As you begin to plan the funeral ritual for your loved one, it is helpful to note that there is a three-stage movement in the rites that we celebrate. Whether observed over three days or compressed into a single day, the WAKE, the FUNERAL and the BURIAL outline a movement from the PAST to the PRESENT and into the FUTURE.

AT THE FIRST STAGE, the Wake, we remember the person who has just died. We look back over their life, remembering the good times and the bad times. We tell stories we have told countless times, and hear new stories that we never knew. We might go through our collection of pictures and put together a storyboard of a life lived. It is always a bittersweet time, for while we revel in the memories, we wish the deceased were there to share the time with us. We often want to stay here and not move on to the next stage in the journey.

THE SECOND STAGE is the gathering at the church for the Funeral Mass. Now we move from the past into the present. We bring with us all of the memories that have surfaced since the news of this death and bring it to prayer. We lift up this life to God as we gather together in prayer. At the door of the church, the casket is sprinkled with the water of Baptism to recall our first death: Baptism into the death of Jesus. The casket is then clothed with the white pall; this is our baptismal garment worn for the last time, recalling the moment when we were joined to the body of Christ, the communion of saints. The Paschal Candle is placed before the casket, recalling our journey of faith in the light of Christ. Now we begin to understand that it was not for this life that we were baptized; our baptism into Christ’s death prepares us to share in Christ’s resurrection and new life after death. This moment prepares us to move toward the final stage of the journey.

WE LEAVE THE CHURCH and carry our beloved to Cemetery, the final place of rest. The burial is a simple action, but a very important step in our grieving. Now we let go of the deceased and begin to move toward a future without them. This is always hard, but as we have moved through the stages in the funeral rite, we are ready to take this last step and let go, not for good, but for now. For we know that one day we will be reunited with our loved one in the kingdom. We take the first step toward life without them.

Our grieving is hardly complete in the span of three days, but this three-step movement outlines the scope of the journey, and signals the direction of our work. Several years ago we adopted a custom in our funeral rite, however, that interrupts this movement: the Eulogy at the end of the funeral Mass. The eulogy is about the past, of course, which takes us back to the focus of the wake service. With this interruption in the flow from past, present to future, we derail the ritual journey. Since we do not always go to the cemetery, this last moment in the funeral rite leaves us in the past, as if we had made no further progress.

Bishop Ken Untener introduced a very simple remedy to maintain the flow of the ritual process. Instead of a eulogy at the end of the funeral, Ken asks a family
member to introduce the deceased at the beginning of the funeral. Since not everyone in attendance actually knew the deceased, this introduction brings everybody together for our common prayer. This introduction recalls some of the memories from the previous night as we move into the present to lift up this life in thanksgiving and prayer to God.

THE INTRODUCTION is different from what happens the night before at the Wake service. Typically the remembering at the funeral home is very spontaneous and off the cuff. The introduction must be written out beforehand; it cannot be spontaneous. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but meant to capture the spirit of the person we are lifting up in prayer. The process of deciding what to include in the brief introduction is an important part of our reflecting on the death of our loved one. Several people, even a larger group might gather to do this work, and then decide on a couple of good stories that are worth more than many words. It can also be reflective, identifying some of the ways this person has been a gift to us, and how their life reflects the Gospel. Identify one person to edit the introduction in its final form. This might be the same person who will read it at the beginning of the Funeral Mass. It should only be a single page, double-spaced typed, or two pages hand written. (650-800 words.) This introduction helps the homilist prepare the funeral homily. Usually the introduction is read by a family member or friend, but if necessary, the Presider can step in and read the introduction if the designated person is having difficulty getting through it.