commits you to an arrangement, ask for the details before treating it as a routine task.

Watch a large list become usable

FOR EXAMPLE

Consider Daniel, who is helping after his aunt's death in a care facility. He has a message about collecting belongings, a request for a service photograph, an appointment with a funeral provider, and a relative asking him to start clearing the home.

He begins by asking the facility which steps it is handling and what the family needs to arrange next. Staff explain their handover process. Daniel writes the named contact beside the question instead of leaving "call hospital" on the list.

Next he asks when belongings can be collected and whether a particular person must sign for them. The facility gives its process and a collection window. His cousin agrees to enquire about the collection requirements, without assuming she may take possession of everything.

The photograph can be discussed at the forthcoming arrangement appointment. Daniel asks the relative who has the albums to choose a few possibilities. Nobody needs to approve a final image while transport questions are still being resolved.

Clearing the home moves to a separate list. Before anyone distributes property, the family needs to establish who can make those decisions. A helper can still check, with permission, that someone is looking after the cat.

By evening the list is smaller. It has a contact for the handover, an agreed document enquiry, a photograph task, and a pet-care arrangement. The property question remains open, with an owner to seek the right advice. Daniel has not finished everything; he has made the next actions clear.

Notice what did not happen. The family did not ignore the difficult task or mark it complete. They separated the question that must be answered before anyone should begin it.

Recover when the day changes

COMMON MISTAKE

A new request keeps taking over. Ask what makes it time-sensitive before replacing the task already under way. Add it to the page so the person asking knows it has been heard.

The list says only “paperwork.” Name the particular document or enquiry. If you cannot identify it, finding out what is needed becomes the task.

Everyone thinks someone else is doing the call. Write an owner’s name and ask them to confirm. An unread message is not a completed handover.

A task can also stall because you do not have the capacity to do it. Tell the helper or provider before the agreed follow-up, if you can. Ask for a different arrangement instead of silently carrying a commitment you cannot meet.

When an office is closed, record when it next opens and prepare the questions or documents in advance. Use the time for another defined task or a break. Repeatedly reopening the same website rarely makes a closed office respond sooner.

Keep deadlines attached to their source

BE CAREFUL

There is no single timetable that safely covers every death, benefit, contract, estate, and location. A general task list does not extend a real deadline. Confirm requirements with the responsible organization or a qualified local professional, especially when an application, legal authority, or disputed arrangement is involved.

If a relative says something must be done immediately, ask where the requirement came from. They may be right. They may also be remembering a different family's circumstances. Record the actual answer once you obtain it and share the correction with anyone relying on the old one.

At the next review, cross off finished actions and move waiting items only when their condition changes. Keep the completed page with your notes. It can save you from making the same enquiry again when the next person asks what has been done.

IN SHORT

- Begin with immediate safety and the responsible team's instructions.
- Record why a deadline exists and who confirmed it.
- Give each next action a willing owner.
- Keep unanswered enquiries visible in a waiting column.
- Review the list at an agreed point; do not measure the day by its length.

Enjoyed this sample?

The full book has every chapter, all the checklists and the printables.

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