

1 TOP STORY:

Leading the Conversation

By Lacy Robinson

4 You Are the Umpire of Your Career

By Daniel M. Isard

5 Taking Stock of the Funeral Profession, Part 2

By Todd W. Van Beck

11 Going Green

By Aimee Garcia

12 Reiterating the Value of Restorative Arts
By Edward J. Defort

14 So You Want to Manage Your Employees' Cellphones and Social Media? Good Luck!
By William E. Ford

16 Lest We Forget
By Shelby Ogozaly

17 From the Editor's Desk... The Untapped Power of the Obituary
Edward J. Defort



Leading the Conversation

By Lacy Robinson

When it comes to seniors, there's a slew of common perceptions, some of which are fair and others that are not fair at all. These include forgetfulness, slow-moving,

easily confused, constantly retelling stories from 50 years ago, in decline, anxious, irritable, or even senile. In general, there is a negative general perception about senior adults these days.

As a funeral director, you might experience some of these traits in your older clients and feel frustrated when trying to communicate. Let's take a look at effective communication skills to better connect with seniors.

BE PATIENT

It's easy to lose patience with senior adults. When this happens, immediately step back, slow down and rethink your communication style. Senior adults want to feel respected, and this is achieved only through a relaxed atmosphere, speaking clearly and moving at their pace.

David Solie, a leading expert on aging and geriatric psychology, plumbs the depths of intergenerational communication in his book, *How to Say It to Seniors: Closing the Communication Gap With Our Elders*. Solie emphasizes the need for slowing down and creating a more peaceful atmosphere in which seniors feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Asserts Solie: "Most of the unsettling behavior of older people is the result of developmental tasks operating quite intensely in a world that is hostile to them."

The world is a disturbingly fast-paced, hectic and chaotic place for senior adults. Whether it's being hurried in a restaurant, bullied by aggressive drivers on the road or expected to make snap decisions on everything from which credit card

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to use at the grocery store to which medical consent form to sign. Seniors frequently feel overwhelmed and resentful. They are constantly being hurried when all they want to do is make their own decisions and move forward at their own pace.

EMPATHY

As a funeral director, it's crucial to make the effort to understand a senior client more deeply. Solie refers to what he calls "layers of loss." Aging has sapped their strength and robbed their health. Good friends and family members have died. Retirement has taken their identity and sense of authority. People don't come to them for advice or help the way they used to. If they have moved into an assisted-living facility or retirement home, they have lost familiar surroundings and homeowner status and have sold off or given away treasured possessions. Retirement has forced them to rely on Medicare and other government assistance. Health issues are no longer just a nuisance but can be life-threatening. Those who lived through the trauma of the Great Depression might fear being poor or not having enough money. Keep these "layers of loss" in mind when meeting and talking with senior adult clients.

Nonlinear communication is a tool seniors use to help in organizing thoughts and finding purpose with direction. It's a process of sorting, discovering, remediating and revisiting. Essentially, they are piecing their thoughts together.

KNOW SENIOR ADULTS' COMMUNICATION HABITS

David Solie describes four attributes of senior adult communication: repeating stories, saying "no" quickly, lacking urgency, and nonlinear communication.

Senior adults often retell stories. Solie points out that when a senior continually repeats a story, it means that story is meaningful to them. Be patient when a senior client repeats a story. Even if it's the 10th time you've heard it, be respectful and listen. Listening intently will demonstrate respect and show that you care about what they have to say.

You might also have noticed that senior adults tend to say "no" often; it can almost seem like a gut reaction to any new or unfamiliar suggestion. Solie explains that saying no is simply a way for senior adults to retain a semblance of control; it helps them maintain a sense of independence and being in charge. With all of the changes they have endured, and living now in an increasingly unfamiliar and confusing world, new ideas or suggestions can seem overwhelming, and "no" becomes a defense mechanism.

A lack of urgency when making a decision – sometimes even bordering on an unwillingness to make decisions – is a hallmark trait of many senior adults. It's important to understand that senior adults have moved beyond the high-productivity years of middle adulthood. They've earned the right to move a little slower and be a bit more relaxed. They're in a reflective state of mind, and they do spend a great deal of time recollecting memories and sharing stories, as opposed to working through a daily to-do list.



Their lack of urgency in decision-making is reflective of this, and as funeral directors, we need to demonstrate understanding and respect. Don't rush senior clients into a decision. Give them the time they need to consider all aspects of a decision.

Senior adults generally use nonlinear forms of communication, which means they jump around from subject to subject and might end a conversation abruptly. Conversely, they might chat longer than necessary on one subject. It might seem as if they are confused or incapable of forming a complete thought. But as Solie explains, nonlinear communication is a tool seniors use to help in organizing thoughts and finding purpose with direction. It's a process of sorting, discovering, remediating and revisiting. Essentially, they are piecing their thoughts together.

Give senior adults the time they need to go through this process. While they are engaging you in their nonlinear thoughts, they're measuring your attention level. Being impatient and re-routing the conversation quickly can hinder the development.

CONSIDER ENVIRONMENT AND SETTING

Careful consideration of the setting and environment is vital for stimulating memories and engaging senior clients. In his book, Solie offers four ideas for creating the right environment during discussions with seniors.

Consider meeting outside in a garden or patio setting. Nature, sunlight and fresh air are things senior adults enjoy, even if it's just briefly. Consider creating a relaxed outdoor setting with comfortable furniture, wind chimes or maybe the soothing sound of an outdoor fountain. Perhaps start a conversation outside and then move indoors.

Walk with senior adult clients. Solie stresses the importance of the walking conference. When walking next to a senior adult, the person feels secure, as if you are their safety shield.

It builds trust and makes it easier for the client to open up. Short walks are preferable for obvious reasons. It might be as brief as simply walking with the person from the car into the funeral home, or perhaps a walking tour of the funeral home or the grounds of an adjacent cemetery. If your client lives at an assisted-living facility, consider meeting them there and incorporating a walk inside or outside.

Go for a drive. Seniors enjoy pleasant drives, which are soothing and create a good environment for opening up and talking about deep topics. Some of the best conversations can occur in a moving vehicle. Consider driving your client to the cemetery to view the property. Maybe pick up the client from their home and drive them to the funeral home for the arrangement conference. Something as simple as offering to run an errand with the person can provide the opportunity for good conversation and communication.

Make the arrangement room more comfortable. Make sure there's plenty of natural light. A nearby exterior door leading to a comfortable outside patio can facilitate escorting the person to an outdoor setting. Even if there is no door leading outside, a room with plenty of windows looking out onto peaceful and pretty settings can help relax a senior adult. Have comfortable furniture that senior adults can get into and out of easily. Offer back-support pillows and goose-neck lamps with different light levels that senior clients can adjust to help with reading documentation. Have magnifying or reading glasses available. Many senior adults experience dry mouth due to health conditions or from taking certain medications, so add mints to the arrangement room and offer water. Further reduce anxiety and increase one's focus by using an essential-oil diffuser with scents such as lavender, cinnamon or citrus.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Asking the right questions is vitally important to achieving effective communication with senior clients. The right questions will give them the opportunity to establish their legacy, which is an important end-of-life issue senior adults think about often.

According to Solie, there are three types of questions that are important: follow-up, seeking insight or expertise, and feeling-finding.

Follow-up questions allow you to refer back to previous statements the senior adult has shared, demonstrating that you are listening and seeking to understand further.

Insight or expertise questions do precisely what you might expect – they seek deeper insight or expertise from your senior adult client, as well as demonstrate that you respect their wisdom and life experiences.

Open-ended questions represent a deeper form of fact-finding. By asking questions that probe feelings, you are allowing that person to reach deep into an experience.

Your goal should be to transition from fact-finding questions to feeling-finding. Uncover the emotions underlying the stories – that's ultimately how you add layers and depth to funeral planning.

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LISTEN EFFECTIVELY

When you sit down (or walk or drive) to talk with a senior, listen to the facts and stories and everything in-between. Expect the person to take pauses when speaking. When this happens, let it flow; don't try to fill the voids.

Remain silent, attentive and focused. Their pauses have a very specific purpose – to gather emotions and pull out information and memories from a very long time ago. Give the person a minute and do not be in a hurry.

Keep in mind your posture and sitting positions. A face-to-face position shows interest and preparedness. Sitting side by side can deepen a conversation and allow for a more significant probing of feelings, emotions and memories. Whatever position you're seated in, remain patient and relaxed, keeping eye contact but not staring, which might be interpreted as seeking control.

Crossed arms can indicate you are drawing conclusions or making judgments. Be sure to keep your hands folded politely in your lap, which gives a sense of openness. Hand gestures should be kept to a minimum, and when you do speak with your hands, keep your gestures slow and deliberate. Be mindful of your facial expressions and always convey a sense of warmth.

Improving your communication skills with senior adult clients is undoubtedly one of the best things you can do for your business. Senior adults want someone they can trust, and they want to feel respected. Using the tools outlined here, you can move to the next level of communication with seniors and provide them with a warm, comfortable, trusting atmosphere that allows them to open up and find their legacy.

Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.

You Are the Umpire of Your Career

By Daniel M. Isard

There are officials in sporting events. You watch the event through your big-screen TV, with slow motion and instant replay, and say, "I could do that as well as that guy!" Well, you can't. What separates him from you is his ability to deal with the speed of the play. In Little League, the play is much slower than in the big leagues!

As you ponder your future in funeral service, allow me to explain three points about your career choice:

1. The pace of play is much faster.
2. A bad decision can sidetrack a successful person.
3. Good decisions should never be made under pressure.

Draw a horizontal line on a sheet of paper. The left side of the line is today; the right side is your retirement. In between, you must figure out what is going to make your career and life a happy and healthy one. Assume you want to plot out your future income. Write down on the left side your current income. What is the income on the right side at the end of your career? Use 2019 dollars in making these forecasts. If your current income is \$40,000 and, upon retiring, you want your income to be \$100,000, what are the choices you need to be prepared for?

No one has ever entered funeral service for the money. It is a calling. It is a service to mankind and a personal passion. However, you can't spend that calling at the store. We need to be paid for that calling, just as a minister is paid for providing his or her calling to the community. We must be prepared to talk about money and compensation. Let us not be embarrassed to be paid what our service is worth.

If you don't know what those numbers are, there is a great U.S. government website that takes data and publishes the basics on the value of being a funeral director (www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/funeral-service-occupations.htm).

I think education is critical to income, but alas, there has been no conclusive study that shows that education and income go hand in hand in funeral service. There are about 25,460 presently employed as "morticians, undertakers and funeral directors." The average compensation on an hourly basis is about \$27.07, or about \$56,300 per year.



This tells me that the top 10% earn almost \$85,000 per year and the lowest 10% earn about \$29,000. The states with the highest compensation are Connecticut, Massachusetts, Delaware, New Jersey and Illinois. There is very little unemployment of funeral directors. However, states with the highest employment level of funeral directors as a percentage of the population are Texas, Florida, New York, California and Illinois. The lowest are North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa and Wisconsin.

Why am I telling you to plan your future goals and objectives as it pertains to pay? Too often, people realize they are not being paid a reasonable rate. Too often, that observation is made by a friend, family member or parent, who have no basis for that conclusion. Too often, young people have an unrealistic expectation as to what their compensation should be.

I gave a presentation to a group of students and business owners a few years ago. I spoke to the students while another presenter spoke to owners. After about an hour, the audiences switched. I asked the students, "How much do you think a funeral director with five years of experience should be earning?" The students gave answers from \$40,000 to \$80,000. When I asked the same question of the owners, I got answers from \$40,000 to \$50,000! Compensation needs to be realistic, and the marketplace ultimately sets that amount.

What goes hand in hand with income increases is the law of supply and demand. If you want to make more than an average funeral director, then your choices are the following:

1. Find a way to market your own personal goodwill to attract consumers to the firm for which you work.
2. Work in a state that has the lowest number of funeral directors looking for a job.
3. Prepare yourself for management and take on more responsibilities.

The goal is to do everything you need to do so that your YBR (Yellow Brick Road) travels correctly. Each decision you make should be made to facilitate getting your career to the goals and objectives on the right side of that sheet of paper. Sometimes knowing the range of realistic results is the place to start. Check out the website to figure out how you want to handle your compensation.

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Taking Stock of the Funeral Profession, Part 2

By Todd W. Van Beck

Editor's note: In our last issue (Autumn 2018), Todd Van Beck, longtime funeral director and educator, offered his perspective on the funeral service profession. In this issue, we continue that discussion.

I decided to peel back the DNA of two critically important subjects: the care of the dead and the care of the living. I can tell you, my friends, right now, that if you are still reading, taking this road and following it to wherever it might take you will make all the difference in the world.

As I journeyed down this thought path, I began to ponder the beauty and nobility of funeral service and was reminded of a beautiful sentiment written years ago by a great American author named Jim Bishop in a great book called *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*. In his book, Bishop makes candid and beautifully honest reference to the reality of what a funeral director must balance, and he describes it with great insight and elegance: "There is no profession which stands in such permanent delicate balance as a funeral home. It must be solemn but not doleful, helpful but not overly cheerful, competent but not morbid, spiritual but not hyper-religious, cordial but not intimate, ready to assist but not overbearing."

Even now as I read those words, I tear up. I feel in my heart something almost mystical. Bishop's thoughts concerning the funeral profession go far, far beyond a rule or regulation or the opinions of ever-present naysayers. This quote displays a professional awareness that is way beyond the confines of a mere certificate or degree or credential (as important and essential as they are) – it harks back to an authentic, unqualified and indescribable love of funeral service. Can it possibly be that a genuine love of funeral service is just maybe what qualifies it as a profession?

Just maybe, this is the missing link that has eluded the attempts of so many to create a nice, tidy, absolute, definitive establishment of funeral service as a profession for so many years. Just maybe, the absolute professional identity is centered on the love of funeral service that those who are called to this work have in their hearts. Could it be true that an emotional connection to loving our work is what qualifies funeral service as a profession?

Let's try a little test. Answer for yourself the following questions. Do you not think, for instance, that my Aunt Tilly back home in Iowa was, in the end, more interested in her physician's genuine love and devotion to the work of medicine and not necessarily his grade from medical college or the states in which he was licensed? Do you not think that Aunt Tilly (a simple Iowa farm woman) was, in the end, far more interested in her clergyperson's love of the Lord and ministry to humanity than in how many A's he received in seminary?



The presence or absence of love is indeed a powerful qualifier when it comes to assessing the validity and purposes of a profession. For instance, I knew a farmer when I was a boy in Iowa who could not read or write, but he loved, dearly loved, being a farmer, and his love showed all the time by the fruits of his labor. He wasn't educated in the formal sense, but he had a Ph.D. in experiential expertise. He loved the earth, he loved planting and he dearly loved the harvest. Would he qualify as a true professional? What do you think?

Possibly, just possibly, having a deep abiding love of funeral service is the ultimate watermark for us to lay claim to true, authentic and absolute professionalism. These criteria of professionalism don't ultimately revolve around a test or a book or a framed certificate; they revolve around the individual and what is present or absent in his or her heart. Human beings, based on this thinking, who truly love what they do are the true professionals.

In my humble and flawed efforts, motivated by an abiding love of funeral service, I arrived at some additional thoughts that I believe have depth and relevancy to this idea that truly loving funeral service is the ultimate measure of validating the professional status of funeral service and funeral professionals.

The following evaluative criteria are the micro-categories that make up the substance of a profession in addition to that main ingredient – love of the mission of what you are doing.

See whether any of the following points here resonate in your life and career. Determine how many of these points apply to you and funeral service. Put a check by the ones that apply to your own personal experience.



A DIRECTOR'S TIME IS NOT HIS OR HER OWN

How could anyone make a convincing argument that the average, normal, typical funeral professional's time is his or her own? It almost borders on the ridiculous to try! It seems that if just this criterion alone was the sole qualifier of funeral service being a profession, the ancient debate would certainly be over.



DIRECTORS HONOR APPRENTICE/ MENTOR LEARNING SYSTEM

If you and I were alive in the Middle Ages and our parents were peasants, sadly, that too would be our stock in life unless some expert, such as a blacksmith, cobbler or miller, hired us and taught us the skills necessary to do the job well. The blacksmith would be the mentor and the learner would be the apprentice. Does this ancient system of learning a profession not sound familiar to you? The mentor/apprentice system has never said anything about classroom learning, online learning or receiving an academic degree. What it does teach is the lesson, still applicable to this day, that there is wisdom in having a veteran teaching a novice – an intern, a student or a funeral apprentice – the lessons learned from years of performing that skill. Given this approach in establishing the professional status of funeral service, the case can eloquently be made that funeral service, along with numerous other professions, such as medicine, clergy, education, pharmacy, law and, yes, even welding, have a well-established system of the mentor/apprenticeship path to professional credibility.



AN IDENTIFIABLE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

This one is easy. The path of education does not spell out the length of the educational process or identify the precise academic degrees that must be obtained. These professional criteria only state that there must be an identifiable process of education (which is clearly present in our profession), but most important is the presence of a philosophy of education that centers its ethical standards on the ancient idea of “education simply for the sake of education.”

Funeral service might not be at an academic level of requiring a master’s degree or doctorate, but the expectation of equating exclusive higher-level academic degrees as a primary benchmark in creating a profession poses serious drawbacks. For example, I was on a seminar program with another speaker some years back. For confidentiality sake, I will call this gentleman Dr. Joe Smith. When I was introduced to Smith, he looked down at me with his reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose. He looked around for other people to talk to; clearly he was bored to death in meeting me. In his speech, he claimed perfection, scolded the audience and made a grand pitch for the sale of his books and tapes. After his speech, I tried to congratulate him on his efforts, just to be cordial. I was rebuffed, and Smith left the room. The core point of this story was Smith’s business card. I found one lying on the speaker’s podium and took it; I still have it. The card reads:

DR. JOSEPH SMITH

Ph.D., M.A., M.S., B.A., B.S., CHFU, D.PSYCH. D.H.L.

Later in this article, I have a good Iowa story to share with you about what the length of his credentials and the impressive letters below his name might mean concerning a sense of humility and love for a professional identify.



UNIQUE AND SPECIAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

It seems safe to claim that the average American or even the average world citizen does not know where the right common carotid is located, let alone be able to incise and elevate that particular vessel in preparation for arterial embalming. I believe it is safe territory for us to lay claim that funeral professionals possess unique and special skills and knowledge. And in funeral service, these skills and knowledge go much further than impressive anatomical knowledge and preservative techniques. The depth of unique and special knowledge the typical funeral professional possesses is almost limitless in its scope, simply because funeral directors confront literal life-and-death situations in any community.

In fact, a safe claim can be easily established that funeral directors have more experiential knowledge and expertise concerning information about death, dying, bereavement, mourning and grief than any other person in the community. “Wait a minute!” the skeptic says. “What about hospice? They know everything about death don’t they?” They certainly know a tremendous amount of extremely valuable information, but in my work with hospice since 1979, I have never heard that they routinely, professionally confront myriad of grief situations created by homicides, auto accidents, suicides, stillbirths, decomposed decedents or the myriad modes of death that are expected as part of the daily work of the funeral professional. To be sure, the words “unique” and “special” apply to many professions, but these two adjectives have a powerful relevance in describing the professional reality of funeral directors.



BOUND TOGETHER BY MUTUAL SENSE OF IDENTITY

One of the hallmark accomplishments of our great profession is that funeral directors have exhibited decade after decade the keen ability to connect with each other – and for good reason; funeral service is a unique way of life and not everybody understands the call to become a funeral professional. I have thought for many years that this is one of the cardinal reasons why funeral directors clearly like to be in the company of other funeral directors – I know I do! The communication that is evident in these special communications is NOT ordinary chit chat; funeral talk is NOT ordinary small talk. Most funeral director conversations with other funeral directors center around the fascinating world of the case study – in other words, telling stories. Funeral directors love to tell stories, and nothing is as interesting or binds people of kindred spirits more closely than telling and listening to stories. Not divulging confidences, but telling stories, funeral stories, case-study stories. I discovered when I was a young funeral professional that the stories I listened to from veteran funeral professionals were a thousand times more instructive than anything I learned in mortuary college. Frankly, I don’t remember much about things I learned in mortuary college a half century later, but my sense of mutual identity with other funeral professions continues to be enhanced even to this day by the opportunity to tell and listen to funeral stories with

some of the very funeral professionals with whom I went to mortuary college. My memory of getting my diploma has dimmed, but not my memories of the people who attended mortuary college with me.



LIFELONG DEDICATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN A WORTHY MISSION

Funeral professionals are involved in service to humanity – this is the core foundation of our profession. All service professions have one supreme and inviolate mission and that mission is to help other people. This is the mission of all professions from the time the first human being became of service to help another human being. Even before there were medical colleges, or medical licenses, the medical profession's mission was summed up in the ancient Hippocratic oath, which clearly states: "First, do no harm." Funeral service qualifies with high marks as a profession simply because of our dedication and devotion to our mission, which is to help alleviate the misery and suffering of humanity when death enters life. This type of service mission is not totally contingent on advanced academic degrees, or in even the approval or disapproval of others – we can't be all things to all people. The proof of a successful service mission is the simple response of other human beings to the services being furnished – and funeral professionals receive high marks in providing answers to people's myriad of questions when death enters their lives – remember the Gallup Poll? The mission of problem solving is contingent on the character of the individual funeral professional and their interest in and attention to other human beings – it is as simple as that. However, some people in funeral service just don't get this vision of mission. They don't love funeral service, but they have the credentials. A lack of love of mission in funeral service, or medicine, or law, or pharmacy, or education might well be one of the cardinal reasons that state boards were created in the first place. Let us keep in mind that professionals are mighty attracted to mission-centered work. Based on this definition, a worker in a fast-food establishment who has genuine love of fast food, and hence a mission in life to be of service to people who are hungry, is as truly professional as is the most brilliant surgeon in the medical profession.



THERE EXISTS A RECOGNIZABLE, WELL-ENUNCIATED SET OF VALUES BY WHICH THEY CONDUCT THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE BROADER COMMUNITY OR SOCIETY, AND WHEN THESE VALUES ARE VIOLATED, THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES

One of the hallmarks of the beauty of our profession is the set of values that most every funeral director holds near and dear. Terms like "nonsectarian" or "service to all" bespeak a set of well-enunciated values that our profession has for decades held as an ethical standard by which all other activities are judged. Reverence for the Dead, Caretaker of the Dead, Caregiver to the Living – all are living examples of a set of worthy values that most funeral professionals see as the bedrock philosophy of our beloved profession. Few professions

are held to such a high standard, and few if any other professions have maintained this high standard with such a consistent excellence in attitude and practice. Certainly, one doesn't have to search very far or wide to see the consequences that are created by rogue members of our profession who are not professional in the least. By their thoughtless actions, they violate this historic basic set of well-enunciated values, and usually there are consequences and usually the results are not good. Here are two questions for you to ponder: If these abusers of our well-enunciated set of values had loved being in our profession in the first place, do you think they would have behaved as they do sometimes? No one is looking for perfection but could a lack of love of funeral service result in an increase of avoidable abuses – not natural human mistakes, but avoidable abuses that translate into the haunting phrase, "They should have known better?"



THERE IS A COMMON LANGUAGE, A COMMON SET OF SYMBOLS, UNDERSTOOD INSIDE BUT NOT FULLY UNDERSTOOD OUTSIDE

Ask any funeral service apprentice or intern about how vulnerable they were by not understanding the language of funeral service that seemed to be commonplace to the veteran funeral professional. Language that includes words such as "trocar" or "Christian Burial Permit" or "arterial chemicals" or "church truck" (a church on a truck?) . . . well the list of our profession's language that is unique and special goes on and on. No one expects the funeral professional to possess an advanced academic degree to know the language, but everyone expects all funeral professionals to understand precisely what the language means. Then add to this that every fraternal group, every social group, every religious group, and actually every group on earth has their own unique rites, rituals, ceremonies and special symbols concerning death, funerals, burials, cremations, etc., and one concludes without any difficulty that the funeral profession and hence the global funeral service world possess a clear distinct common language and a set of common symbols that we as funeral professionals understand but not everyone outside our profession understands.



AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE WITH THE MEMBERSHIP COMES THROUGH INTERNAL DISCIPLINE

In many states – years before there existed a state medical board, state nursing board, or even a state bar association board – the state board of funeral directors and embalmers had already been well-established and was thriving through a system of internal discipline. Early in the rich history of our profession, it was quickly recognized that funeral service called out for internal discipline, and such professional vision gave rise to the advent of mortuary colleges and funeral service education across this country. This is a noble heritage in our profession that should never be forgotten. Our profession's pioneer mortuary educators and mortuary colleges worldwide have propelled our professional knowledge to a level of sophistication never seen before in death-care history.



ROLES AND ACTIVITIES ARE FULLY UNDERSTOOD INSIDE AND REASONABLY UNDERSTOOD OUTSIDE

How many times have we all been asked by a funeral “outsider” this question: “How can you stand being around death all the time?” or something to that effect. Of course, most funeral professionals know precisely why they are in funeral service, their role, and their identities as professional individuals devoted to their mission in life as a caretaker of the dead, and a caregiver to the living. However, by asking the above outsider question, it is clear that our mission, our profession, and our dedication is only reasonably understood by people outside of our ranks, until of course they need us. Then everything changes and with good reason. One of the hallmarks of the professional status of members in funeral service is that far and away most funeral directors not only understand this state of affairs, but they are extremely sensitive to overlook the “outside” questions – sometimes ridiculous and insulting – and be ready to respond whenever the death of a member of the human family occurs. Most funeral professionals are so kind and thoughtful that they possess the priceless ability to understand and let cruel remarks pass. This ability to understand the DNA of funeral service realities inside, and to also equally understand that people outside of our profession only reasonably understand what we do, until they need us, is indeed one of the benchmarks for our identity as a profession.



ROLE DEFINITIONS ARE CLEAR AND AGREED UPON, AND ARE THE SAME FOR ALL MEMBERS

It is interesting how clear and agreed upon the role definitions are in our profession, without actually having to be written down in laws and statutes. The laws and statutes codify expectations, but there is something more going on here that funeral directors innately understand. Now, not everyone in funeral service understands these clear roles of the funeral professional to be sure, but fortunately most of us clearly understand them. The inherent roles of being a caretaker of the dead, and a caregiver to the living, have been so abundantly clear and agreed upon that these two paramount definitions of just who we are as professionals were understood and accepted decades before any idea was thought of to create state boards of funeral directors and embalmers. In fact, when I travel to other countries giving seminars, where there is no formal licensing system, the vast majority of these funeral professionals all clearly understand the unwritten, unspoken, uncodified definitions of the role of caretaker of the dead and caregiver to the living. I once gave a speech to a gathering of South American funeral directors and there was a tremendous language barrier. All I had to do to connect with these great people was to start talking about the role of the funeral professional and soon we were all talking the same “language” even though our words to each other were foreign and required an interpreter. This is an impressive global reality that further clears the way for our quest in identifying funeral service as indeed a sincere and valid profession.



ENHANCES THE QUALITY OF THE NEXT GENERATION OF MEMBERS THROUGH CONTROLS IN THE SELECTION OF NEW MEMBERS BY INFLUENCING EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND HENCE SHAPES ITS NEW MEMBERS BY MEANS OF ITS OWN TRAINING

The license is important. An educated credentialed profession is critically important. Mortuary colleges have a very important mission to fulfill, and this mission needs to be respected and supported by us all. The colleges of mortuary science do a grand job! However, I long ago concluded that when I graduated from mortuary college, I received that fateful day not the keys to the kingdom, but the keys to the hearse – in other words I earned my “learners permit” on the day I received my diploma. I believe this to be true: The quality of the next generation in our beloved profession globally rests with every breath taken by human beings who wake up and find their mission to serve humanity through their identified love of funeral service. From this standpoint, our beloved profession excels globally at creating a wise and effective watermark for the newly initiated: for the funeral service mentor/apprentice experience exists everywhere. Mortuary colleges and licenses might not exist everywhere but, in our profession, the mentor/apprentice system is ever present. There is an underbelly of some apprentice experiences. True, there are horror stories told in abundance about this or that apprenticeship experiences, or the lack of them, but then the same kind of stories are told in abundance in medical training apprenticeships, clergy training apprenticeships, and teacher training apprenticeships. The apprenticeship on a global basis never has claimed it had to be a lovefest. From the simple position of maintaining, and in many regions enhancing, the mentor/apprentice experience, however, funeral service has utterly excelled at taking very seriously the quality of the next generation who will make up the body, mind and spirit of this great profession. The mentor/apprentice experience should never be underestimated – and in most places, it is not.



SET IDEALS TO BE REACHED, NORMALLY IN TERMS OF SERVICE TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY. THE IDEALS TEND TO BECOME GOALS

When I decided to become a funeral director, the decision had nothing to do with what any kind of legislative or governmental agency had to say. In time, what these great organizations had to say became of great importance in my life and career. But starting out, my motivation had everything to do with my innate attraction to anything that reflected high ideals in being of service to others.

If any of our criteria establishes the professional status of members in our beloved profession, it is this one.



THE WORTHY IDEAL OF BEING OF SERVICE TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY

This is what a makes funeral service a profession. This is it! The best definition I have ever heard of what success is goes

like this: “Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal.” Being of service to humanity is unquestionably a worthy ideal. Caretaking of the dead, and caregiving to the living, has always been the worthy ideal in our great profession – always, even back to the Neanderthal and their primitive yet highly meaningful burial customs.

The worthy ideal concerning the mission of our beloved profession was most eloquently captured by the now well-familiar quote of William Gladstone, prime minister of Great Britain: “Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.”

This quote reflects a heartfelt sentiment; it is a beautiful sentiment that I know thousands of funeral professionals have committed to memory. However, it can easily be stated that today we live in and contend with a culture that has lost much of its sentimentality. In the end, most all worthy ideals that make a difference in life are based precisely on sentiment because it is from the human ability to be sentimental that the ability for human sympathy arises – they go hand in hand. It is also from human sympathy for the misery of another human being that the motivation springs forth to be of service to humanity. And that is the inviolate core of the funeral service profession.



REQUIRES MORE TRAINING AND EDUCATION THAN THE LARGER AND BROAD COMMUNITY DEMANDS AND INSISTS ON A HIGHER STANDARD OF BEHAVIOR

Do you think that the average citizen in the United States of America is aware that mortuary colleges exist? The answer to this question is irrelevant because it only matters that funeral professionals realize mortuary colleges exist. It is the very history of mortuary education that sets the solid contemporary foundation for funeral service professionalism. True, many other countries do not have formal colleges of mortuary science, but in the end, that makes no difference. We have them in the United States. We will never be asked to give an account of the status of funeral service in other countries; we will only be asked to give an account of the status of funeral service here. Sophisticated and advanced mortuary education clearly is a primary example of the fact that our professional leadership over hundreds of years possessed the wisdom and insight to require more training and education than the general community insists upon or is even aware of. True, the average American might not be aware of mortuary colleges, their purposes, and their impressive results, but you and I are aware of this singular contribution to the professional status of funeral service. I have often wondered what the outcome might be if the combination of our genuine love of funeral service were combined with the worthy ideal of continued advancement in mortuary education. Is it possible that this combination might result in a bachelor’s degree as the minimal academic entrance requirement to become a funeral director nationally? Okay,

take a breath. I am just thinking out loud. I don’t mean any harm, but I can hope, can’t I?

Professional status, anywhere on earth, is ultimately based upon the contributions of one single solitary person’s belief in the power of their individual influence that results in a genuine love of being of humble service to humanity. This is the idea; this is the core substance that makes funeral service a profession.

The humble love of doing good work. This is what makes a profession.

Winston Churchill, the great English statesman, once saw a Hindu worker hoisting bushel sacks of coal onto freight cars in India. Churchill was fascinated by the vigor with which the man tackled each sack, threw it up on his shoulders, ran up a short gangplank, and deposited it with a flourish in just the right spot among the other bags to save space and, thus, load the car more efficiently.

Speaking to the man, Churchill said, “You work with great enthusiasm!” The workman, startled that the famous Churchill was speaking to him, smiled widely and replied, “Sir, cold weather is on the way, and I am working diligently to make certain that this coal gets to the right place to be of service to people I don’t even know so they will not freeze. I use my imagination to keep it from being monotonous. Each sack of coal is a new enemy to conquer over the cold. I see how many enemies I can conquer, and I make records and then I beat them. You see I imagine in my heart the smiles of the children when they are put to bed with warmth and safety because of my coal loading – it is my mission. I know what I do is good for people!”

Winston Churchill applauded the man for his well-defined mission and creativity, and later said the experience was worth a month’s pay. Churchill also said the worker was a professional of the first rank!

All articles must come to an end, and I would like to conclude by directing attention to the world-famous humanitarian, physician, theologian and musician Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Having earned his medical degree, he went to the Congo in 1913, when the Congo did not require a medical license, because Dr. Schweitzer had in his heart a burning desire to be of service to humanity in Africa. Hence, he opened his world-famous missionary hospital and the rest, as they say, is history.

In time, the Congo did require a medical license, but in Dr. Schweitzer’s mission to humanity, that ultimately really didn’t matter. His mission was service to other human beings, and after he had worked for half a century at his beloved profession, the good doctor left us with a beautiful thought. I would humbly suggest that Schweitzer’s written word encapsulates the professional position that our beloved profession has worldwide, even in countries where formalized credentials do not exist. Dr. Schweitzer talks of the results of

devoting a lifetime of service to others as being the ultimate formula in finding true happiness. This is what the great humanitarian said:

“I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those of you who will have sought and found how to serve.”

Based on Schweitzer’s definition of the worthy ideal of service to others as being the best road to personal happiness, I am going to take the risk of concluding that there must be many happy people out in the great big world in the funeral service profession. This I believe to be true: Far and wide across the globe, funeral professionals have truly and with tremendous success sought and found how to serve. Oh, by the way, this medical missionary in the Congo also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

So, my dear friends in funeral service, do I dare be bold as to answer our beginning question, “Is funeral service a profession?”

Was my unlicensed friend way out West so many years ago a professional? Or was his heart akin to Dr. Schweitzer’s?

Is professionalism dependent solely upon legislative and government bureaucracy in the end – is this the final test of professional authenticity? Certainly, the work of these diligent governmental overseers cannot be underestimated as they are the keeper of the keys that helps in the noble mission of keeping our profession on the straight and narrow in very complicated social times.

Is the proof of funeral service’s true authentic professionalism to be solely found in the licenses one possesses? If you don’t possess the necessary licenses, are you automatically guilty of being unprofessional?

It seems from my meager and flawed exploration of this subject that there is much more going on in the quest to embrace, define and identify the word “profession.” Anyway, I found in this search there was much more going on than I had ever expected! Yes, much, much more, as I hope and pray this writing has in some small way given additional light to. So, what’s left? What should I do now?

OK, I know I will take the risk and offer an answer to our original question “Is funeral service a profession?” Yes, funeral service is a profession. It is not a perfect profession, it is not a problem-free profession, and it is not a profession that has perfect people in it, but nonetheless, it is a profession.

Based on this exploration, investigation and evaluation, we can make the claim that, to be sure, our beloved work is indeed a profession of the first rank, and funeral professionals are charged with protecting, maintaining, improving and enhancing the noble mission of what makes funeral service a profession in the first place: Being of humble service to humanity, and love doing it.

Remember our old buddy, the arrogant Dr. Joe Smith with whom I shared a seminar many years ago – the chap who had an alphabet of impressive letters behind his name on his business card? What can we deduce from Dr. Joe Smith? He certainly held impressive credentials, and I am certain he worked very hard to earn them, but how in our final analysis of this important subject can we make any conclusion about the example of Dr. Smith concerning true professionalism? I believe the best way to answer this question is to tell another story. I believe the moral of this story will furnish our answer.

This is another story from my childhood in Southwestern Iowa, and I believe this story goes to the very heart of Dr. Smith’s “professionalism.”

The story goes this way. A family was traveling in Iowa and drove by a ranch. The family was interested in ranch life, so they pulled into the driveway and asked the rancher, “Does your ranch have a name?”

“Well,” said the rancher, “I wanted to name it the Bar-J. But my wife favored Suzy-Q, my son liked the Flying-W, and my other son wanted the Lazy-Y. A neighbor suggested the Bar Seven, my ranch hand wanted the Double O, and another hired hand wanted the Flying M. So as not to upset anyone, I decided to call it the Bar-J, Suzy-Q, Flying-W, Lazy-Y, Bar Seven, Double O, Flying M Ranch.”

“I bet you have a lot of cattle,” the visitor replied, scanning the magnificent landscape.

“Nope,” the rancher said. “Not too many of my cattle can survive my branding them.”

The moral of the story is this: It is not the length and number of letters behind a person’s name that is ultimately important. Sure, people work diligently to obtain them and that is a good thing, but the length of the letters behind a person’s name is not as important as the length someone will go to be of service to others. And the number of letters after your name is not as important as the number of kind acts that one solitary person can pile up in a lifetime. It is the combination of these ideas – the length of service and number of kind acts – that creates at the end of our life journey what I call professional immortality. It is also one of the silent but powerful ingredients that got funeral professionals so high up on the Gallup Poll in the noble and worthy categories of trust, honor and respect.

Going the length in service to help others, and piling up kind acts in service to others, is in the end, in my humble opinion, what makes funeral service an authentic profession.

Last question: Do you think my friend out West at the beginning of my career was a professional?

Todd W. Van Beck is director of continuing education at John A. Gupton College in Nashville, Tennessee.



STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Going Green

By Aimee Garcia

Every day, someone dies and the question of “what will the disposition be?” is asked. In our society, we have always had our traditional ways that include burial or cremation, and if cremated, some still end up in the ground. This is most popular because people want to have a place to visit, and to be frank, some people do not want ashes sitting around the house or in the closet. As time has progressed, we as consumers have become increasingly aware of the environment and the impact we have on it.

This mentality has trickled into the funeral industry, and families are no longer content with the traditional ways. Yes, there are some that want to bury their loved one in a casket, but green burial is beginning to make an entrance. Green burial is the new form of being environmentally friendly while traditional cemeteries are definitely not.

Funeral homes and cemeteries are helping this to be the case as more and more began to cater to the green movement.

So what is green burial? Well, in its most natural form, it is when a dead body is free from chemicals and placed directly in the ground in a shroud or biodegradable burial container. A green cemetery does not allow any caskets or outer burial containers that do not break down – this is the opposite of a traditional cemetery. Some cemeteries do allow embalming with a “green” chemical, and these are approved by the Green Burial Council.

These guidelines are in place due to the amount of pollutants and materials that are placed into the environment during a non-green burial. According to the Green Burial Council the number of “cemetery goods” placed “in the ground in U.S. cemeteries each year are: 20 million board feet of wood, 4.3 million gallons of embalming fluids, 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete, 17,000 tons of copper and bronze, and 64,500 tons of

steel” (2016). For green burial, this number approaches zero, which is why consumers are gravitating toward this choice.

Originally, green burial was not a choice in the U.S., or really anywhere, for that matter, until 1993, when it began in the United Kingdom. The first green cemetery opened in the U.S. in South Carolina in 1998.

Not all green burial cemeteries involve just green burials though. There are actually three types of green cemeteries: hybrid, natural, and conservation. A hybrid is a cemetery that allows both traditional and green burial in the same place. A natural cemetery only allows green burials in the manner mentioned before. Lastly, a conservation burial cemetery is the same as a natural, but the standards of the property deed are different. There are different choices based on what people might need and the area they live in. Soon there will be more cemeteries and funeral homes to allow for more needs to be met.

In its most natural form, [green burial] is when a dead body is free from chemicals and placed directly in the ground in a shroud or biodegradable burial container.

In the funeral industry, more and more funeral homes are working to accommodate the environmentally conscientious consumer.

For some, that is all they advocate, including funeral homes such as Undertaking L.A. in Los Angeles, CA. Run by Caitlin Doughty and Amber Carvaly, the firm helps make even more of a name for the natural process. With people and funeral homes like theirs, the industry is being affected. For starters, chemical companies have created new products to allow people to be embalmed if needed and still be placed into a green cemetery.

Manufacturers of cemetery goods have also had to accommodate. Those that have not started creating environmentally biodegradable caskets will need to as the market increases. Consumers have begun to consume fewer of these goods as they are not necessary. For example, if the family wanted to, they could even wrap their loved one in a linen shroud – no casket necessary.

We... can start adapting now by changing our merchandise, and becoming more educated about the process and rules of green burial. If not, we will potentially lose business...

As funeral providers, we need to work to create products that will fit into the concept of green burial.

The green burial movement is one that is continuously growing, and will be a long-term commitment. As cemeteries become full, these types of burials will provide more space due to the lack of cemetery goods, such as caskets and vaults. As people become more environmentally conscious, this is going to become a more popular choice. We in the funeral industry can start adapting now by changing our merchandise, and becoming more educated about the process and rules of green burial.

If not, we will potentially lose business as firms like Undertaking L.A. are opened. What cemeteries can do is start creating spaces to allow for this type of burial and become a hybrid cemetery. This will help bring in business now and in the future. Funeral homes can start to contract with cemeteries in their area that allow green burial, and began to offer it to their families. Green burial is the future of the funeral industry.

In a world full of people who are concerned about their environmental impact, green burial is on the rise. People want to have a place to visit their loved one without growing their carbon footprint. Green burial is what will accommodate these families. It has only been in the United States for about 20 years, but it will be around for many more. The different forms of green burial cemeteries can help those with specific needs and allow a cemetery to provide their services to all families.

As funeral professionals, we have the capability to educate ourselves and our families on what is available. We also have the duty to keep up with the trends, whether temporary, or permanent, such as green burial. In fact, the National Funeral Directors Association has already created a program to award funeral homes participating in “ethical, sustainable green funeral and business practices in order to become more environmentally responsible to client families, employees, and their communities” (2018). Green burial is the future and current funeral homes must keep up or they will be left in the past.

Aimee Garcia is a student in the mortuary science program at Cypress College in Cypress, California.

Reiterating the Value of Restorative Arts

By Edward J. Defort

Last year, NFDA launched its new Embalming and Restorative Arts Seminar. It turned out to be a very successful program.

Prior to this program, we interviewed one of the presenters, Jzyk Ennis, Ph.D., author and funeral service educator at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama, about what was expected to take place at this inaugural event.

I know this type of seminar is something you've been advocating for quite some time. Tell me, what do you hope attendees would get out of the program?

Ennis: I am only one of many who believe that focus needs to remain on technical skills. My hope is that this will be an opportunity for all of us to learn from each other. While



some of us are acting as facilitators, the reality is that those who attend have ideas and skills that can help us, as well. There are formal sessions and then informal time for us to interact with each other.

We intend for this to be a learning experience for all of us. To your question, I hope the attendees walk away from this program with a renewed sense of confidence, pride and new ideas that they can incorporate into their own practices to better serve the public.

It seems that people have been talking less and less about the presentation of the body until it does not meet a family's standards. Do you feel that since there are more families opting for cremation that embalming and preparation has been taken for granted?

Ennis: There are those who believe that poor decedent care is responsible for the rising rate of cremation. I have not seen hard data to support or refute that point. Most all of that is anecdotal. In some cases, that may be true.



What I do know is that all of us must maintain our skills over time. This is true in golf, music, and most any activity. Cremation has reduced the opportunity for chemical preservation in some cases; however, some form of decedent care is still required in all cases.

I will say that I think many providers of continuing education moved their focus to the trendy topics related to cremation and business management for a period of time. Many embalmers were not convention attendees and were at home taking care of business while management and owners, who might not regularly embalm, attended the conventions. Logically, it would make sense to have convention topics geared towards attendees.

With that said, I think embalmers never left the party and were eager to stay engaged. Opportunities for embalmers have been reduced or nearly eliminated in some cases. This is why I am glad that NFDA stepped forward to reengage embalmers and let them know that what we do is important.

Where do you stand on the split- vs. dual-license debate?

Ennis: This is a sticky question. If I had my personal preference, I would require the minimum of a bachelor's degree and require all licensees to be licensed as both embalmers and funeral directors.

The reality is that I might be in the minority. I come from a state that has split licensure, and I can see situations where very good people hold only a funeral director's license. The argument is that as cremation as a form of disposition rises, we don't need as many embalmers.

Again, decedent care is required on 100% of those cases.

Another argument is that some really good people don't want to be embalmers but are great with the front-end of the funeral home. I use the analogy of a car dealership. You have sales people who sell the high-end cars, and then the mechanics who service the vehicles. They do not cross over to do the other's job.

The problem is that in many areas, funeral homes cannot afford to specialize that way. They need people who can do everything. If a state chooses to go split licensure, I do think it is a good policy that single-licensed funeral directors understand embalming and the benefits that embalming might provide to a grieving family.

Our latest consumer data says that it is a 50-50 split as to whether the body is present at the memorial service. What are your thoughts?

Ennis: If your data shows that the consumers surveyed are split on the issue, then I have to accept those findings. It would be interesting to find out if these consumers were engaged by the funeral director to talk about decedent care and the opportunity for viewing before cremation.

I think it is important to understand that everyone will not want or select services that require embalming. That is all right. Our job as funeral directors is to present all of the options, all of the time, to each family we serve. This is no different than casket or urn selection. Once the family makes a selection from the merchandise that we have shown them, it is our job to support the decision that felt right to them at the time.

Simply stated, we can't make people want embalming and viewing; however, we need to make them aware of the benefits and then respect their decision.

This does go back to your previous question... if the deceased is not cared for properly, the family will not see the value for future decisions.

Edward Defort is editor of NFDA publications.

So You Want to Manage Your Employees' Cellphones and Social Media? Good Luck!

By William E. Ford

Many employees feel they must have their cellphones on at work so that their children (who might also have cellphones) can contact them. Leaving aside the obvious question of “What did you do a few years ago when there were no cellphones?” we still have other serious workplace issues, such as loss of productivity, medical patients who have to wait, photos or videos taken at work and posted online or shared with co-workers, retail customers who receive poor service, improper or sexually charged emails and sexting.

Some employers prohibit employees from bringing cellphones to work. Others have a policy prohibiting cellphones from being turned on at work. Still others allow them to be turned on but in the vibrate mode (the problem with this provision is that it is difficult to enforce and you still don't know what the employee is accessing online). If you allow cellphones to be used at work, some employees might abuse the privilege and use the phone for other reasons, such as making appointments, ordering groceries or, the “unkindest cut of all,” looking for another job – on your time.

From our seat as a management consultant, it's best not to allow cellphones at work if that policy is reasonable for your workplace.

And then came social media and social networking, giving people the ability to interact with others and perhaps reconnect with old friends or others with similar interests. Some of the more popular sites are Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. While not an actual social networking site, YouTube can also be a major source of employee problems at work. There is no cost to join and you have virtually unlimited access.

So what's the problem? Problems at work are legion and continue to evolve. For example, if someone writes on your “wall” or if some event occurs, such as a friend's birthday, Facebook can send a notification to your computer or smartphone.

Suppose a male supervisor of a female employee accesses her social networking page and sees pictures that are, shall we carefully say, “not work related.” The male supervisor then either writes on her wall or, in conversation with her the next day, tells her how much he likes her pictures. The employee feels threatened and “creeped out” and tells her mother, who just happens to know a personal-injury attorney, who then contacts both the company and the supervisor and... well, the story will most likely not end well.

Or suppose a disgruntled employee goes home from work one night, accesses his social networking site and writes on his wall, “My boss is a real jerk and this is the worst company I've ever



worked for. They treat me like a dog and don't pay me enough to live on.” The supervisor sees the post and promptly fires the employee. The employee then files an Unfair Labor Practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), claiming that the posting was “protected concerted activity” (under NLRB regulations, employees have the protected right to discuss wages, benefits and working conditions).

Or, again, suppose an employee, on the weekend, during non-work hours, visits an auto dealership to buy a car and has a bad experience. She tweets to her friends, “This is an awful dealership. They treated me rudely, lied to me and tried to charge me extra fees.” Trouble is, this auto dealership is a customer of the company for whom the employee works. The dealership hears about the tweet, gets a copy of it and cancels its account.

Or suppose two employees are horsing around at work and one of them makes an obscene gesture. It's all in good fun, except that a third employee was watching and took a video with his smartphone, which he then emailed to all of his friends, one of whom posted it on YouTube and... well, the employee is embarrassed and the public-relations fallout for the employer could be significant.

And you can imagine how much worse this could be if some kind of activity took place at a company party, where one or more employees had a few too many libations and one “playfully” engaged in some sort of sexual behavior, and there is another employee who took a video, sent it to friends, one of whom put it on YouTube... well, you know the rest.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The digital universe is still expanding, so we anticipate that other unexpected and undesired situations will evolve in the workplace. And management must be prepared to handle them. After all, this is what managers do. However, as one

manager told me, when you're up to your elbows in alligators, it's hard to remember that your main objective is to drain the swamp. And since there are lots of social networking alligators in the digital swamp, we strongly recommend that you have a comprehensive policy regarding social networking at work. Some of the provisions could include:

1. Prohibiting cellphones or smartphones at work or, if not prohibited, placing specific guidelines on their use.
2. Some employers have a designated phone line for family members to call in the event of an emergency.
3. Prohibit employees from using cellphones to take pictures or video at work.
4. Prohibit employees from accessing social networking sites at work, either on a cellphone or the computer.
5. Do not allow supervisors to access the social networking sites of their employees or to "friend" employees.
6. While we cannot prohibit an employee from posting any and all information, we can caution them to be prudent.
7. If the company has a Facebook or Twitter account, be sure to thoroughly train and advise the employee in charge of it with respect to the benefits, pitfalls and proper use of these media.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORKPLACE

Someone might rightly refer to the following statements as "a tremendous grasp of the obvious"; nevertheless, here we go... The proliferation of social media and social networking continues to move forward at warp speed, pushing ahead so fast that we can hardly keep up with it. News, messages, texts, emails, tweets – all instantaneous and mobile and all with great opportunity for good or ill. Ours is a digital society, and we know that the workplace mirrors society; that is, what's going on in society will, ultimately, make its way into the workplace. Thus, our employees now come to work armed with smartphones that include voracious social networking capabilities, not the least of which is the ubiquitous Facebook.

If employees use Facebook to talk about their own personal interests, that's one thing, but if they use Facebook to talk about work-related activities, all of a sudden we're in an entirely different arena because employees might post derogatory information about their employer, their work, their pay, their co-workers, their supervisor or their clients. If they post in this way, what can we, as employers, tell them and what restrictions can we require? The answer is very little and very few, owing to the NLRB's regulations on "protected concerted activity."

PROTECTED CONCERTED ACTIVITY ON FACEBOOK

For the most part, according to the NLRB, employees have the right to engage in "protected concerted activity," which is where two or more employees are discussing their wages, benefits and working conditions. Employees have the right to

engage in this activity and we, as employers, cannot prohibit it. An example would be where two or more employees discuss their pay rates with one another – employees have this right and employers are not allowed to have a policy prohibiting it. They have this right at work, at the water cooler, on the job and... on Facebook. As strange and objectionable as it seems, this right even extends to offensive language about the employer or the supervisor.

However, in order for the behavior to be "protected concerted activity," it must meet the following criteria: It must (1) concern wages, benefits and/or working conditions and (2) two or more employees must be involved. Thus, if an employee posts something to the effect of "My supervisor is a purple people-eater" and other employees respond with their own postings, then the behavior has met both criterion and is thus "protected concerted activity."

SESCO SUGGESTIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORKPLACE

From a human resources standpoint, the best recommendation is to leave the Facebook pages of employees alone as much as we can. We strongly recommend that supervisors not access the Facebook pages of their employees, not "friend" employees on Facebook (we know we're in trouble when a noun becomes a verb), not comment about the Facebook pages of employees and not post on the Facebook pages of employees. This is TWTH (trouble waiting to happen).

We also don't recommend an employment policy that instructs employees about proper posting on Facebook, as this moves us ever closer to the protected category. If absolutely necessary, a few words about caution and prudence might be all right, but in general terms, the less said about employees' personal Facebook pages, the better.

In addition, we recommend that you exercise extreme caution when considering whether to discipline or reprimand an employee for a personal Facebook posting. That's not to say it can't be done, but if it is done, we have to be very, very careful. We might come out ahead at the end of the day, but sometimes we can spend a lot of money proving we were right. I am reliably informed that when someone asked Coach Bear Bryant if he walked on water, he replied, "Well, I won't say that I do and I won't say that I don't. But if I do, I do it real early in the morning, when no one can see me."

The question of the use of smartphones at work is another similar issue. Some employers completely prohibit their use at work, while others allow restricted use. Without question, employees should not be allowed to use their smartphones to access any of the social networking sites while at work or to take pictures with their smartphone cameras, as this is another instance of TWTH.

William E. Ford is president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants in Bristol, Tennessee, an NFDA-endorsed provider for human resources.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Lest We Forget

By Shelby Ogozaly

Although the victims are laid to rest, the TV cameras non-existent, and the horror behind us, we will never forget the tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue, nor its victims.

The PIMS family felt helpless but were willing and prepared to assist in any way possible. The Ralph Schugar Chapel, only a few blocks from PIMS, handled most of the funerals. Their staff worked around the clock to provide service with dignity and care to all who perished in the shooting. We are proud of our alumni and all who assisted in the days following the horrific event.

PIMS Pride shone through again as one of our current students, Shelby Ogozaly, mentored by the funeral directing staff at Ralph Schugar Chapel, had the chance to assist in these endeavors. Ogozaly was gracious enough to share her experiences with her class and, again, with you. Please read her words below...

The Tree of Life Synagogue tragedy was a very devastating event that I hope to never experience again in my funeral directing career. It was an emotional week for everyone in the Jewish community, the funeral home, and the city of Pittsburgh. Throughout the course of the week, I had the opportunity to prepare the decedents, interact with the families, and experience what it is like to handle large funerals. I attended five of the nine funerals that were handled by the Ralph Schugar Chapel.

While working these funerals, I heard stories from people who were in the synagogue that day and I could see the fear and hurt within their eyes. To hear their stories was absolutely devastating to me because this was a terrible act that did not need to happen. I was also able to hear about the amazing lives that these people lead before this terrible tragedy. When the funerals came to an end, I felt as if I knew the victims based on the stories and pictures that were shared by the families.

Throughout this entire funeral process, I learned many valuable skills that I will carry with me into my future funeral career. The most important skill I learned was how to appropriately interact with the families of the victims. I learned to interact with the families through the areas of reassurance and comfort. I was approached by the family members of the victims with questions of uncertainty and worry at the funerals.

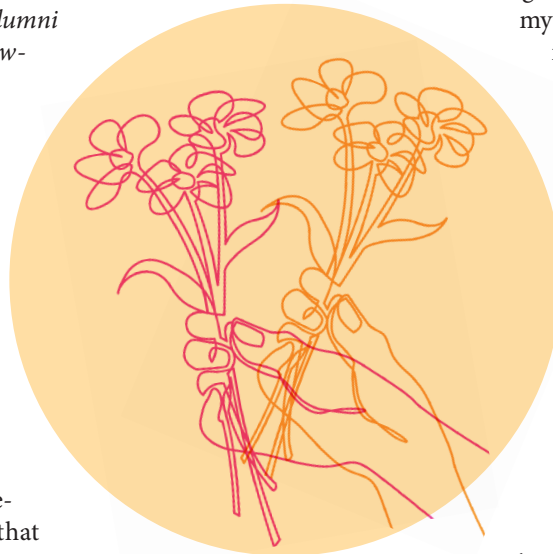
I made it a priority to reassure them that everything was being taken care of. I could tell that my assistance really made a difference in their lives and the weight on their shoulders was lifted; their worry turned into assurance.

This terrible tragedy also taught me that life is not guaranteed from day to day. You could be here today and gone tomorrow. Overall, I have learned to appreciate life a lot more through this experience because in the wise words of one of the victim's family members, "You do not know what you have until it's gone."

The only positive thing to come out of this terrible event was the community support of the victims, their families and the funeral home. The victim's families were greeted by many people throughout the community. A lot of people did not know the families personally but generally wanted to show their support during this difficult time. The community also reached out to the funeral home by calling to see if we were okay, and businesses within the community donated food each day because they knew we were too busy to go out for lunch.

#STRONGERTHANHATE

Shelby Ogozaly works at the Ralph Schugar Chapel and will graduate the PIMS diploma program in January 2019. She plans to continue her studies to earn a PIMS associate degree. She is from Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania.



From the Editor's Desk...

The Untapped Power of the Obituary

I worked my way through college on an internship and also as a “stringer” for local publications. A stringer is just a freelancer who usually gets called in to cover the lesser municipal meetings – just in case something would happen. More often than not, nothing did. But it was good training for a journalist, forcing me to come up with stories from each of these meetings.

My first journalism class even focused on the obituary. I remember my first assignment was to write my own obituary. I remember little about what I wrote except for the phrase, “he is survived by his wife, Olivia Newton-John.”

After several years of covering municipal council meetings, planning board meetings and zoning board meetings, I graduated and settled in for my first real newsroom job, diploma in hand. For most new graduates like me, the first assignment was the obituary desk, where I would routinely speak with funeral directors. The conversations followed a pretty standard form, and I'd have been hard-pressed to say that any of them at the time demonstrated any degree of creativity.

Years later, after I made my way into covering funeral service full time, I heard more about these creative obituaries that went a long way toward painting a picture of the deceased and could even change the mood at visitations. At least that's what I had experienced on a couple of occasions when someone I knew had died and what the family included in the paper was a little different than most. In fact, I can clearly recall on one occasion where the obituary was pretty much a focal point of conversation at the visitation.

Last week, while scanning Google alerts, I happened upon an obituary that included the following: “...No calling hours will be held. A private service will be held at the convenience of the family.” I don't know which term caused me to recoil more – “no calling hours” or “convenience.”

This is phraseology I had never experienced in my early journalism days on the obituary desk. While such a circumstance is certainly nothing new, it's disheartening to see it in the obituary itself.

In casual conversations I have today with funeral directors, the consensus is that this is happening all too often. Families must be encouraged to be a little more creative and directors should let them know that this notice to the public should not be overlooked.

Death has never been about convenience. That's a strange concept to learn, and I suspect it will be even more difficult for families to unlearn it.

Ed. Edward J. Defort
Editor

*in loving
memory*

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