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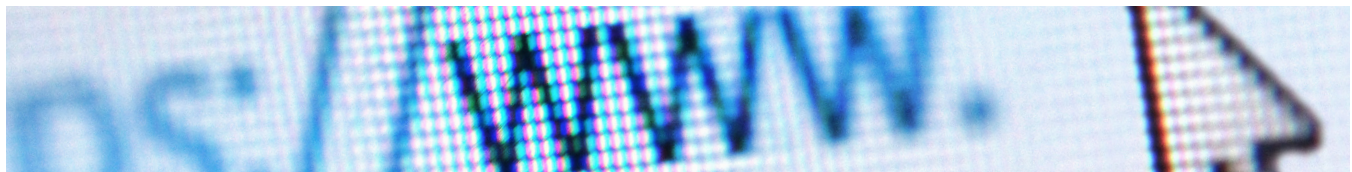
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## Understanding the Digital Aspects Of the Americans With Disabilities Act

By Welton Hong

I think it's safe to say that most Americans understand the basics of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), and I have no doubt that includes the funeral service students reading this. But there's much more to the ADA beyond the basics, including something most people probably don't think about: the digital aspect.

When you assume your first position in deathcare, you'll want to know how to ensure your firm is fully compliant

**While you might think that digital locations shouldn't count as "areas that accommodate the public," the courts tend to disagree.**

with the ADA. If you start off in a small, independent funeral home, it's possible the owner won't know this information, so you can impress him or her even more by potentially saving the firm from a lawsuit! Of course, abiding by the ADA also helps you better serve your community.

### THE ADA AND WEBSITES

According to Title III of the ADA, businesses with areas that accommodate the public must remove barriers that might keep people with disabilities from accessing business services or goods.

Granted, the language of Title III doesn't literally mention websites (the ADA was passed way back in 1990, although it was later updated), and you might think digital locations shouldn't count as "areas that accommodate the public." But the courts tend to disagree. In lawsuits and regulatory action on the matter, U.S. courts and the Department of Justice have repeatedly interpreted Title III as also applying to websites and mobile apps.

That makes sense, especially given everything that's occurred throughout the pandemic. For some businesses, digital channels might be the only touchpoints currently available for consumers. Thus, people who can't fully access a deathcare provider's website and its information and functions are at a disadvantage.

### DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES

How do you ensure that your deathcare website is ADA compliant? The technical requirements are spelled out in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). This document is long. It's also been updated a number of times over more than a decade, and there's another update expected in 2021. The updates are necessary because technology keeps changing. For example, mobile app options available today didn't exist when the guidelines were first created.

Tons of information and a moving target can make it challenging for funeral service providers to ensure compliance. Here are some WCAG requirements:

- *Text alternatives for all content:* The ability to hear written content read aloud and have images described can be important to those with disabilities. All images should have descriptive alt text so that text-to-speech programs have something to interpret. For example, where others might see an image of a woman selecting an urn for cremated remains, users with a need for auditory processing might hear alt text that states, "image of a woman choosing among urn options." Captions for videos, written explanations of charts and graphs, and alt text for navigation items are other examples of this requirement.
- *Ability to use all functions from the keyboard:* Website functionality must work with keyboard commands and interactions for people who cannot use a mouse.
- *Information available in multiple or simplified formats:* Complex information on your site should be available in various formats so people can find an option with which they're able to engage. Because someone might be unable to properly view a certain graph, the information contained within should be explained in text somewhere else. For example, if your website uses a step-by-step chart of cremation service options or perhaps an infographic about the benefits of funeral preplanning, the page should also include text versions of that information.
- *Support for programmatic language applications:* Machine learning and artificial intelligence support myriad software programs and other tools that help people engage with online content. Many of these involve programmatic solutions that read the content to help users make decisions or convert information into audio formats.
- *Support for other assistive technologies:* ADA-compliant websites should also support other types of assistive technologies, including browser extensions and solutions users have invested in to help them navigate the web.

### ENSURING AN ADA-COMPLIANT SITE

Staying compliant with the requirements listed may already sound like a daunting task, but we've made only the smallest of dents in the technical requirements of the WCAG. To ensure your compliance, start by reading up on the ADA requirements for websites. You can find the entire text of the WCAG, including explanations and examples related to each section, at [w3.org](http://w3.org).

Numerous software companies also provide ADA-compliance checkers using tools that "crawl" your website and return information about areas you may need to address. Unfortunately, WCAG requirements are so complex that automatic tools can't check for all of them. They can save you a lot of time, however, by checking elements such as images for alt text and making sure you're meeting many of the other simpler requirements.

To get into the nitty-gritty of ADA compliance on the web, a manual audit might be necessary, and small deathcare businesses might consider working with WCAG experts. These individuals are extremely familiar with how the ADA relates to digital solutions and what courts have decided in previous cases.

### MORE BENEFITS OF ADA COMPLIANCE

Reducing the risk of expensive lawsuits is obviously a compelling business reason to look into ADA compliance for a deathcare website, but if you're still on the fence, here are a few other potential benefits:

- *Improved search engine optimization:* ADA compliance requires working on alt image text, meta tagging, transcripts and other elements that can improve SEO performance.
- *A more functional website:* Sites that function well for people with disabilities tend to function well for everyone because thought was put into the navigation and other elements. This can improve customer experience – a major driver for conversions and revenue.
- *Greater customer reach:* Making sure your site is accessible to more people helps you reach out to more potential clients.

When you consider that quite a few brands and entities have been sued for noncompliance, including Burger King, Nike and even Beyonce, it's best not to take any chances when it comes to legal action.

Moreover, you don't want any firm for which you work to miss out on a call because its website was not universally accessible, so keep these ADA requirements in mind when you set out in your career.

*Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com), a regular contributor to The Director magazine and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (2nd Edition).*

# Addressing the Challenges of Funeral Home Staffing

By Mark J. Krause

Like every other profession, funeral service continues to evolve. Over the past few decades, it has experienced great changes, such as the growth of cremation, the focus on personalization and the advent of new technologies that help create better ways to memorialize. Some of the more subtle changes have created challenges and new ways to view funeral service.

Contemporary funeral operations require many moving parts to operate well, and none of that happens without the most important piece of the puzzle: the funeral home staff.

I contend that there has never been greater opportunity for quality funeral professionals than today. A well-trained, professional funeral team can truly make a difference to client families. Without a skilled, caring and professional team to lead families through the journey of the funeral, our profession becomes nothing more than a business transaction.

That scenario offers a bleak future, with a funeral home becoming little more than a place to dispatch the body of the deceased. On the other hand, funeral directors that develop their skills and use them proficiently will have an economic, professional and managerial advantage over their colleagues.

Our profession is experiencing an assortment of issues that are creating challenges for funeral home staffing. America is seeing more people retiring from, or leaving, the workforce than are entering it. In addition, the beginning of the baby boomer effect on the U.S. death rate, the complexity of contemporary funerals, marketing and preneed have all contributed to greater demands on today's funeral professionals in terms of the time, quantity and quality of their work.

Therefore, the skills today's funeral directors need must be different than those of past generations. Consumers are more highly educated and articulate than ever before. They demand high quality and will not accept less from their funeral directors. A director with mediocre communication skills damages the family and poisons the future of funeral service. If a family has a bad experience because of a less-than-skillful funeral director, what happens when there is another death in that family? Perhaps they will choose direct cremation or elect to hold a memorial event at their home, church or country club, without the involvement of a funeral home.

Directors must be able to explain and demonstrate the val-



**Funeral directors who develop their skills and use them proficiently will have an economic, professional and managerial advantage over their colleagues.**

ue and meaning of the funeral experience and the importance of including funeral professionals in the process. Creativity is a key skill set to the contemporary funeral director. Families come to see funeral professionals without knowing what options are available, and so merely saying, "We do whatever the family wants," is not acceptable anymore.

Funeral directors need to be the creators and facilitators of this event, while also communicating at a high level everything that contemporary funerals can offer families. Unfortunately, technology has caused a de-emphasis in the development of interpersonal communication skills. Today's director must embrace these skills and the repertoire of an event planner, however, in order to meet the needs and desires of modern funeral service consumers.

The need for highly proficient directors and assistants has never been greater. As we slowly witness many smaller, less

**We must think more aggressively about how to attract bright, articulate, creative individuals to explore our profession.**

efficient firms vanishing, funeral homes are confronted with the staffing challenges experienced by many other businesses. The competition for employees – from entry level to highly skilled – is increasing every day.

A significant issue for funeral service involves the exposure of new and younger people entering the workforce to the profession. How many high school or college students think of funeral service as a career path? Let's be honest – for someone looking for an exciting lifetime career, the funeral profession does not possess the initial attraction of many other occupations. While those of us who have experienced the variety, challenges and value of funeral service have discovered the rewards and meaning that this field offers, reaching people starting their educational and career paths, and showing them the value of becoming a funeral service professional, is vital to staffing needs.

We can no longer wait and hope that people will just stumble onto funeral service for their vocation. We need to think more aggressively about how to attract bright, articulate individuals to explore our profession. One of the possible paths to a vibrant workforce is to recruit people who have earned college degrees but do not have a clear career path. Individuals with communication, English, history, psychology, sociology, political science and other humanities degrees are perfect candidates. These disciplines teach people about the human condition while fostering writing and communication skills. The necessity of recruiting highly educated funeral professionals who possess good communication skills is demanded by the client families we serve.

Explaining the value and meaning of today's funeral experience involves much more than running a funeral and selling a casket. Many of the people directors meet with are professional people who are used to interacting with others proficient in the exchange of ideas. The continued success of our profession depends on the next generation of consumers, who no longer find value in the cookie-cutter funeral, and on funeral professionals painting a picture of what is possible.

Finding and recruiting potential funeral directors requires starting at the high school level. Career days involving a presentation and personal interaction are always positive experiences, but more needs to be done. Hiring high school students so they get exposure to and experience in a profession that might otherwise never occur to them is a way of planting seeds for a future staffing harvest. Recruiting incentives for the unlicensed might include mortuary school tuition reimbursement and schedule flexibility.

Funeral homes also must be involved with our funeral service schools, which can offer a great way to interact with and expose a funeral home to those already interested and invested in a funeral service career. Scholarships, awards, intern/apprenticeships and other opportunities can be directed through the schools to foster an energetic atmosphere of learning and professional development.

Another possibility in approaching the demands of a shrinking and unaware workforce is to look at some of the legislative barriers that keep people from exploring funeral service as a career possibility. I am not suggesting that we reduce what it takes to become a licensed funeral director but, rather, that we allow unlicensed individuals to experience our wonderful profession in a controlled and regulated environment.

This would require licensed funeral directors and funeral homes to become more hands-on with their staff. By having the funeral director or funeral home responsible for the oversight and professionalism of the recruit, the firm's reputation and livelihood would be the incentive for legal compliance and performance.

The job market is only going to become more difficult for funeral homes looking for new staff. Funeral service schools do not have the time or resources to develop directors who can "hit the ground running" in the short time they have with students. The school's focus is, and must be, on getting their students to graduate and pass the national board examination. Thus, funeral homes need to develop a "farm team" or have developmental positions available to create the professionals needed for the future.

**One possible path to a vibrant workforce is recruiting those who have college degrees in the humanities but no clear career path. These disciplines all teach about the human condition and foster writing and communication skills.**

Funeral directing is not an easy vocation; it requires time and experience in order to become effective at serving both families and the funeral home. Those firms that take the time, make the effort and invest in the future will be in the best position to grow their market share, provide meaningful funerals and employ a staff that will excel in meeting the needs of families today.

*Mark J. Krause is president of Krause Funeral Homes and Cremation Services in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Krause operates four funeral homes that serve more 1,300 families annually.*

# The Brotherhood and Sisterhood Of Funeral Service

By Daniel M. Isard

You have chosen to enter a profession that is a quasi ministry. You want to help the people with whom you come into contact survive the most awful time in their lives. You want to help the living deal with their dead loved ones.

While this is most admirable, there is a cost.

It does not involve school tuition or any financial capital, but rather human capital. Dealing with people coming to grips with the loss of a loved one, without regard to their belief in a spiritual world, is difficult. I believe funeral directors take the weight of their client's world upon their shoulders and too often pay the price themselves.

## THE COST OF CAREGIVING

Decades ago, the very first geeky project I undertook in my support role within funeral service was to help a large life-and disability-insurance company understand mortality and morbidity. I did this by helping them comprehend the disability aspect – they were looking at statistics while I was seeing events.

When it came to long-term disability, there were several leading causes:

**Work Environment** This was back before we acknowledged formaldehyde as a cancer-causing chemical and before the Occupational Safety and Health Administration prescribed universal precautions. (Before then, the sole precaution many people took before embalming a body was tucking their tie into their shirt.)

In addition, we saw infections from blood- and fluid-contaminated needlestick injuries causing disabilities. In larger businesses, however, I did not see this work-environment hazard as a cause of a business owner's disabilities because owners in larger businesses usually don't embalm.

**Auto Accidents** Many disability claims resulted from auto accidents, and I discovered that more than half of these accidents involved a single car and occurred late at night. This was before law enforcement routinely administered blood-alcohol tests after car accidents. In fact, the idea of driving drunk was still laughed about rather than shunned the way it is today.

I realized funeral directors might have been drinking when the phone rang, drove to conduct the first call and suffered an accident. I went back to the statistical reports and again found that larger firms did not experience owners filing claims like this because the owner of a larger firm usually can hire a trade company or requires employees to perform removals.

**Alcohol and Other Addictions** In the mid-1980s, it was



still considered “cool” to drink or be a “lush” because alcohol abuse or addiction did not hold the social stigma it does now. We found that disability claims for alcoholism were higher in the funeral service profession than in other professions. Furthermore, we discovered it was more prevalent in funeral arrangers than embalmers.

My conclusion, almost 40 years ago, was that people in this business relieve their stress by self-medicating. Drug abuse and alcoholism rates were probably higher in this business back then, too.

## CAREGIVER, CARE FOR THYSELF

It is unfortunate, but being a caregiver can take a toll on your health and your soul. I suspect it always has, and we also see higher rates of drug and alcohol use in other caregiving professions, such as medicine. As a student working to enter the funeral service profession, please be aware of this and don't waste your time pretending this won't impact you, too.

Fortunately, there are proven, healthy solutions you can adopt to relieve your stress as a caregiver:

**Develop a circle of industry friends.** This forces you to talk and to share. Sharing is cathartic. Study groups allow business owners to talk and share and get past some of the loneliness of this profession. You cannot always talk to people within your town. If you complain to a neighbor that “business is slow,” they will probably think this is good for the com-

munity because there are fewer deaths. This is like a fireman complaining there are fewer fires. While you don't encourage death, you are a professional waiting to apply your skills when it inevitably occurs.

**Find a passion outside of funeral service.** Most people in a given community are not known by their profession outside of their regular work hours, but doctors, ministers and funeral directors are walking embodiments of their professions 24/7 by necessity. Every funeral director has been out in public at some point, not dressed in their normal professional attire, and suddenly bumped into a community member who starts talking about a funeral-related matter. Thus, it's tough for you to turn it off.

I once had a client who owned three funeral homes and 50 head of cattle. On an airplane, if a fellow passenger asked him what he did for a living, he would reply, "cattle rancher." He found that whenever he replied "funeral director," he would end up listening to the horror stories the passenger had heard about the funeral held for the passenger's fourth cousin's aunt. As a cattle rancher, however, the worst he ever heard was, "I don't eat as much beef as I used to."

Therefore, have an escape outside of funeral service. Whether that passion is travel, golf, cattle or something else,

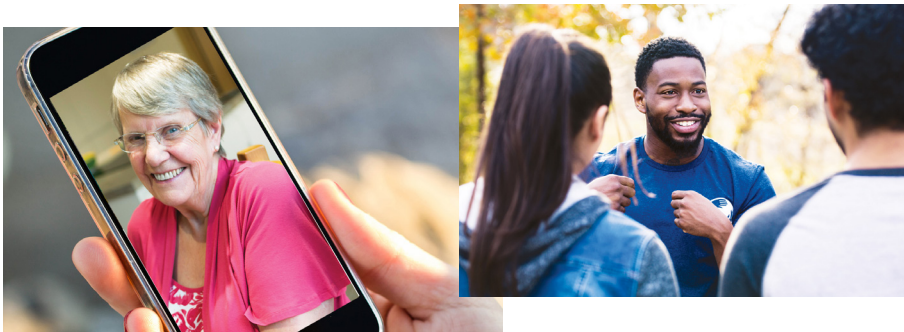
just find a way to turn off that funeral director mentality when you need to.

**Be able and ready to find a confidant.** A confidant is someone you can talk to, such as a friend, a loved one or a professional. Sometimes you just need to unload in a safe environment.

One client told me he was in therapy to help stabilize his feelings about his work. He said: "It's great to talk to someone who is listening. It's also great that insurance pays 80% of it!" Having a friendly ear is important, but having a professional ear is better.

So, neophytes, look around at your classmates. Go to the NFDA International Convention & Expo and look around at other students. You are all in the same place with a similar opportunity. Handle it well. Avoid the pitfalls. Find people within the profession – your brothers and sisters – and form a lifeline with them.

*Dan Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, finance and customer surveys.*



## How to Use Social Media To Be Seen By More Families

By Ashley Montroy

The past 12 months have proven that a lot can change in just one year. When the pandemic first hit, many thought it would create a minimal disruption, with lockdowns and stay-at-home orders lasting just a few weeks. That certainly wasn't the case, and the disruption to local businesses turned into something a lot bigger than expected.

These disruptions were something funeral home owners and directors had to figure out, and figure out fast. At the heart of the profession are the families and communities who come together to honor and celebrate the lives of their loved ones. But when they can't gather in person, how do you still assist that family?

**More firms had been realizing that their marketing and technology were out of line with consumer expectations. COVID just put the need for a realignment on the fast track.**

For years, the funeral service profession has been somewhat traditional, often relying on the same old business and marketing practices that previous generations used. In the past few years, however, a growing number of funeral homes have realized that their marketing and technology is out of line with what consumers expect from them. The pandemic just put this misalignment and need to change on the fast track. Inviting a family to meet at your facility or waiting until the arrangement conference to discuss service options don't work very well when businesses are forced to limit interactions and gathering capacity.

One way to work past that is with social media marketing. Pandemic or not, today's families live in a digital age where their convenience matters more than ever. Their smartphones make it possible to connect with anyone at a moment's notice, book appointments, compare pricing, access resources and obtain quotes.

Here are some lessons you can apply to your digital and social media marketing efforts if you want to better connect with families.

**Social media marketing is all about being social and relatable. Share photos of your staff being *people*, not just funeral directors.**

#### **MAKE SURE YOUR WEBSITE IS UP TO DATE**

Families will always have questions. Now, before they sign a contract or even pick up the phone, the majority will turn to Google or visit your website to do some research. That's why it's especially important to make sure you highlight how your firm has adapted in light of the pandemic and continue to offer the premier service quality for which your firm is known. Adding pages to your website to promote new livestreaming options, virtual arrangement tools or safety response plans, for example, are all ways you can help families feel safe about choosing your firm.

First, publishing this information on your website makes it easier to later get that information in front of people on social media channels – a powerful way to communicate and interact with a lot of individuals at once. By making sure you've updated your website, you can use platforms such as Facebook to promote a service you offer, especially a new one, by creating a post and linking viewers back to your website so they can learn more.

Too many funeral homes add new tools and new offerings to their business but don't tell anyone about it. (Many firms don't even show their basic offerings on their website.) Don't make that mistake! Far more people enter your "virtual door" via your website than walk through your physical front

door. Make sure what you do and what you offer are available on your website for all to see, and then do the necessary social media marketing to get that message out to as many as possible.

#### **SHOW PEOPLE HOW YOU'RE KEEPING THINGS SAFE**

By using social media as part of your public relations strategy, you can help put people's concerns to rest. In other words, you don't have to just create posts that redirect traffic back to your website. Part of your strategy should include using social media to be social.

One such way is to show behind-the-scenes pictures and videos, and then answer questions posted in reaction to the images. You could share a photo of how your facility is set up to protect visitors' health and safety, for example. Or you could use videos to answer frequently asked questions, or conduct a virtual tour of your space. By creating social media posts like this, you can put your firm in front of families and build/enhance relationships and trust.

#### **SHOW YOUR FACE AND BE RELATABLE**

Social media marketing is all about being social and relatable. While that doesn't mean you should be in gym clothes or old jeans, if you can, save the suits for the services. Share photos of your staff being *people*, not just funeral directors, whether at the firm or active in the community. This can help people get to know your staff and your business.

Your social media posts should offer a glimpse behind the curtain and showcase the people many in your community might already know. You could create a post that celebrates a staff member's birthday, for instance, or congratulates a team member on his or her anniversary with the firm. You could also share photos of the team or of events happening at the funeral home.

#### **PRIORITIZE EDUCATION OVER SALES**

Use social media to educate and inspire your community. To start, make sure you post about what you do and the services you offer – and not just burial or cremation but specific services, such as livestreaming, online payment options, electronic signatures, etc. You should also make sure your website provides answers to common questions and shares past unique services that will inspire people to hold the funeral they want. These things give you a ton of content to work with so you can create social media posts and link viewers back to your website.

Remember, most people have never planned a funeral. Use your Facebook page and other social media posts to become the go-to resource like no other funeral home in your area. When you do this, your brand will be front and center in your community.

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT A PLACE TO SELL, SELL, SELL**

Advertising and promotion should definitely be a part of your social media marketing strategy but not the entire thing. Af-

ter all, social media is all about being social and building relationships. By using your Facebook page and other social media platforms to educate and nurture families, you can help strengthen the trust you're already building by implementing the previously mentioned steps.

For instance, instead of waiting for an arrangement conference to discuss how you can personalize someone's service or add special elements to it, you can show people via your social media pages and posts, so they can start thinking about it on their own. There are many different ways you can accomplish this, such as a page on your website showing photos from a family's celebration of life or a blog post about the 10 steps of planning a funeral. Posting this type of content helps people learn about your business and shows them how you can help. It makes you the authority.

Unfortunately, some funeral homes jump on Facebook just to sell preneed services, urns, etc., and don't focus on anything else. This completely misses the point of social media marketing. If every post you make is focused on sales and pricing, people will lose interest. Who wants to be spammed by the same overly sales-focused posts day after day?

Don't become known as a business that only cares about the sale and the money. Instead, use social media to educate and inspire families and help them learn more about your firm and the people on your staff.

Be that go-to leader, and your firm will win.

#### **AVOID STEPPING BACKWARD**

For many funeral professionals, the pandemic has been a wake-up call that has forced them to adapt and modernize their services. But even once we finally reach the point where masks go away and things can get back to normal, don't settle back into those traditional practices of yesteryear.

Yes, the pandemic forced the funeral service profession to adopt convenient solutions to serve people from afar, but consumers will always want convenience. Once a convenient option is available and accessible, consumers don't want to revert back to the old way. Remember Blockbuster? Netflix and other streaming services killed that business model by offer-



ing on-demand content. There's no going back to the physical movie rental model now.

Your funeral home shouldn't be any different. If you've adopted digital solutions to help families complete their arrangements virtually or livestream services, don't eliminate these options now. People demand convenience, and the businesses that continue to offer convenient solutions are the ones that will succeed.

#### **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Presently, there is no better way to connect with the public than through social media. If you're looking to connect with families now and going forward, then social media is where their attention is. In addition to making your firm more accessible and transparent, social media marketing, when done correctly, can and will help you grow your business. More people will know you, trust you, choose you.

Don't spend advertising dollars in places that make you continually question what you're getting in return. Social media can be tracked, so you'll know exactly what you're getting and how many people you are not only reaching but also how many are actually interacting with your business.

*Ashley Montroy is chief marketing officer for FrontRunner Professional.*

## Don't Be an Energy Vampire: The Four Levels of Employee Engagement

By Ryan Hobbs

Employee engagement drives production in any work environment. When members of a team are passionate about their vocation and intentional about their preparation and effort, production levels soar, and customer satisfaction rises with it. Business growth and other opportunities then follow.

Employee engagement, which some statistics show as low as 30% in this country, is powered by the human energy in a company. The greater the energy, the more engagement and productivity. But where does this energy come from? Where is it produced day in and day out in our funeral homes? My



company recently learned that what we thought should be producing energy was not the answer.

### IDENTIFYING THE CAUSE

In July 2020, Walker Funeral Homes of Northwest Ohio purchased six additional area funeral homes that were serving nearly 600 families per year. At that time, we were already operating six funeral homes and offering care to more than 900 families, as well as a direct-cremation company that assisted about 650 families annually.

Given the purchase, our team worked hard on a plan to immediately integrate the new businesses and employees into our operation upon closing. This was a monumental task that we can proudly say was accomplished rather successfully in the short term. Since then, we have gradually adjusted to maintain high levels of care and service to the families that trust us. We have made some mistakes, no doubt, while continually learning and adapting to our new normal.

About four or five months after the purchase and integration, however, our leadership team, which has a standing meeting every Wednesday morning, noticed that energy levels were beginning to slowly decline. The frustration points of some were also rising.

We realized that both concerns were due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted everyone in funeral service so profoundly. Working in the deathcare industry is difficult enough at times, but when we remove normal face-to-face interactions, making it more challenging to connect on a human level, it is tougher. Witnessing families grieve without proper community support also compounds our frustration. We do our jobs to provide healing experiences for families, and it has been personally troubling to feel as if this is not always happening. There is no doubt that our work has been far more taxing than in the past.

That being known, our leadership team still wanted to make certain there was not more happening that we might have been missing, particularly given the recent changes that had taken place with every person in our company. Our acquisition not only asked something different of our newest employees, but the restructuring and realignment also created a major transition for the “old” Walker staff.

After reading some of the Arbinger Institute’s resources and information ([arbingerinstitute.com](http://arbingerinstitute.com)) and listening to a podcast by Tim Kight and former Ohio State football coach Urban Meyer ([focus3.com/podcast](http://focus3.com/podcast)), I decided to dig a little deeper to find out where we were losing energy in our system.

In the “Focus 3” podcast, the hosts discussed the four levels of energy and how they impact productivity in organizations. Again, the more energy the people in a

company possess, the greater their productivity will be. The Law of Entropy, a physics concept, is defined as the measure of disorder in a system. Relative to a business, it simply means that the energy used to make an organization function effectively must be replaced by more energy or the system will move toward disorder.

After some thought, I asked our leadership team to set aside an extra hour after our standing meeting the following week to use the “Four Levels of Engagement” as defined by Kight and Meyer to evaluate our employee engagement. We first defined the levels before doing an analysis of where we saw our employees at that time.

**Energy vampires are those cynical employees who have left but still show up for work. And because of their low energy level and poor work ethic, they also tend to drain others of energy.**

### THE LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

The first level of engagement is that of the *cynical employee*, or “*energy vampire*.” This is the sarcastic employee who has left but still shows up for work. They are difficult to change, cowardly and prey on low-hanging fruit (other cynics and lesser engaged employees). The cynic tends to talk *about* people, not *to* them.

And because of very low energy levels and poor work ethic, they tend to drain others of energy. Obviously, no organization or team can thrive with these employees remaining on the team. Every organization likely has at least one person in this category, and we were no exception.

*The compliant employee* makes up the next level of engage-

ment. These are the autopilot, “just checking the box” members of a team. They do not quite sink low enough to lose their job but do just enough to get by. They manage the optics, saying all the right things, but are not really contributing to the well-being of their team and organization. Because the compliant employee is often a “wounded animal,” he or she is open to predation by the cynic.

Compliant employees can be changed with the influence of committed and compelled employees (explained next), but they are more likely to be consumed by the cynical if left alone and not led. Energy levels are minimal in this group; they possess just enough to get by themselves and often have none to share. Having too many compliant employees is a certain path to mediocrity.

**Committed employees can be elevated by good leadership and are unlikely to be pursued by the cowardly cynic.**

*The committed employee* is the on-time, do-my-job, accountable, steady staff member. These are the folks who make up most of a solid team or organization. They most often perform their duties at their talent level. The committed often reach the maximum point of their current skill set and stop there, likely to avoid the pain involved in being stretched to acquire new skills and become better. Every team, however, needs these people in order to become great, and when we recruit and hire, we hope to find a candidate with this type of engagement.

Many committed people can be elevated by good leadership and, because of their commitment, they are unlikely to be pursued by the cowardly cynic. They can impact others but at times have trouble sustaining energy levels that are most often good but not great.

*The compelled employee* is a top-level team member. These are the mentally strong energy givers in an organization who believe deeply, from their heart, in the mission and strive to achieve at the highest level. They are not necessarily the most talented or gifted (though they might be), but they are not afraid of the extra work, time or pain it takes to become the best they can possibly be.

Because of their strong self-discipline, self-respect and belief, they are massively powerful. The compelled love to ask, “How can I get better?” These people are game changers in an organization. Though it’s impossible to

sustain those high energy levels, the compelled possess elite levels of energy and are the best at maintaining it. They give energy to their teammates and, by their strength of character and work ethic, drive production and all levels of satisfaction. Their energy simply radiates into their teammates. The compelled enjoy being surrounded by other compelled employees and are therefore inclined to help others increase performance.

### ASSESSING THE EFFECTS

After evaluating where our staff members appeared to fall in our analysis, we determined that we were like most organizations in that we saw the “10-80-10 principal” – 10% of people had low levels of energy and fell in the “bottom” categories and 10% were “rock stars” who lived at the top of the energy mountain. The other 80% fell somewhere in between. We were pleased to learn that the largest percentage of our staff appeared to be “committed” members of our team!

Next, we “assigned” leaders to individual employees to try to elevate their levels of engagement with respective positions where we saw needs. We wanted to be fair and build our efforts based on who our people are as human beings, respecting their personhood and any issues they might be struggling with, either personally or professionally. Every one of us has difficult times in our lives and are broken in some way. Reaching out and addressing things on a personal level, respecting the dignity of the other, has been paramount in how we have approached our conversations. This is an ongoing process that has born some fruit already.

Though the idea of leadership providing energy seemed obvious, it was not something we were focusing on enough. Our leadership team had done significant work to make sure we had enough money, the right organizational structure, updated technology, refined operational processes and a good strategy – but we had lost our focus on being quality leaders. This certainly does not mean that good cash flow, structure, technology, etc., are unimportant, because we know they are critical to running an effective organization. But no matter how great they might be, they are not the source of energy. That comes from leadership.

In response, our leadership team has since foregone a pre-



vious agenda item that had become stagnant in our meetings and replaced it with five to seven minutes of leadership training every week. Each team member takes a turn and reminds the rest of us just how important our roles as leaders are by offering an inspiring presentation.

It is my experience that we learn far more when we are preparing to teach a topic than when we are simply studying to learn. So far, we have witnessed a tremendous improvement in the mentality of our leadership team when we close a meeting. Accountability and healthy conversations are more frequent during the sessions, and our leadership approach with our valued staff is much improved. We are becoming better leaders and, as a result, our levels of energy are indeed increasing.

After reviewing my notes from both the podcast and from the Arbinger book *The Outward Mindset*, it became obvious that developing compelled leaders is the formula for creating the power plant of a great team. This progression must be done by responding in a caring way to the human condition of the people on a staff. It also requires those in leadership

positions to make certain that they are, first and foremost, compelled team members.

We have plans in place to recruit, develop and reward leaders who are energy givers. We are confident that surrounding ourselves with compelled people will create the circuit that continually provides energy to help our team maintain focus and discipline each day.

We have learned that our success as leaders is gauged not by what we are able to accomplish but by what those whom we lead are able to accomplish. Focused, engaged employees drive production in the workplace.

May we all feel compelled to do the work it takes to be energy givers to our co-workers and the families we are so deeply privileged to serve, so that we might thrive in this most challenging of businesses.

*Ryan Hobbs is vice president and general manager of Walker Funeral Homes in Toledo, Ohio.*



## Five Important Lessons We Can Learn From Geese

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

A recent survey by the American Psychological Association found that 49% of U.S. adults reported feeling uncomfortable about the prospect of life returning to normal following the pandemic.

That's because we're different now. That pesky word "normal" implies that we can get back to the way things were, that we can somehow pick up right where we left off before the pandemic hit. But nothing could be further from the truth. There's no going back to the old normal; there's only creating a new normal.

Whenever we're impacted by significant loss of any kind, we're changed by it. After someone we dearly love dies, for example, we're never quite the same. The hard work that is

grief, in fact, is the very process of coming to terms with our new normal, which includes developing changed self-identities and revising our understanding of what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

Like any great loss, the COVID-19 experience, too, has changed us. Funeral home staffs, especially, have been affected in myriad challenging ways by the pandemic. You have been at the front lines of so many of the losses suffered, and so you are now in a period of constructing a new normal. You are in a time in which you must acknowledge everything that happened, feel and express your many continuing feelings about it and work to reconstruct meaning in your vocation and your life.

Post-pandemic, all of this hard work of grieving, mourning and finding a new normal will require human empathy and kindness. If there has ever been a time when we needed to support and nurture one another, it is now.

In reflecting on this need to support each other during a post-COVID period of reconstruction, we would be well-served to look to the skies because wild geese have much to teach us about community and lifting one another up. Here are five natural instincts for support and companionship demonstrated by wild geese from which we can learn.

**LESSON ONE:** When the flock is on a journey, the flapping of each individual goose's wings results in an uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in a V formation, the entire flock achieves 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

**Implication:** As we find our new normal post-pandemic, we, too, are on a journey. Your fellow funeral home staff members are on a similar journey, and you can all be uplifted by journeying together. No, you need not travel alone, nor should you try.

**LESSON TWO:** Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it experiences the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. The goose then realizes it needs to get back into formation to take advantage of the collective lifting power of the flock.

**Implication:** Just as geese benefit from staying in formation with those on a similar journey, we humans are better off if we accept the lifting power of those who journey alongside us. We are grace-filled when we open ourselves to the support of our fellow travelers.

**LESSON THREE:** If any one goose has a problem, two other geese will always drop out of formation and follow the wayward goose to help support and protect it. They stay present to the goose that has special needs until it is able to continue the journey with them.

**Implication:** We humans should always companion each other in difficult times. Receiving help from others strengthens the bonds of compassion and love that help us survive when we are devastated by loss and difficult change.

**LESSON FOUR:** When the goose leading the flock gets tired and overwhelmed, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies at the point position.

**Implication:** No one person on a funeral home team can lead the way all the time. Especially during difficult times, it is wise for leaders to acknowledge when they are tired and need others to care for them and to protect them from the headwinds.

**LESSON FIVE:** While flying in formation, geese honk to each other as a form of encouragement and mutual support.

**Implication:** Now is the time when we all need encouragement from those around us to remind us of our interconnectedness. We must allow ourselves to rely on each other; other-

**No one person on a team can lead the way all the time. It is wise for leaders to acknowledge when they need others to help protect them from the headwinds.**

wise, in our struggle to find a new normal, we could end up feeling totally alone and completely isolated.

#### WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

"There is strength in numbers," one saying goes. Another echoes, "United we stand, divided we fall." As you work to grieve the many losses you have experienced during the past 18+ months, it's essential to let other people in. Both inside and outside of your work community, I encourage you to make room for those you trust most. Carefully chosen friends and family members with whom you feel safe can often be at the center of your support system.

Seek people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings. Open your broken heart a little at a time to those in your life who are compassionate and loving listeners. In an ideal world, this is your family and friends. If this is not true for you, my hope is that you will seek other sources of support.

The darkness COVID-19 may have brought into your life is a place from which you might be tempted to judge others, particularly their motivations. Not all will be able to feel your profound losses the way you do, and you shouldn't expect them to. Except in cases in which there is evidence that you can't trust someone's intentions, try to be open to letting others support you. Remember, you are doing the best you can from moment to moment, from day to day.

You might also find comfort in talking to a minister or other spiritual leader. As you work to find your new normal, it might be natural for you to feel ambivalent about questions of faith and the meaning of life. A clergy member or spiritual mentor who responds nonjudgmentally and empathetically to your feelings can be a valuable resource.

A professional counselor may prove a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends, family members and colleagues can't be right now: an objective listener. A counselor's office can offer a place of sanctuary, where you can give voice to those feelings you might be afraid to express elsewhere.

As with everything else during this overwhelming time, counseling is an intensely personal choice. However, when you find the right counselor, you might well have found a safe haven in which to experience and explore the jumble of feelings impacting you.

Many people discover that support groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others

who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about your struggles as much as you would like. In these groups, each person can share his or her unique loss experiences in a nonthreatening, safe atmosphere.

While I'm sure you're looking forward to face-to-face funeral service organization gatherings, perhaps you can access a study group or an association in the meantime that allows you to stay in contact with colleagues online. Or maybe you could create an employee-support group at your funeral home and bring in a trained facilitator. Such groups could be a lifeline during the transition.

As a grief counselor, I have been privileged to help people challenged by loss who have reached out to me for help. Among the lessons they have taught me is that sharing their grief with others is an integral part of the healing process. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that, by definition, mourning means "the shared response to loss."

Remember, help during a post-pandemic period might come in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it. Please don't try to confront your pandemic grief/loss experience alone and solely inside yourself. You need and deserve companions – friends, relatives, colleagues, counselors and others, all who have experienced challenges during the pandemic – who will walk with you as you make the difficult journey to a new and meaningful normal.

*Alan Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. He speaks on grief-related topics, offers training sessions for caregivers and has written many bestselling books and other resources on grief for both caregivers and the grieving. For more information, visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com), email [drwolfelt@centerforloss.com](mailto:drwolfelt@centerforloss.com) or call 970-217-7069.*

## "Our Boy": The History and Symbolism Of the Funeral of the Unknown Soldier

By Todd W. Van Beck

At 8:30 a.m. on Armistice Day, November 11, 1921, gun salvos sounded from Fort Myer, Virginia, and continued every 60 seconds during the five-hour ceremony. No military leader, regardless of rank or achievements who died in the course of any war, received such a funeral ritual as the soldier who, on this day, would be interred as the "Unknown Soldier" in America's most hallowed and revered cemetery: Arlington.

The funeral ceremony was symbolic of the eternal gratitude of the whole nation to the common soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our freedom.

While the nation honored this nameless man on that chilly November morning, the Unknown Soldier, whose sacred remains traveled on a funeral caisson down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., in front of thousands of mourners, was, in reality, known to all. He was one of "our boys" – an American son, not a warrior, as they were called throughout the centuries in the dark days of war.

To some women that day, weeping in the crowd after an all-night vigil, the Unknown Soldier was their boy, the one who went missing one day and was never found until now.

To some of the men who lined the funeral procession route, many wearing ribbons and badges of mourning on their now-civilian clothes, he was a very familiar figure – a comrade, the one they liked best, the "hail-well-met" chap who possibly drank too much in their taverns, and the one who went out into the fields of death and stayed there with the great, noble and honored companionship.





As the funeral procession went by with military precision that day, a chilling thought entered the minds of many men: “That could have been me.” Doubtless, every man or woman that day realized this funeral procession was a symbol of attained and cherished freedom and peace, and that the world would now be a better place.

It was the red, white and blue of Old Glory, the Stars and Stripes, draped over the standard gray military casket that revealed him instantly, not as a mythical warrior aloof from common humanity, but as one of those fellows dressed in khaki, stained by mud and grease, who went into the ditches and dirty trenches with the American flag leading his way. In his heart were unspoken emotions, bravery and fear simultaneously with a faith not shaken. He was full of complication, far from perfect, a human being, but in the watchwords of that war, he and we were then, as now, under the same flag.

As the funeral procession reached Arlington Cemetery Amphitheater, some of the great men of the time waited to greet the body of a simple American soldier. General John G. “Black Jack” Pershing, tall and dignified, stood at attention, along with former president and now chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, William Howard Taft.

President Warren G. Harding nervously shuffled the papers of his speech. Former president Woodrow Wilson, frail since being stricken by a stroke, but still the acknowledged and revered war leader, was sitting quietly to the side.

There were bishops, archbishops, priests and prime ministers ready to honor the sacred remains of a soldier who had gone trudging through the mud and muck like one ant in a legion of ants, all unknown to fame. A casualty not more heroic than his pals and buddy’s around him, and perhaps not missed much when he fell dead between the tangled wire and shell holes, but a hero nonetheless.

Now, this common soldier’s body was brought before the greats of the greats from the United States military. It was their brains that had directed his movements down that long road that blistered his feet, over ground made impossible to cover because of gunfire, up banks from which he slipped under the weight of his pack. Whatever his rank as a soldier, this day marked the end of his long journey, which finished in a grave marked “Unknown.”

In life, this soldier had looked upon these great men in awe.

Sometimes he had saluted them as they rode past him in their magnificence. Now they all stood at Arlington to salute him, to keep their silence in his presence, to render him homage more wonderful, with deeper reverence, than any general or president ever received.

It was noticed that of all the greats who on this funeral day were humbled, only Woodrow Wilson unashamedly shed tears.

The light was dim that morning. The old Arlington House, former home of Gen. Robert E. Lee, now the center of the cemetery, looked gloomy in the November mist.

The U.S. Capitol dome could not be seen but the minute funeral guns along the funeral route kept booming. Soon, the sun shone brighter so that the dome of the Capitol was etched with ever-deepening lines. On all the buildings, flags were flying at half-mast. The military officers, who walked about with swords drawn, wore mourning crepe on their left arms.

Presently, they passed the word along, “Reverse arms,” and all of the soldiers lining the funeral procession turned over their rifles and bent their heads in homage.

It was very silent in Arlington. Before the ordered silence, the dense lines of people had kept their places without movement and spoke little in their long line of waiting but, as they caught their first glimpse of the caisson, fell solemnly quiet, all heads bared and bent. One could feel the spirit of reverence in the crowds. This gathering of everyday people was touched with the sharp-yet-comforting thought as to what this funeral was really all about: freedom.

**It was Old Glory draped over the casket that revealed him instantly, not as a mythical warrior aloof from common humanity but as one of the fellows who went into the trenches with the American flag leading the way.**

The military bands passed by with their inspiring funeral music and their drums thumping at the hearts of men, women and children. Guards, with their reversed arms, passed, and then the caisson, with its impressive team of horses, halted in front of the cemetery amphitheater where President Harding stood, and every hand was raised to salute the soldier who died so we might live, chosen by fate for this honor – in remembrance of the great army of patriots who went out with “our boy” to fight for his country. Possibly he had heard or read former President Wilson’s firm and haunting admonition, “We must keep the world safe for democracy.”

President Harding, looking polished and dignified, laid a wreath on the casket and stepped back again. Crowded behind the caisson in one long line was an immense column



of men from all branches of the military, moving up slowly before coming to a halt. They were followed by other men in civilian clothes. Everywhere among them could be seen the most ancient of funeral tributes: flowers in the form of wreaths and crosses.

Then all was still and the picture was complete, framing the wreath laying upon the flag-draped casket. The soul of the nation at its best, purified at the moment by emotion, was there in silence about the body of the man dubbed for eternity as the Unknown Soldier.

Funeral guns continued firing in the distance. They were not loud; more like the distant crackling of guns on a misty day in France, a day when there was “nothing to report,” though a day, perhaps, when this man died.

It was a time of silence. No political arguing or grandstanding here. What thoughts were in the minds of all the people, only Gods knows, as they stood there for those minutes that seemed more like hours.

In the midst of this silence, off to the sidelines, the reverent crowd focused not only on the Unknown Soldier, but also on one of the last true casualties of the Great War, Woodrow Wilson. For as sure as the barbed wire tore one’s hand in battle, and the bullets would rip and tear at your very soul, so it was likened to this great-but-flawed man, who had a mission of peace for all times, but a cause the barbed wire and bullets had torn to pieces. Yes, there were two casualties of war on this Armistice Day.

Suddenly the silence ended. Some words rang out, guns in unison could be heard sounding the three volleys over the tomb – the ancient symbol in military funeral customs that the battle of life is over for the dead warriors, but that this battle of life must continue for those still alive.

In the crowd, women were weeping quietly, but it was their

hearts crying that made the loudest sound. Many had lost their only son. Men’s faces were hard, like masks, hiding all they thought or felt.

At the entrance to the ceremonial platform, the casket was carried shoulder high by eight tall military men. On the platform, the casket was centered in the pathway usually held for kings, prime ministers and presidents.

Now, no one can ever go to the altar of death to commemorate or to be honored without first paying homage to the resting place of a man who symbolizes the many soldiers who died so that this nation might endure.

The actual funeral service was a simple as in any village church in the land. The 23rd Psalm was sung, followed by an invocation and an address by President Harding. Then another anthem and, almost as an afterthought, the program called for some brief remarks by former President Woodrow Wilson.

The crowds hushed as the stricken war leader awkwardly made his way to the podium, steadied by men holding onto both of his arms.

Wilson, with his head bowed and his wife bracing his paralyzed left side, said in a weak voice:

“Our life is but a little span. One generation follows another very quickly. If a man with red blood in him had his choice, knowing that he must die, he would rather die to vindicate some right, unselfish to himself, than die in his bed. We are all touched with the love of the glory which is real glory, and the only glory comes from utter self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice. We never erect a statue to men who have not forgotten themselves and been glorified by the memory of others. This is the standard that America holds up to mankind in all sincerity and in all earnestness.”

The crowd stood with moistened eyes in absolute silence. As Wilson was helped from the platform, a cheer went up that lasted 10 minutes. It was to be the only applause of the day.

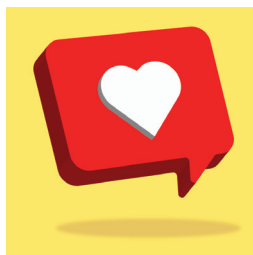
The gray metal casket was lowered into the tomb. A clergyman said something about “earth to earth” as former President and Chief Justice Taft stepped forward and, from a silver bowl, sprinkled the casket with soil from France.

The funeral service was concluded. The funeral ritual had accomplished its mystical and unexplainable purpose: it made people feel they had done the right thing and had given them peace of mind.

As the words of blessing died away, from far up the line you could hear a whisper of sound. The sound of human beings grew louder and it seemed that all were on the march back to the joys and sorrows of daily life that surely lay in wait.

As the last person left, and the last roll of drums faded, two soldiers came forward to serve as the guard of protection for this glorious dead. From that day onward, there would forever be a guard at the tomb of “our boy,” at the entrance to the hallowed tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

*Todd W. Van Beck is a longtime funeral director, funeral service historian, presenter, educator and author of hundreds of funeral service articles.*

*From the Editor's Desk*

## Say What Now?

By Edward J. Defort

As figures of speech go, oxymorons don't get the attention they so richly deserve. In political circles, it's not unusual to witness politicians talking from both sides of their mouth, but for a phrase itself to be self-contradictory? Well, that's special.

It's a fairly small club, but among my favorites are "old news," "civil war" and "act naturally," not to mention "jumbo shrimp." Funeral service has even created its own – "living funeral."

Perhaps the list is growing as social media has now paved the way for a new oxymoron: "TikTok famous."

Social media is writing its own rules. I have written before about my disdain for the social media phenomenon of gender-reveal parties. I mean, aside from the parents and immediate family, who really cares? It's easy to understand why these parties became more involved; we can thank social media for adding the fuel to this fire, with families adopting a "Can you top this?" mentality to satiate the growing craving people have for a viral moment that would make Maury Povich's ambush-TV episodes look like C-SPAN.

I was born in a generation in which fathers would find out whether their child was a boy or a girl when the nurse came out to tell them, so maybe I'm a bit jaded about all this. I do often wonder if my father passed out cigars when I was born (that's what they did on TV). And since none of my family or friends has had a gender-reveal party for their kids, consider me among the uninitiated.

I know my confusion stems from imagining planning such an elaborate event, in which thousands of dollars are spent, to let family members in on a little secret. And as you widen the net to include friends and virtual friends, as well as social media strangers, fewer and fewer people care. I get it – we live in an experiential society. But what will be the shelf life of this experience?

The most perplexing thing about all this? When the same family suffers the eventual death of a loved one, will they take as much time and effort to hold a memorial to celebrate a life well lived?

It's far more inviting when a family gathering centers on something joyous rather than marking someone's passing, even if we do call it a celebration of life.

 **Edward J. Defort**  
Editor

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