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Lessons From The Departed

Former funeral directors candidly share their reasons for leaving the profession.

Introduction by Allyse R. Worland

“Since I was 9, all I had dreamed about was going to mortuary school. I feel in my heart that I will always stay in funeral service.”

Those two sentences are an excerpt of the reflection I wrote during the end of my time in mortuary school. I believe we all shared that same sentiment on graduation day.

I remember that experience with perfect clarity. It was a beautiful autumn morning as we stood for pictures in our caps and gowns. Each of us beamed with excitement to begin working toward our funeral director licenses.

Yet, with each passing year, a few of us stepped away from

We were so excited to begin working. Yet, with each passing year, a few of us left funeral service.



the profession. Unfortunately, this experience is not unique, and many of us have observed this same occurrence. Naturally, this raises the question of why so many people are making their exit from the funeral service profession.

The following accounts are written by two former funeral directors willing to share their stories about why they chose to walk away from the profession. The authors, who have chosen to remain anonymous, hope that their insights and experiences will shed some light on the growing issue of retention in funeral service. The goal is to create a clearer picture of how we can help prevent others from leaving the profession.

TALE 1: THE PERSONAL TOLL

Growing up, I never planned on using my degrees. College was a required step, but I was going to follow my passions. I got my bachelor's in history and wrote my undergraduate capstone on Christian preparations for death during the Black Death, never guessing that I would be involved in a modern plague.

Back then, I'd talk to classmates about death in the Middle Ages, and they'd talk about death in the modern era, funerals they went to, if they wanted to be cremated, etc. When I was looking for a career change a few years after college, I reflected on these conversations and thought, "I could do that."

A few weeks later, I started working at a crematory. I was fascinated. I consumed every bit of information I could, in books and YouTube videos, before going to mortuary school.

There isn't much information available, however, but I was going to change that. I wanted to be an educator within the field and out in the community. I was passionate in school – maybe annoying some of the other students – but I wasn't going to let their opinions weigh me down.

After mortuary school, I was given a great opportunity for an apprenticeship, so I packed up and moved to a place I would have never imagined to begin the process.

Over the years, I was given opportunities beyond embalming, directing and cremating. I was regularly out in the community, talking to groups about the funeral process, grief and the funeral service career as a whole. I was attending many funeral service events regularly. I worked with the local community college as a lab preceptor and assisted in training the apprentice that joined the firm after me. I sought continuing education in every form and, because of that, I was often working with difficult embalming and restorative cases.

Long-term, I was looking for upward mobility, so I asked to be lead of the onsite crematory, which happened in practice but never formally. I also came up with a different management plan, with the help of mentors from mortuary school, to modernize our smaller, secondary location and offer different services for the changing community in that area. The owner of the firm often supported my ideas, but the manager vetoed each of those plans, limiting my promotion within the firm. He was a bit old-school, and I was considered an outsider.

During the pandemic, the things I was doing in the community came to an abrupt end. We needed all hands on deck, so we split into two teams to reduce the risk of staff infecting each other. Our skeleton crew of three were putting in longer days than ever before. We were in a small town, and the three of us on my team managed to handle 30 decedents in a week.

The town (or state or region) didn't seem to be taking lockdowns or mask wearing seriously, yet every day, I saw the damaging effects of the infection on my embalming table. My mentor had Thanksgiving with their family and then spent time in the hospital, leaving all of us wondering if they would be our next COVID-19-related death call.

I didn't go home for Christmas. I went over a year without seeing my family. I was faced with near daily exposure and cautioned to isolate. I could no longer do the things that attracted me to the field in the first place. We could barely connect with the families sitting across from us at arrangements. There was no option to meet people and be the death-care ambassador I wanted to be. The priority became crisis

response. It felt operational, not helpful or emotionally fulfilling, as we just tried to survive and keep everything moving forward.

In 2021, the funeral home brought in a crisis counselor and a minister who worked as a team to talk to us about the mental health effects of this sustained crisis. I stayed after to continue talking to them when I was told that my isolation, although recommended for physical health, was concerning from a mental health aspect.

I had given everything I could to this job, and I just had nothing left to give. I had reached my limit.

As I drove home, I was trying to find a way to take care of everything, everyone and myself. About an hour after leaving the funeral home, I got a death call. I couldn't manage to get myself together to go. I had reached my limit. I had given everything I could to this job, and I just had nothing left to give. I could no longer put my needs aside to serve the community after realizing it was at the expense of myself.

I had no idea what I was going to do after I finished at the funeral home. It took months to get back on my feet. I was proactive and had been talking to a counselor, but it wasn't until I was out that I actually realized how bad my mental health had gotten. I struggled with derealization and checked a lot of boxes toward a PTSD diagnosis.

I think there's a reason people don't stay in these traumatic jobs long. We (people, humans) weren't made to see the terrible things that we see on the job; to not cry with the people around us; to think so rationally in times of crisis.

After picking myself up by the bootstraps, I moved and got a boring corporate job. I'm no longer put in potentially dangerous and traumatizing situations. I work a hybrid schedule and am paid better. My PTO schedule is respected, I am not on call, and I don't worry about my work when I leave for the day.

I am no longer defined by my work and I can live a life outside of my career. I still talk about funeral service in my social circles, and hey, maybe I am using my degree in a way – I work in accounting now.

TALE 2: SERVICE, NOT SACRIFICE

I have been a licensed funeral director and embalmer since 2019. I started my mortuary science journey in 2016 when I began working for a funeral home in my community as a wake attendant. During this time, I also sat in on arrangements and assisted with embalming and removals.

Prior to joining funeral service, I had worn many hats. I originally went to school for journalism and then moved on to working as a pastry chef, a pharmacy technician, a waitress and in multiple retail jobs. I even took time out of my



On a lark, I stumbled onto the YouTube series “Ask a Mortician” and was introduced to the funeral service industry. I was entranced. Here was a career that checked every box I was looking for. And the information was being presented to me by a woman? Incredible.

Until this point, I had never thought about funeral service. I hadn’t experienced much loss in my life, and death is not a topic discussed very much in our society. We all know everyone dies, but little thought is given to what happens to us and our bodies after our passing. It is considered taboo, frightening and macabre to discuss this in polite company.

Discovering “Ask a Mortician” had really opened my eyes (and mind) to a world I didn’t even know existed. I instantly went down the rabbit hole of funeral service content. I checked out every book in the library about funeral service, including the controversial *The American Way of Death* by Jessica Mitford, and read them all. I made a trip to a mortuary college and met with the staff to discuss the education I would receive.

“This is it,” I felt, “the missing piece!”

In all of my homework, I also learned a bit about certain aspects of the funeral industry that I hoped to change. Despite the female voices I was hearing, much of the representation in funeral service came from men. Some of the postings I found online regarding the field were, dare I say it, hateful to anyone who might have any ideas that run outside of what tradition suggests. I shrugged this off and thought that this had to be on the way out. After all, a majority of my class was made up of women. There had to be a change on the horizon.

I loved my time in mortuary school. I learned so much information that would be invaluable to me in my career. I made many friends that I know I will have for life. Several of my classmates attended my wedding; one was my maid of honor, another my “something blue.”

I felt so inspired to help families in their time of need and to gain trust in my community. It was a pleasant surprise and inspiring to be surrounded by so many women who were pursuing the same dream as me. I couldn’t wait to graduate, join the workforce and make positive change in the field.

Since graduating, I have worked for five different firms in

mortuary studies to work at Walt Disney World, but that’s another story.

I grew tired of just having “jobs.” I wanted a *career*, something I could attach my name to and be proud of. I wanted to finish my education. I had earned my associate degree, but I wanted more.

two states. Out of those five firms, only one made me feel like I truly belonged and was an important and integral part of the team. Sure, they all sold me on the idea that “first and foremost, we are here for the families,” but only one lived up to that expectation. I only left them because of my desire to move back home to be closer to my family.

The other four firms left much to be desired. My loyalty to the company was questioned because I didn’t root for the local college football team, and I visited home every available weekend. I got a talking-to because “those pants don’t match that jacket.” I listened as a colleague outed an applicant to a firm as being transgender, resulting in the applicant not being hired despite being more than qualified.

I received countless accolades, praise and thank-you cards from families in the community but was called into a meeting with my manager because I had a photo of my boyfriend (now husband) at my desk, and that is distracting to families. Despite having families requesting my services specifically, and despite consistently going out of my way for families (ask me about the numerous themed funerals I’ve planned), it was never enough.

Add to that the long hours of work for little pay, no breaks, poor benefits and no union to stand up for you. It was time to go. For a field that cares very much about what families think, they certainly don’t take their opinions into consideration.

Since graduating, I have worked for five firms in two states. Only one made me feel like I truly belonged.

Regrettably, the industry has become more about appearances and ego than truly serving families. The “we’ve always done it this way” camp has won out and the folks who truly want to help families in need are losing.

Go to any online forum and see how many firms are looking for people to work for them so they can retire, yet they don’t want to pay wages to reflect the work involved. There are no replacements. Until the current leaders in the field wake up and realize “the times they are a-changin’,” there will be no one to fill the empty seats.

I would love to return to funeral service, but it would take a lot for me to get back there. I very deeply loved serving families, but I won’t devalue myself and who I am in the process.

Allyse Worland, CFSP, is a first-generation funeral director and embalmer in Indianapolis, Indiana, who is also licensed in Kentucky. She holds a bachelor’s degree in funeral service management, is an InSight-certified celebrant and holds a certificate in thanatology for end-of-life professionals.

Writing a New Script For the Future of Funeral Service

The importance of recognizing the potential of local microtrends, leveraging data and understanding broader societal shifts.

By Julia Prout

Unearthing my great-grandfather's files from 1924 feels like exhuming a forgotten era. The files themselves are startlingly thin, a testament to bygone days when a handshake sealed the deal. As the decades progress, the files thicken with paperwork, contracts, authorizations, disclaimers.

But beneath the legalese lies a hidden story: the metamorphosis of funeral service in our North Jersey community. This journey through time isn't just about dusty documents; it's a poignant reflection on how we, as a profession, adapted to societal changes to continue honoring and celebrating life's final chapter.

Those early funeral records were like carbon copies of each other: *wake at home*, *Requiem Mass*, *cemetery burial*. It was a familiar script echoing the customs of our community. But history, as they say, is rarely static. Wakes migrated to the funeral home, reflecting changing lifestyles. Our chapels welcomed mourners from diverse religious backgrounds, testament to our evolving society. New forms of disposition, such as cremation and natural burial, gained traction.

I would like to think that the future is not about clinging to a fading script but embracing the freedom to write a new one, together.

By 2018, when I joined the profession as a licensed funeral director, the old script was more of an adaptable framework. Families craved personalization, weaving unique stories into traditional threads. Yet a certain flow remained: *visitation*, *service*, *final disposition*. It was a comforting rhythm, familiar though not rigid.

Then, the 2020 COVID pandemic hit and life changed in the blink of an eye. My social geographer's eye saw the societal shifts brewing, but the funeral director in me was



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stunned by the sheer pace of change. Services shrank, and we quickly pivoted to virtual services, livestreaming across continents, and connecting families scattered by circumstance.

As we have accepted a new normal, the traditional script lies crumpled in the corner. The very definition of "traditional" seems to have undergone a transformation. It's an exciting and, at times, slightly unnerving prospect, this blank page before us. What will the future hold? I would like to think that perhaps it's not about clinging to a fading script but embracing the freedom to write a new one, together.

While topics such as sustainability, tech integration and hyper-personalization headline the discourse on the future of funeral service, I am drawn to the quieter shifts, the subtle murmurs echoing just beneath the surface.

Having entered the field well after cremation's rise, I've witnessed the consequences of playing catch-up. In its earlier days, cremation was viewed as a fringe choice, easily dismissed. We neglected to recognize its significance, clinging to the perceived value of traditional services in a transforming landscape. The lesson learned? Overlooking subtle trends can leave us scrambling, desperately trying to explain our worth in a reshaped world.

Imagine future generations inheriting a profession crippled by resistance to change. We stand at a tipping point, and the choices we make today will shape the future. Let's shed the reactive mindset and become proactive microtrend hunters, embracing the whispers before they become roars.

In navigating the funeral service landscape, our success lies in proactive anticipation and adaptation rather than reactive responses. We can begin by understanding small shifts in our local communities, laying the foundation for resilience.

Extending our focus to national trends through data provided by reports such as NFDA's annual consumer preferences study allows us to move beyond catch-up, aligning our services with emerging expectations. Additionally, recognizing the broader societal shift from a product-driven to an ex-



perience-driven economy is integral. By mastering the art of anticipation and adaptation at both micro and macro levels, we can position ourselves as pioneers shaping the future of funeral service in sync with families' evolving needs.

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

Taking a proactive approach hinges on actively listening and keenly observing our local communities. For those of us born and raised in the communities we serve, there's much to learn by stepping back and closely examining shifting values, lifestyles and attitudes. Even in my hometown, blessed with a retained sense of small-town charm, the wants and needs of our community have evolved with each generation.

What unspoken needs surface in conversations with families? What innovative rituals are gaining prominence? How are cultural and environmental concerns shaping choices? Delving into the values, lifestyles and attitudes of our community members serves as a compass, guiding us toward emerging trends. By attuning ourselves to these micro-trends, we transform from bystanders to innovators, ensuring that our services remain relevant and meaningful.

Turning observations into actionable insights doesn't require an anthropology degree. It's about becoming an astute observer in your own community and asking the right questions. For example, concerning faith and beliefs in your community, consider these questions:

- Are houses of worship buzzing or facing declining attendance?
- Are interfaith families more prevalent? How do diverse religious traditions influence funeral preferences?
- Is there a growing interest in nontraditional rituals or philosophies around death, such as meditation or mindfulness practices?
- Are there ways to adapt your space and/or service offerings to accommodate these shifts?

When it comes to lifestyle shifts in your area, ask yourself the following:

- Do health food stores and farmers' markets thrive, indicating an eco-conscious mindset? Are there fairs dedicated to sustainability or health and wellness? Could this translate to interest in green burials or sustainable funeral options?
- Are there unique, nontraditional community events celebrating life, such as outdoor gatherings or art installations? Could these inspire personalized memorial services or alternative venues?

For even greater insights, undertake some of the following actions:

- Engage in local conversations with faith leaders, community organizers and businesses catering to emerging trends. Ask about changes they've observed and listen to their unique perspectives.
- Host focus groups with diverse community members for open discussions about their evolving needs and preferences regarding funerals. Feedback from different demographic groups is invaluable.
- Collaborate with local partners, such as health food stores or sustainability groups, to host a "green fair," where you can educate the community on eco-friendly funeral services and products, or work with local artists to create personalized memorials. These collaborations showcase your commitment to evolving with your community and customizing your services to meet their needs.

Remember, this is just a starting point. Adapt these questions and observations to your community's nuances. By actively listening and adapting, you become a leader in meeting your neighbors' needs and shaping the future of funerals in your area. But again, crucially, *don't underestimate the microtrends.*

By actively listening and adapting, you become a leader in shaping the future of funerals in your area.

MICROTRENDS AND DATA

In his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell examines how a small group of individuals can instigate significant transformations. He illustrates this phenomenon through the example of Hush Puppies, the comfortable loafer that was on the verge of being discontinued in the 1990s but saw a resurgence when a small group of young adults in the East Village embraced them, ultimately influencing fashion trends and skyrocketing sales. Gladwell emphasizes how seemingly inconsequential actions can yield substantial consequences.

The book, published in 2000, foreshadowed today's world, in which various forms of communication such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook enable like-minded individuals from across the globe to connect swiftly. In today's interconnected world, a spark of an idea or trend can quickly ignite and spread, which is why we would be wise not to ignore trends developing on a national level.

If you're reading this publication, you're likely aware that NFDA releases a treasure trove of insights through its annual Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study. This large-scale, national survey serves as a compass for our industry, offering invaluable information about evolving needs, emerging trends and the expectations of families.

The most recent report, which indicated a 60% interest in sustainable funerals, serves as a stark reminder that ignoring microtrends can have consequences. We've seen it before – dismissing “green funerals” as a fad only to realize the demand was very real. What other whispers are we not hearing?

We have a choice. We can dismiss or shrug off emerging trends, or we can seize the opportunity to become trusted guides in an evolving landscape.

Another compelling finding reveals that 53.1% of respondents said they have attended services outside traditional venues, with 15.6% specifically mentioning attending a home-based service. While it was unclear if these were memorial services or full funerals, the finding parallels the rise of the “home funeral movement” on platforms such as Facebook, which informs and empowers individuals to host funerals at home. Could this be a microtrend with the potential to reshape the industry down the road, akin to the Hush Puppy resurgence of the 1990s?

We have a choice. We can dismiss nontraditional preferences and shrug off emerging trends, or we can seize the opportunity to become trusted guides in this evolving landscape. Envision transforming into a resource for sustainable options, providing support for home funerals, and forming partnerships with local businesses to meet changing needs in our communities. Embracing these trends, no matter how small, positions us not only as custodians of tradition but as forward-thinking leaders navigating the diverse and evolving preferences of those we serve.

But why stop there? Let's up the ante and take our analysis another step. To fully anticipate families' needs and desires, we must grasp the larger societal forces shaping consumer behavior. This journey leads us to the “Ford economy” versus “Starbucks economy” framework explored by Mark

Penn and Kinney Zalesne in their 2007 book *Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes*. Understanding this paradigm shift is fundamental as it sheds light on the underlying values and priorities driving today's consumers. (Yes, that includes funeral consumers.)

In the past, the funeral industry operated much like a Ford production line. Standardized services, often built around religious traditions, were offered, with little room for personalization. This approach mirrored the “Ford economy,” where mass production of identical products ruled the day.

But similar to the rise of specialty coffee shops, consumer preferences are shifting toward personalization and experience. In this new “Starbucks economy,” people expect products and services tailored to their unique needs, tastes and desires.

Likewise, the cookie-cutter funeral is no longer enough. Families now seek services that reflect the individuality of their loved ones. They want ceremonies that celebrate life and incorporate personal touches and unique experiences. This aligns perfectly with the “Starbucks economy” mindset.

We should look beyond standardized packages and become experts in crafting personalized experiences that resonate deeply with each family. This could involve incorporating the deceased's hobbies, passions or cultural heritage into the ceremony. It could mean offering flexible service options – from outdoor celebrations in nature to intimate gatherings in homes.

In just my six years of licensure, I've helped multiple families break the mold by hosting full funerals in unexpected locations such as meadows, filled with live music and vibrant, catered celebrations. At times, all I could think was, “We never learned this in mortuary school!” Nonetheless, the end result was more than a moving event – each funeral was a deeply powerful and visceral *experience*.

This concept of prioritizing experiences tracks with the mindset of the future funeral consumer, the millennial. A report published by ticketing agency Eventbrite found that 3 in 4 millennials (78% of respondents) would rather spend money on experiences versus material things.

It is important to note that this trend is taking root across all generations. As Blake Morgan, a self-described “customer experience futurist,” wrote in a 2019 article for Forbes.com:

A staggering 74% of Americans prioritize experiences over products. The focus on experiences is closely related to the growth of the sharing and experience economy... Millennials may be leading the experience-first trend, but they aren't the only group participating in it. As many Baby Boomers enter retirement, they fall into the “less is more” mentality and put more value on relationships and experiences than things. Clearly, this isn't a trend that will be going away any time soon.

REMAINING “FUTURE READY”

In school, we were often taught that a beautiful casket and surrounding accoutrements create the “memory picture,” aiding people through their grief journey. But to remain rel-

evant and future-ready, it's crucial to acknowledge the shift from a product-driven economy to an experience-driven one. Our websites, the spaces where arrangements are made, and our overall attitudes must reflect this transformation.

The new value proposition lies in our capacity to serve as a resource not only in deathcare but in end-of-life care, shepherding families through hospice resources, caregiver support groups and mental-health resources. To excel, we must be a wealth of information, guiding families and creating an experience that goes beyond the traditional, leaving a lasting and meaningful impression.

The future of funeral service lies not in our ability to respond to the obvious changes after they rise to the surface but in our capacity to anticipate them.

As I return to digitizing my great-grandfather's early records, I am hopeful that, like those files, future records will tell a story of adaptability, innovation and a profession that

continues to honor and celebrate life's final chapter. Standing at a tipping point, we have the freedom to write a new script for the future. By recognizing the potential of local microtrends, leveraging NFDA data and understanding the broader societal shifts, funeral service has the opportunity to shape an authentic, meaningful and personalized future for the industry.

By remaining receptive to evolving preferences and cultivating experiences that transcend tradition, funeral directors can be trusted guides in this dynamic and ever-changing landscape. Let us boldly pioneer this path, championing adaptability, personalized experiences and exceptional service to honor the legacy of the past while propelling ourselves into the limitless possibilities of the future.

Julia Prout is a fourth-generation funeral director at Prout Funeral Home in Verona, New Jersey.



Origin Story

By Joao G. Pozzi Arcaro

Editor's note: Last year in this publication, we cast a net into the funeral service education waters to ask students why they chose this particular career path. Here, we present another student who shares his origin story.



JOAO G. POZZI ARCARO

I was first introduced to this field in 2012 while I was a sociology student at Université Lumière Lyon II in France. It all started with a challenging assignment for my sociological inquiry and research course, which was based on the broad subject of "the body."

This presumably unclear instruction intrigued my keen interest. While my peers investigated health, beauty and the relationship between the body and essence, I headed into a field that received less attention: the study of dead bodies. As I reflected about the idea that a body is a body even after death, the concept began taking shape. With permission from the professor, I started a research project that was different from the course's main themes and centered on the deceased.

I was introduced to the fascinating world of funerary practices through this immersion program. Eager to learn,

investigate and actively participate, I soon realized that the funeral industry exudes more vitality than morbidity. In a profound realization, I recognized that for every deceased person, there were approximately 25 living individuals involved, including pallbearers, funeral directors, embalmers, physicians, nurses, family, friends – even entire communities mourning the passing of significant figures.

This revelation made me appreciate the importance of funerary practices and the impact they have on the lives of the living. In essence, my experience highlighted the importance of every single person involved in the process. At the heart of the funeral industry lies a remarkable energy and dedication that has fascinated me – one that motivated me to pursue this unconventional yet deeply satisfying career path.

What amazed me most was the great number of people involved in organizing a funeral and their unwavering commitment to serving the community with the utmost care. From handling the initial removal to overseeing the final moments at the cemetery, or any other chosen resting place, the comprehensive involvement from start to finish led me to this engagement and commitment based on the collective effort put forth to better serve the community.

Joao G. Pozzi Arcaro is a funeral services administration student at SUNY Canton, New York.

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Bridging Generational Divides in The Funeral Industry

By Melissa A. Cyfers



It is no secret that the landscape of funeral service is evolving faster than ever. Whether we embrace the changes or buck them, we can probably all agree that some changes are more profound and unexpected than others.

One such transformation involves the aging baby boomer generation. In mortuary college in 1995, the instructors touted our future job security as funeral professionals because we would eventually become the funeral directors and managing partners taking care of an aging baby boomer generation as its members reached the end of life.

In addition to this increase in the need for funeral services, there would also be the need for industry succession because these same boomers owned and/or managed the funeral homes and would want to retire. This is indeed happening right now.

The baby boomer generation – those born between 1946 and 1964 – is one of the largest cohorts in human history. As this generation ages, the funeral industry is witnessing a surge in demand for funeral services. The sheer number of boomers reaching the end of their lives has led to a significant increase in deaths and, subsequently, the need for funeral directors. The global COVID-19 pandemic only compounded the need.

At the same time, a new generation is entering the funeral industry. Younger individuals, often characterized by their forward-thinking attitudes and adaptability, are choosing careers as funeral directors. This shift brings a fresh perspec-

tive to the profession, with new ideas and approaches to funeral services.

Unfortunately, this generational gap can create a clash between the old and the new in the funeral industry. Baby boomers, who may have traditional views on death and funeral practices, might find it challenging to relate to the methods and perspectives of younger funeral directors. Conversely, younger funeral directors might struggle to navigate the established norms and expectations of their older co-workers.

Change will always be on the horizon, but the important part is to address that change. This article offers a few positive suggestions for bridging the gap between generations.

The first to enhance working relationships between younger and older generations involves education and training programs. It is important to implement educational programs that facilitate mutual understanding between generations within the funeral industry. It is equally important to encourage continuous learning for both seasoned professionals and newcomers so they can stay updated on evolving funeral practices.

Another very important yet often overlooked program focuses on cultural sensitivity training, which should be offered to funeral directors to ensure that they can cater to diverse needs and beliefs. This also brings staff together and fosters an environment that values and respects various cultural practices related to death and mourning.

The younger generation is generally more technologically sound than the older generation. The former grew up turning in assignments on their iPads and streaming their favorite shows. Technology integration is a large piece that can be worked into funeral service to cater to the preferences of the younger generation. Thus, younger workers can assist

with developing online platforms for funeral planning, live-streaming services and virtual memorials to accommodate changing preferences.

It is important to establish mentorship pairings, but the pairing should encourage an exchange of ideas to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Next, while it is primarily thought that mentorship involves an older person mentoring a younger person, remember that mentor programs can work both ways. It is important to establish mentorship programs that pair experienced funeral directors with newcomers, but this pairing should encourage an exchange of ideas and experiences to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. Often, the mentality of “out with the old and in with the new” is the charge for change, but here, both generations can benefit from the other. While some traditions might be worth clinging to, perhaps it is time for others to go.

Community engagement can serve as another path to bridge the gap. Community events not only bring together directors and the families they serve, but they also bring together directors with wide differences in their ages. These types of events can create opportunities for open dialogue, which

further helps bridge the gap and dispel misconceptions.

Finally, it is time for the funeral industry to take a page from the Kurt Lewin playbook. He was a German-American psychologist who laid the groundwork for the scholar-practitioner model. This approach is key to the future success of the funeral service industry and would take the apprenticeship model to the next level.

Here’s how it would work. After students have received their formal education in mortuary science, funeral directing and a base in psychology, they would be mentored during their apprenticeship service. The mentoring should focus on integrating theory and practice. There really is no substitute for hands-on, real-world learning in both embalming techniques and the arrangement conference.

The scholar-practitioner model contributes to individual development, organizational success and the advancement of knowledge in the funeral industry. It also promotes a culture of learning and collaboration between both generations. It’s time we use the generational gap as a bridge to benefit both individuals and society as a whole.

The convergence of the boomer generation’s departure from funeral service and the emergence of a new wave of funeral directors present both challenges and opportunities. By fostering understanding, embracing change and implementing positive strategies, the funeral industry can navigate this transition smoothly, ensuring that the future of funeral service is both respectful of tradition and adaptable to the evolving needs of society.

Melissa A. Cyfers is executive director of the West Virginia Funeral Directors & Crematory Operators Association.

Glitter, Grief and Growth: Helping the LGBTQ+ Community Die With Dignity

By Gabrielle Willis and Marc A. Markell, Ph.D.

The LGBTQ+ community encounters specific challenges in both end-of-life and post-death care. Recent recognition aims to expand advocacy for these important matters. This article examines the needs of LGBTQ+ people in preneed and at-need deathcare, the multiple identities of LGBTQ+ people and how religion plays a part in the end-of-life and post-death care experience.

LGBTQ+ people, in preneed and at-need deathcare, need to be discussed, and the funeral director needs to help them feel seen, acknowledged, safe and respected. Some funeral directors might believe that the pre- and post-death needs of LGBTQ+ people are the same as other arrangements. However, there might be some unique elements that LGBTQ+ people have that need to be understood and respected.

What the public might see with LGBTQ+ people are Pride parades, glitter and celebration. While that is certainly part of it, this community is much more complex. Part of this complexity involves a general mistrust of anyone who LGBTQ+ people believe to be in a position of power. This is not an

Funeral directors need to help LGBTQ+ people feel seen, acknowledged, safe and respected.

unwarranted mistrust, as many have been treated badly by those in authority.

Another notable aspect of this community is the potential for an individual's conflicted relationship with their family of origin. Individuals might face disagreements within their family about how they should live as an LGBTQ+ person. This conflict can extend to decisions related to death and dying. Therefore, understanding the unique dynamics of individual families is vital in providing appropriate and compassionate care to LGBTQ+ individuals.

If the LGBTQ+ person is legally married, or if the person has a legal document assigning an agent to make decisions after death, the spouse or legal agent will be given rights to decide for the person who died. However, if the funeral director is meeting with a legally unmarried same-sex couple, or a survivor of such a relationship, and the couple does not have a legal document appointing an agent, then the surviving partner is not legally considered next of kin and cannot make decisions. Everyone needs to be proactive about their planning around end-of-life and post-death wishes, but this is especially important for LGBTQ+ people.

Everyone, including LGBTQ+ people, has multiple identities. The community's cultural diversity in the United States spans different beliefs about death based on various factors, such as where the person lives, traditions from their family of origin, religion, income level, race, sex and ethnicity. These factors, along with an LGBTQ+ identity, influence end-of-life and post-death attitudes and decisions. For example, a person who identifies as lesbian Korean-American and lives in an urban area might have very different beliefs and needs concerning death and dying than a person who is gay, German and living in a rural area. The important thing for funeral directors is to listen

A notable aspect of this community is the potential for conflicted relationships with their family of origin.



carefully to what the person says during a preneed conference, or when making arrangements at an at-need arrangement, and how they want to honor the deceased individual.

Religion can bring comfort or condemnation to LGBTQ+ people. Most in the community have childhood ties to some religion. According to Pew Research Center, as with the U.S. general population, LGBTQ+ adults with a religious affiliation are primarily Christian.

Progressive faith communities bring affirmation and acceptance to LGBTQ+ people, while other more traditional communities might send the message that people need to be cisgender and heterosexual to be included in the community. Some religions accept LGBTQ+ people if they remain celibate and accept the church's teaching, which might include LGBTQ+ people having a "strong tendency to sin."

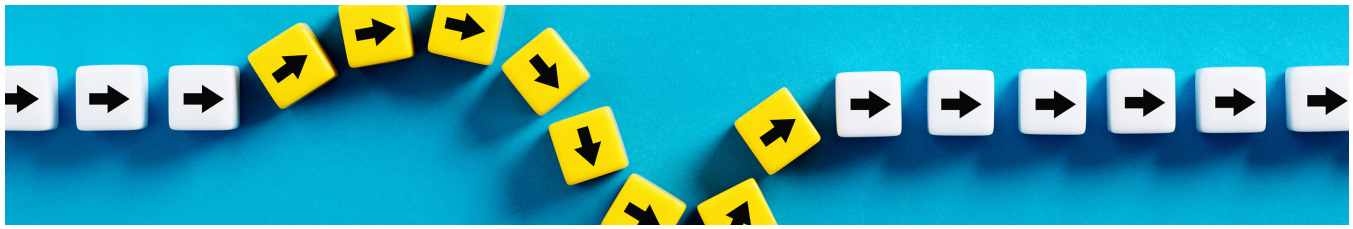
There is a glaring lack of inquiry into the afterlife beliefs in the LGBTQ+ community. Many individuals decide to leave organized religion, but whatever decision a person makes, it plays a part in the end-of-life and post-death care experience.

Acknowledging and addressing the diverse needs of the LGBTQ+ community is very important. Funeral directors must strive to be informed, sensitive and inclusive, making sure that individuals from this community receive the respectful and compassionate care everyone deserves.

Religion can bring either comfort or condemnation to LGBTQ+ people. Most in the community have childhood ties to some religion.

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From No to Now: How to Make (Almost) Everyone Like Change

By Welton Hong

We just can't help ourselves. When it comes to our parents, sports team coaches and even bosses, we can't stop ourselves from thinking about how we would've done things differently if it were us. You'd have let yourself have a cellphone earlier, play the big game with that minor ankle injury, or complete that project your boss scrapped.

And when the time comes for you to become a parent, sports team coach, boss or other leader (and maybe it already has), that speculation materializes and you're eager to make changes.

While our ideas about what's best don't always pan out how we expect, you might be feeling a familiar ambition as you prepare to enter the funeral service profession. It's that same "hunger for better" you'll harness to propel deathcare forward and save old-school firms from falling behind.

As students of mortuary science, maybe you've already had a chance to observe the mistakes and successes of your predecessors, determined your likes and dislikes, and know exactly what you want to do differently. Or, maybe you're stashing a wealth of innovative ideas no one has even tried to implement that you can't wait to introduce.

I, for one, can't wait to find out. I'll be frank: "This is the way we've always done it" just doesn't cut it anymore. (Did it ever?)

With societal shifts, technological advancements and changing preferences, I encourage you to not just see this as your opportunity to impact change, but as your responsibility.

In this article, I share an approach to making (almost) everyone like – or at least accept – changes to ensure venerable firms remain relevant, responsive and resonant with the needs of today's families. While you might be met with a wall of resistance, I strongly recommend you give it the old college try. I've got a few tips for that, too.

WHY CHANGE?

The funeral service industry is steeped in tradition, providing comfort and familiarity to those grieving. That might even be what attracted you to this profession in the

first place, but as we've all learned (or certainly should've by now), change is necessary for growth. That's why I believe the first step to keeping an old-school firm from falling behind is recognizing evolution is not just beneficial but necessary – and making others see it, too.

To successfully make that argument, education is your ally. Begin by educating your team and the families you serve about the benefits of integrating new practices. Highlight how these changes can enhance the service provided, making it more personal, meaningful and, in some cases, more accessible. Communication should be ongoing, transparent and empathetic, addressing concerns and illustrating the value of adaptation through case studies and real-life examples.

Remember, change doesn't need to happen all at once. Radical changes are overwhelming and typically meet the most resistance. Instead, opt for incremental innovation. Introduce new services or technologies one step at a time, allowing everyone to adjust and see the benefits gradually. This approach reduces the shock to the system and the initial "no" becomes less definitive as confidence in new methods grows.

Radical changes are overwhelming and typically meet the most resistance. Instead, opt for incremental innovation.

IS IT EVEN WORTH IT?

Knowing what changes are worth making is as important as how to make them. In other words, if it's not broken, don't fix it.

But whether we like it or not, one thing that's constantly changing is technology. Hello, Open AI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini. While you don't have to dive headfirst into

artificial intelligence (AI) specifically, adapting to technology is practically non-negotiable.

The reality is that technology can be a game changer for traditional funeral homes. It's a key tool to help ensure old-school firms not only survive but thrive in the modern era. From online memorial services, digital guestbooks and virtual-reality experiences that celebrate the life of a loved one, technology offers numerous ways to enhance traditional services.

So, if you know you'd like to implement new technology (whatever it is), start with one or two technological integrations and build from there. And if you want that to go over well with all involved parties, I suggest you always focus on how these tools can improve the experience for the most important party involved: grieving families.

Because of AI, there's a plethora of new opportunities for personalization and customization, in addition to those that already existed. Today's families increasingly seek services that reflect the unique life of their loved ones. Offering personalized and customizable services is a way to modernize without losing the essence of what makes funeral services meaningful. Whether it's through thematic memorials, customized keepsakes or unique celebration-of-life events, personalization can set your firm apart.

So far I've written a lot about technological changes (my specialty is digital marketing, after all), but changes can be made in other arenas, too. Modern consumers value businesses that contribute to their communities and the greater good. Therefore, engage with your community through outreach programs, support for local causes or hosting public seminars on grief and loss. Demonstrating social responsibility not only modernizes your firm's image but also builds deep, lasting relationships with the community. This is the type of behavior that keeps a go-to firm, the go-to firm.

Your journey with making changes is just beginning. For funeral directors, professional development and a

commitment to lifelong learning are crucial. If you truly want to keep your firm from lagging behind, it's your job to stay well-versed on industry trends, technological advancements and shifting societal attitudes toward death and grieving. Commit to your professional development by attending conferences, participating in webinars and engaging with professional networks to keep a flow of fresh ideas and practices coming to your firm.

THE RESISTANCE

During your career, you'll undoubtedly encounter a fair share of resistance. It might seemingly come from every direction – from within the organization, longstanding staff, or even the families you serve who are accustomed to traditional services. The key to overcoming this resistance is understanding its roots: fear of the unknown, attachment to tradition, or concerns about feasibility and cost. By understanding the roots of resistance and communicating clearly and empathetically, you can appease or eliminate those concerns.

My advice: When faced with the first “no,” use it as an opportunity for dialogue. Explore the concerns behind the resistance and address them directly. Demonstrate flexibility by adapting proposals to better fit the needs and comfort levels of your team and the families you serve. Remember, every “no” is a chance to refine your approach and build consensus.

As aspiring funeral directors, you have the opportunity to bridge the gap between tradition and innovation. The future of funeral service is in your hands, and with the right approach, you can turn the first categorical “no” into a resounding “yes” for progress and innovation.

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (second edition).



The New Reality

By Marc A. Markell, Ph.D.

With the increasing frequency of alternative methods of final disposition and a growing recognition of the need for personalized grief rituals, the role of funeral homes and directors must evolve to meet this new reality. Also, because families now have so many options, funeral directors need to show they offer something that other venues do not. Funeral directors must show extreme professionalism, care and

compassion. If they do not evolve, they will likely be replaced.

I love the funeral profession and am very proud to be teaching future funeral directors. This love compels me to continually strive to enrich the profession, acknowledging and addressing areas in need of improvement so that it will continue to grow and succeed.

Cremation and other forms of disposition are increasingly common. A “traditional funeral” with embalming, a casket, visitation, funeral and burial is becoming less common as people realize that this type of service might not be what the deceased would have wanted, or that it might not help survivors begin healing. I have left too many funerals and memorials feeling more annoyed and angry than I felt helped in my grief. Too many funerals are “cookie-cutter” services that do not honor the person who died as much as they merely give mourners the same impersonal conventional service.

In some situations, services fail to adequately acknowledge the person who died, reducing the deceased to a footnote in a generic script that could apply to anyone. I remember after my mother died, my family was at the funeral home making funeral arrangements. The pastor of my mother's church also attended. At the beginning of the meeting, the pastor stated that the service was not about my mother but was about "the risen Savior." The funeral director nodded, and I imagined a funeral service that was generic and impersonal.

Taken aback by the pastor's statement, and the funeral director's agreement, I said, "I will be doing a eulogy and so will my sister. When will these eulogies happen in the service?" To my surprise and relief, the pastor said, "When do you feel they would fit best?" The remainder of the arrangements went well. I felt fortunate that I did not need to be more assertive to create a personal service. Many people unfortunately do not have a similar experience.

If an impersonal funeral was all I knew, I, too, would opt to do nothing about an event that would leave me and other mourners empty.

Too many people have told me that they don't want a funeral for themselves because the funerals they have attended were boring, meaningless, impersonal and unhelpful. I know the value of funerals. I know that they can be healing, supportive and personal. If, however, an impersonal funeral was all I knew, I, too, would opt to do nothing about an event that would leave me and other mourners empty.

At this point, I will say that traditional funerals can be supportive, healing and personal, depending on what the family wants and needs. If the director listens and helps them discover what they want and creates a service that would be helpful in their grief, then traditional funerals can be an appropriate choice. Also, if the family wants a funeral they are familiar with – one with a generic eulogy and nothing unique or personal – this can be discovered through deep listening and doing what the family shares about their wishes.

It's not just the type of service that needs to change but also the professionalism of some funeral directors. Before I go on, I first need to say that I know many directors who are in the profession for the right reason. They help people during an incredibly difficult time and serve the family and deceased with great dignity and respect. They know that pressuring families to spend more money than they can afford is not only unprofessional but manipulative and unethical. They know that serving a family is an honor, not just a job, and that each deceased person in their care is a precious and beloved person who deserves their time, talent and compassion. These professionals need to be applauded for their service, and they are truly a gift to families at a very difficult time.

That said, some funeral directors and people officiating at services need to reevaluate what they are providing and change their approach. I recently attended the visitation and funeral for a relative. For me, most of the experience was very difficult. The visitation was packed with people who came to support and grieve. Unfortunately, the temperature in the visitation room was incredibly warm. Sweat was dripping from my forehead, and I looked for tissues to wipe my glasses. No tissues were to be found.

I looked for the funeral directors to ask for the air conditioning to be turned down. After looking for a long time, I finally found them in a back office. I asked for the air to be turned down only to be told that the air was as low as it could go, and it must be the number of people in the room that was making it warm. I said that a lot of gatherings must be very warm since it's not uncommon for a group this large to attend visitations. The funeral directors just looked at me.

"If this is happening," I continued, "it would be a good idea to get an air conditioner that cools the area no matter the number of people present. People who are mourning a loss should not be uncomfortable with heat." Again, I received blank stares.

The service was cookie-cutter, and my relative's name was only mentioned in the context of now being "in a better place."

When we went to the cemetery, the grave had not been opened yet, so the casket was placed atop the undug ground. The casket was also sitting lopsided, and people standing around me voiced their fear that it would fall during the graveside service.

Within moments of the service ending, the directors were in their car and driving away. Again, this type of unprofessional behavior is not common but also not isolated.

The changing landscape of the funeral profession underscores the necessity for funeral homes and directors to adapt to evolving needs. As alternative methods of final disposition become more prevalent and personalized grief rituals gain recognition, funeral directors must demonstrate their value by offering unique, compassionate and professional services. Failure to evolve risks becoming obsolete.

While there are very admirable professionals who provide choice, dignity and honor to those they serve, instances of impersonal and unprofessional conduct remind us of the need for continual improvement. As someone committed to the funeral profession and its potential for healing and support, I am dedicated to nurturing a culture of excellence that ensures every service honors the individual and comforts those who mourn. I believe it is imperative to shape a future where funerals are not only ceremonies but are also meaningful tributes that help with the healing process and celebrate the lives of loved ones.

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From the Editor's Desk



Rust Never Sleeps

There's an old saying that you don't know what you've got until it's gone. While this is true, there are many things we take for granted until we need them, and when we do, they'd better be in perfect working order.

Several summers ago, a close friend passed away suddenly. Four days later, still shocked by his sudden death, I arrived at the funeral home with another friend, and we walked in together. The family was scattered throughout the funeral home. I searched out the kids and then finally made my way to the widow. The suddenness of his death cast a surreal cloud over the event.

Finally, I made my way to the casket to pay my respects. As I looked at my friend, I swear that if I hadn't seen his photograph next to the casket, I would have thought I was in the wrong room. His cheeks bulged unnaturally, as if he were storing acorns, and his mouth was set in an unfamiliar frown, making the man I'd known since first grade almost unrecognizable. As I saw him clasping a rosary, I could see blue in his hands and in the exposed part of his wrists.

My friend's brother came over to me and the first thing he said was, "Don't remember him how he looks in the casket, remember him by that picture – always smiling."

The friend who had arrived with me said that because the body in the casket didn't look like our deceased friend, for him, it made it easier to be there. "I can pretend it's not him," he said. It was an odd thing to say, but I knew what he meant.

The rest of the visitation was painful as we listened to classmates repeating how the body in the casket "doesn't even look like him."

It was hard to move past that fact, especially considering it was counter to what I have come to expect from funeral service. It was the opposite feeling I had when I went to the visitation for a friend's mother nine months earlier – a woman who died after a four-year battle with cancer. She looked peaceful and exactly the way I remembered her. Yet my friend, healthy to the end, looked nothing like himself.

A profession like funeral service does not afford anyone the luxury of "getting it right the next time," so the mandate to stay sharp never wanes. Here's another old expression, courtesy of classic rocker Neil Young: Rust never sleeps.

Ed • **Edward J. Defort**
- **Editor**

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