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## Dealing With Your Boss

By Daniel M. Isard

Congratulations! You got a job working for Dewey-Runnit Funeral Home. On your first day, you show up perfectly dressed, shoes shined, eager to use all of the knowledge you learned in mortuary school for the benefit of your new employer.



Fortunately, that's why I'm writing this article.

First things first. Even if your boss resembles the Dewey-Runnit owner, you must never forget that he or she has the power to “unemploy” you. In other words, unless you encounter an illegal employment practice, stay calm, analyze the directions given and try to learn from the situation. Maybe this “stupid” employer knows more than you give him or her credit for that might benefit you down the road.

There is no class in mortuary school that can prepare you to become an employee.

Despite this, I'm going to bet that you look at your new boss before lunchtime and ask yourself, “Do he runnit?”

Funeral service is a *service* business, which means it requires an employer to employ people to administer a service.

At some point, though, you might feel that your boss is stupid because he or she appears not to know how to train you and/or doesn't know federal and state employment laws.

Unfortunately, there is no class in mortuary school that can prepare you to become an employee.

In addition, you will spend more hours working each week than you will playing, so learning how to get along with your employer and co-workers is an important life skill. Believe it or not, you can learn from all of them! Some will teach you what *not* to do, while others will impart beneficial lessons.

### DEALING WITH YOUR EMPLOYER

#### 1. Do what he or she asks.

When in doubt, consult your job description. If you don't have one, ask your boss to work with you to create a written job de-

scription. If he or she is unwilling, ask questions, take notes and, after at least one year, start looking for new employment if things haven't improved. When you do start to look, ask for a copy of the job description before you interview.

### 2. If someone asks you to do something you think is wrong, ask questions and explain your discomfort.

Remember, you are *licensed* (unless you practice in Colorado), so if you do something wrong – even if directed by your employer – you could put your license in jeopardy. If your boss/employer continues to ask you to perform tasks you perceive are wrong, contact the lawyer for your state funeral directors association or NFDA and ask for guidance. No matter what, take good notes.

### 3. Make sure your employer knows your long-term goals.

Ask your boss to mentor you to help you achieve those goals. If he or she resists, smile, be patient and, as above, start searching for a new employer after a year's time. While interviewing the next time, however, tell your potential employer you want someone to help mentor you as one of the conditions of your employment.

## DEALING WITH CO-WORKERS

Since we spend so much time with these people, there's a whole field in psychology about dealing with difficult co-workers. Here are a few more words of wisdom.

### 1. If you're harassed, inform your employer immediately.

This is not about being a tattletale; once you're old enough to drive, you start dealing with people who need to be held accountable. It's an employer's responsibility to make certain that employees do not have to work in a hostile environment.

### 2. If a co-worker screws up something, report it to your employer.

Never forget that your allegiance should be to the company employing (*paying*) you and not to the person who shares your cubicle. In some cases, anyone who knew of a co-worker's improper action but failed to report it can be held guilty of the act.

### 3. If a co-worker wants to know how much money you make, it's none of his or her business.

Once again, ask your employer to intercede.

Welcome to the working world! Navigate cautiously and always remember that while the people around you might make your job feel difficult at times, everyone you work with throughout your career can teach you something!

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# How to Best Serve Women Consumers

By Lacy Robinson

Picture the most significant adult woman in your life right now, such as your wife or partner, mother, mother-in-law or daughter. What is she like and, more important, what is her daily life like?

Whether she's older or younger; married, divorced or single; with or without kids; working full time or part time, the most significant adult woman in your life probably juggles a hectic, busy schedule that requires mind-boggling multitasking in order to accomplish the daily to-do list.

And even as she's doing, doing, doing, she's probably also thinking, thinking, thinking: "What's next? Does everyone have what they need? Is everyone taken care of?"

No one explains what modern women deal with every day – and their importance as consumers – more succinctly than



Bridget Brennan, founder and CEO of Female Factor and author of *Winning Her Business* and *Why She Buys*. As she notes, "Women are females first and consumers second."

You can take that to the bank because in addition to doing, doing, doing and thinking, thinking, thinking, women are also buying, buying, buying.

Following are compelling insights from Brennan's book *Why She Buys*, with suggestions about how each can help you develop effective marketing strategies and communicate better.

## THE NEEDS OF OTHERS ARE ALWAYS A TOP CONCERN

Women are very good at recognizing and considering the

needs of others. When women are the decision makers, they are acutely aware that they represent not just themselves but also the rest of their group. Whether choosing where to eat or where to vacation, a woman always takes the needs of others into account. It's the maternal instinct. It's just how women are wired.

As Brennan emphasizes, "It's important to address absent influencers during the sales process by asking your prospect if there are other people who will be involved in some way."

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**ASK YOURSELF: How can I help families address the emotional needs of everyone touched by the life of the deceased?**

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### CONSIDER OPRAH'S LESSON

Oprah Winfrey definitely knows how to get things done, and her ability to connect with other women on deep levels has fueled her career. In *Why She Buys*, Brennan explains that Winfrey achieves her connections with women in three primary ways: self-disclosure, affirmation and compliments.

Sharing and being open about her own vulnerabilities and struggles is a Winfrey trademark, as is her ongoing, public effort to better herself. More than anything, she wants to empower other women to do the same thing, i.e., to be the best they can be and to live their best lives. Winfrey supports them in that endeavor through frequent affirmation.

She also appeals to the things women want most, another secret of how she successfully connects with women. Women want help in order to make their daily lives easier and more productive. Women also want to help others, and Winfrey zeros in on those two aspects.

The next time you're at the grocery store, look at the cover of *O Magazine* and notice how the copy clearly communicates solutions for women's concerns and ways they can help others.

You can do the same thing. Focus on the needs of women consumers by simplifying the process of funeral planning and demonstrating how their efforts will help others.

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**ASK YOURSELF: How can I make funeral planning easier and ensure that women feel they are helping everyone involved?**

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### DON'T FORGET THE KIDS

It'll be a few years before Generation Z (those born from roughly 1996 through 2010) starts making decisions regarding funeral planning, but if you want to ensure that your funeral home still thrives at that point, start implementing some of the following ideas now.

Foremost, convey to mothers that their children matter in the process of funeral planning by making your funeral home kid friendly. Brennan urges readers to consider the needs of mothers who have children with them. Think about whether your funeral home is easy to navigate for those using strollers or carriers. Do you offer a good spot with comfortable furniture for kids and a parent to relax?

In addition, offer a stash of children's books and toys or perhaps a television for watching cartoons or movies.

Finally, ensure that your restrooms are kid friendly and equipped with facilities to help those with infants.

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**ASK YOURSELF: How can I ensure that mothers with children feel welcome in my funeral home?**

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### SPEAKING OF RESTROOMS...

In the eyes of many women, your funeral home's credibility depends on just one room in the entire facility – the restroom.

States Brennan: "Woman have better memories for the details of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Scientists attribute this to the fact that women have a larger hippocampus, the seat of memory and learning in the brain."

The bottom line? If your restrooms are clean, accommodating and comfortable, women will notice. They will recognize that you invest time and money in maintaining exceptional facilities and will remember your commitment to exceeding the expectations of families and guests.

Here are four quick, inexpensive upgrades you could make to your restroom(s) this week:

1. Add industrial-strength hooks in every stall to hold purses/handbags.
2. Offer disposable guest towels instead of paper towels. (Score bonus points if they're personalized with your firm's name and logo.)
3. Install a foot-operated door-opening device (such as a StepNpull; [stepnpull.com](http://stepnpull.com)) on the inside of the restroom door to help women make a germ- and hands-free exit.
4. Invest in a baby-changing station, such as those made by Koala Kare ([koalabear.com](http://koalabear.com)).

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**ASK YOURSELF: Would my mother be proud or ashamed of the funeral home's restrooms?**

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### DEMONSTRATE YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Let female consumers know you understand them by effec-

tively demonstrating empathy. According to Brennan, expressing empathy can help women feel more comfortable: “This is a reassuring style of communication that women use with each other in conversation. The technique is especially powerful when it comes to complex and expensive purchases.”

Communicating empathy need not start with trite expressions such as, “I understand what you’re going through.” Empathy is simply taking a moment to see things from another person’s perspective in order to compassionately recognize and share in his or her emotions.

Female consumers will usually sniff out a funeral director who comfortably leans back in a recliner and isn’t compassionately thinking ahead about her family. Communicate your understanding of the family’s unique situation by anticipating questions or concerns.

### **ASK YOURSELF: How often do I anticipate the needs and concerns that grieving family members might have?**

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## **SHOW YOUR APPRECIATION**

Women like to feel appreciated, and they will feel eager to do business with people who show their appreciation. Brennan suggests showing appreciation to women clients early and often.

Consider writing a kind note to tell a female customer how much you appreciate working with her family; she won’t forget it. Follow these simple guidelines to write a perfect note of appreciation:

- Handwrite your message on a personalized card.
- Use the person’s formal name (unless, of course, you’ve been given permission to address them differently).
- Acknowledge a special part of their loved one’s service.
- Be brief, genuine and warm. This simple gesture will communicate to women consumers, in a very real way, that they are more than “just another customer.”

### **ASK YOURSELF: How can I effectively communicate my appreciation to families?**

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## **CREATE AN EXPERIENCE THROUGH STORY**

Being an expert on the differences between stainless-steel and 18-gauge caskets is important, but that’s not going to be the deciding factor for a female consumer. Explains Brennan: “Women respond to stories more than they do to just product information.” Women want to know what other families have done and how they successfully used and incorporated your products into their services for a loved one.

Consider maintaining a journal and jotting down the experiences of other families, which merchandise appealed to them, how they used it and the value they found in personalizing the special products you offer.

A picture is worth a thousand words, so you might also want to take photographs to help women consumers visualize how your products can be incorporated into the services they are planning.

To understand how storytelling works, imagine, for example, that a woman is planning a funeral for her mother and mentions that she was a quilter. Typically, your immediate thought might be about how you could display the quilts during the visitation and/or service, prompting you to start making some recommendations.

On the other hand, using a storytelling approach, you might say: “I recall helping a family plan a beautiful funeral service for their mother, who was also a quilter. Like your mother, quilting had evolved into far more than just a hobby for this woman, so the family decided to display several of their mother’s quilts; they even draped one of her favorites over her casket. We displayed quilts on either side of the casket using quilt racks and, as a special touch, we draped two more on each side of the register stand. When friends and family arrived, their faces lit up when they saw the quilts. The colors in the quilts and floral arrangements played off one another and were vivid and beautiful. It made their mother’s funeral very personal. We could certainly explore a similar option.”

### **ASK YOURSELF: When making suggestions, what stories can I share to help balance the rush of product information?**

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Today’s women do it all and spend much of their time addressing the needs and interests of everyone around them. They frequently serve as the decision makers for their families, making them powerful consumers you should never underestimate. Women are also the storytellers, memory keepers and event planners for their families. The personal details they possess about their loved ones are invaluable during the funeral planning process.

To help women honor their loved ones and provide a stronger sense of healing for their families, it’s vitally important that you recognize and understand their unique, gender-specific qualities and characteristics. Women generally know what they want, but it is your job, as a service provider, to help them get there. Use the tips and recommendations in this article to connect more deeply with women customers. Doing so will help you exceed their expectations and allow them to honor and commemorate their loved ones in more personal and meaningful ways.

*Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.*

# I'm Sick of Hearing About Millennials (And I Am One)

By Sarah Rickerd

In addition to writing for NFDA, I'm a business ghostwriter who helps clients turn their ideas into articles, white papers, case studies and other pieces of marketing collateral to build names for themselves and their companies.

With increasing frequency of late, these ideas seem to revolve around managing intergenerational conflict in the workplace. By my estimate, I wrote more than 30,000 words on the subject last year for *The Director* (and for other publications, such as *Entrepreneur, Inc.* and *Forbes*).

It's a strange position to be in. As I interview clients to get their perspective on how different generations can work together, their thoughts far too frequently skew toward stereotypes – how those recognition-hungry, meaning-seeking millennials need to better emulate the dedication and work ethic of the baby boomers.

Strangely, everyone leaves Generation X out of these explorations, and few seem to remember they're on the phone with an actual millennial.

Frankly, being called out as a millennial chafes. I was born in 1984, which puts me at the end of Generation X and the start of the millennial generation – or in the middle of a micro-generation called the Xennials (stretching roughly from 1977-85), depending on who you ask. I'm quick to point out my connection to other generations because outing myself as a millennial effectively invites being defined as someone who is narcissistic, idealistic and self-obsessed.

So, when I say I'm sick of millennials, I'm actually sick of many things. I'm sick of myopic perspectives that tie up the experience of young people neatly in a bow of self-absorption. The presumption of laziness stings when you've hustled for years to build a freelance writing career that earns enough to make mortgage payments and raise a child. Tech savviness and new channels of communication might be perks my generation enjoys; job security and lifelong careers with a single employer are not.

I'm sick of endlessly exploring the differences between generations, as if mine is so fundamentally foreign to others that

If we're ever going to find peace and parity between the generations at work, it won't arise from trying to bridge gaps that might not even exist.

whole new sets of standards and practices are required to deal with us. And I'm sick of the assumption that my generation's faults developed in a vacuum rather than as a logical response to the social and economic pressures of our modern world.

If we're ever going to find peace and parity between the generations at work, it won't arise from trying to bridge gaps that might not even exist. Instead, it'll happen when we're able to find the common ground and focus on shared goals that empower every employee to contribute.

## WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS, REALLY?

Reaching generational peace and parity requires looking more closely at some of the misconceptions about the millennial generation. For starters, there are a lot of us, and we aren't that young anymore. The Pew Research Center's official definition of "millennial" encompasses anyone born between 1981 and 1996. Those at the youngest end of the span can legally drink; those of us on the older side are nearing 40 years old. (And trust me, we, too, find Snapchat just as mystifying as many belonging to earlier generations.)



There are roughly 92 million millennials in the United States, making our generation larger than the baby boomers and three times larger than Generation X, according to U.S. census data. As of late 2015, millennials represented the largest share of the workforce by generation, comprising nearly half of the total workforce overall.

The millennial takeover of the modern workplace is notable because it's one area in which the differences between generations are most evident. At least we assume they are. When IBM's Institute for Business Value conducted a multigenerational study of 1,784 employees in 12 countries, it found

that millennials actually resemble their older counterparts in many key ways:

- Millennials place equal weight on many of the same career goals held by Gen X and baby boomer employees. These include “making a positive impact on my organization,” “helping solve social and/or environmental challenges” and “working with a diverse group of people.”
- Millennials believe it’s more important to have a manager who is ethical and fair than to have a boss who recognizes their accomplishments.
- Generation X actually places greater value on soliciting lots of opinions versus millennials, despite the latter’s reputation for being unable to make decisions without consulting multiple stakeholders.
- The top reasons millennials, Gen Xers and baby boomers offer for leaving jobs are the same: more money and a more creative workplace.

Imagine inheriting the result of decades of wage stagnation while simultaneously carrying the load of an education that’s no longer affordable yet more necessary than ever.

In a *Forbes* article, contributors David Sturt and Todd Nordstrom help dispel the myth that millennials are job-hopping opportunists. “According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employees today stay longer with a company than they did 25 years ago. In 1983, the average employee tenure was around 3.5 years. Fifteen years later, in 1998, people stayed on the job an average of 3.6 years before leaving. In 2014, the average employee stayed 4.6 years.”

Now, none of this means that *no* differences exist between the generations. All it takes is a few hours at a multigenerational family gathering to make them immediately apparent. In fact, millennials differ from older generations in a number of key ways when it comes to workplace preferences, finances and financial opportunity.

According to data gathered by The Motley Fool, millennials earn less than their parents did at similar ages and do so while carrying more student loan debt to receive a similar education. From a July 2017 article on the site: “Consider that, when adjusting for inflation, the average worker in the 24-36 age group earns \$10,000 less than their parents’ generation did at the same age, which is roughly 20% less purchasing power. Meanwhile, the average student debt for a millennial is double that of the previous generation.”

On the topic of student debt, Trent Hamm of The Simple Dollar website has run the numbers on the college costs millennials face versus those enjoyed by baby boomers. “In 1970, you could work 755 hours at a minimum wage job over the course of a year to earn enough to pay for a year of schooling at a public institution – about 14 hours per week. In 2010, you would have to work 1,823 hours at a minimum wage job over the course of a year to earn enough money to pay for a year of schooling at a public institution – about 35 hours per week.”

Hamm adds that opting out of college to avoid the associated costs is increasingly less viable. “In 1973, the earliest year I could find firm data, 72% of jobs available in the United States employed workers with only a high school diploma or who had dropped out of school. In 2007, that number had dropped to 41%, and future projections show it only going lower.”

For millennials, getting ahead financially is complicated by several other factors beyond student loan debt:

- The Great Recession, which began in 2007 as the first millennials entered the workforce, has been characterized as a “jobless recovery” after it ended in 2009. According to U.C. Berkeley economist Danny Yagan, “For every percentage point a local unemployment rate increased during the downturn, individuals were 0.4 percentage points less likely to be working in 2015.”
- Similar to other generations, millennials have experienced slow wage growth. Write Jay Shambaugh and Ryan Nunn of *Harvard Business Review*: “Since the early 1970s, the hourly inflation-adjusted wages received by the typical worker have barely risen, growing only 0.2% per year.”
- Only a third of working millennials contribute to a retirement plan, according to a report from the National Institute of Retirement Security. *Quartz News* producer and host Preeti Varathan suggests that the primary factor driving lower contribution rates isn’t a lack of interest or foresight. “Many simply have jobs that don’t offer retirement plans of any sort or haven’t worked long enough to qualify,” she states.

Millennials who overcome these hurdles still face challenges in achieving a key component of the American dream – home ownership. Hamm’s numbers on median home prices are astounding: “The median price of a home sold in the United States in January 1970 was \$23,600. The median price of a home sold in the United States in January 2011 was \$240,100. That’s an increase of 917%, on par with the jump in education prices. In other words, even after the housing collapse, a home today costs approximately three times as much as a home in 1970 compared to the average wage a person earns.”

## MAKING A MILLENNIAL

Regardless of when you were born, imagine growing up the way millennials have. There’s economic uncertainty, two of

the longest running wars in U.S. history and a level of information access and social connectivity unparalleled in human history. Given these converging factors, today's millennials seem like a natural outcome.

In a *New Yorker* article titled “Where Millennials Come From,” staff writer Jia Tolentino explains, “When humans learn to think of themselves as assets competing in an unpredictable and punishing market, then millennials – in all their anxious, twitchy, phone-addicted glory – are exactly what you should expect. Millennials, in other words, have adjusted too well to the world they grew up in; their perfect synchronization with economic and cultural disruption has been mistaken for the source of the disruption itself.”

Imagine inheriting the result of decades of wage stagnation while simultaneously carrying the load of an education that's no longer affordable yet more necessary than ever. Wouldn't you seek solace in the easy outlet of social media? Wouldn't you, too, feel compelled to focus on building a “personal brand” (cue the eye rolling) if you believed it gave you any advantage in a competitive employment market? Wouldn't you likewise think that continually acting in your self-interest rather than your employer's is smart self-preservation rather than excessive self-indulgence?

The ubiquity and reliance on the latest tools and technologies makes it easy to ascribe traits of narcissism and self-centeredness to millennials, but the instincts behind them exist in all of us. As Scott Hess, senior vice president of human intelligence for Spark SMG, expounds in his TEDx speech on millennials: “Can you imagine how many Instagrams of people playing in the mud during Woodstock we would've seen? I think in many ways you're blaming millennials for the technology that happens to exist right now. Yes, they check their phones during class, but think about how long you can stand in line without looking at your phone. Now imagine being used to that technology your whole life and having to sit through algebra.”

My goal here is not to devolve into a millennial vs. baby boomer debate. Rather, my point is that if we're ever going to overcome perceived generational disputes in the workplace – the funeral home, in this instance – we need to start with the understanding that the forces shaping this generation affect *all* of us. Moreover, we must realize that, ultimately, there aren't that many generational differences in terms of what we want to get out of work.

## MILLENNIALS IN THE FUNERAL HOME

I asked Kurt Bass of Bass Funeral Home to share his perspective as a 27-year-old director working in a family-owned firm. His experiences have largely been positive. “I feel very fortunate,” he said. “In the seven years I've been active in our five-generation firm, very seldom has a family member discounted or doubted an idea I've brought to the table. They

might have questioned it or told me why our local community hasn't moved that far forward yet, but never have they told me I had a bad idea.”

Overall, Bass sees changes within the culture having a larger impact on funeral home operations than intergenerational differences. “Generally speaking, our local culture has shaped our funeral business to what it is today. Much like the rest of the country, an increase in nontraditional services has made us adapt. Some of my family still see our funeral homes as being in the business of traditional funerals. I know nontraditional services are becoming more prevalent, and with the help and participation of a couple more members, we're working to be more open and accessible to serving those people.”

“Millennials have adjusted too well to the world they grew up in; their perfect synchronization with economic and cultural disruption has been mistaken for the source of the disruption itself.”

One difference Bass has noticed is a shift in focus among younger funeral directors from products to service. “I think many of the older generations put a lot of emphasis on the products. Being in an informed-consumer society, I see the emphasis having to be placed on the service provided. You can work with people by selling a decent casket, but you can serve them by giving them a service and a memory that will last long past the funeral.”

Differences aside, for Bass, the ability to maintain an open dialogue that values the input of team members of all ages – while keeping the ultimate focus on families being served – has made it possible for all involved to benefit. “I think that is what it takes, for both sides. We each have our strengths and weaknesses. Being able to identify those and working with them to provide families with the best service possible is what it's all about.”

Exactly how much funeral service needs to change to accommodate the needs of younger workers entering the profession is a delicate topic but one that is foolish to ignore. For instance, an article in the April 2017 issue of *The Director* stated that today's mortuary science student is likely to be young and female. Reticence to reform standard work practices in the face of a change like this could result in the loss of talented people, according to Michael LuBrant, Ph.D., mortuary science program director at the University of Minnesota.

“I ran into one of our graduates recently,” LuBrant said. “She's working in a related, ancillary profession – one that, with their hours, has a little more flexibility. I was surprised to see her there and asked why she left working with families since I knew

she was very good at it. She told me that one night she was giving her child a bath when she got a call, and her child asked, ‘Mommy, why do these other families always come before me?’ She left that part of working with families because the funeral home wasn’t able to accommodate her need for flexibility.”

That’s not a case of a millennial demanding “extraordinary accommodations” to put her passions ahead of her work. That’s a mother juggling the competing demands of funeral service and family rearing, and leaving the profession because her needs weren’t being met. How funeral service employers address the very real and valid questions her experience raises will have far greater impact on how the profession moves forward than turning them into an intergenerational issue.

## MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

I thought about ending this article with a series of actionable recommendations and tangible takeaways, but every suggestion I considered boiled down to one fundamental guideline: Treat your employees the way you’d want to be treated.

Regardless of their age, most employees want the same things: fair compensation for the work performed, the respect of management, an engaging working environment and healthy boundaries between work and day-to-day life.

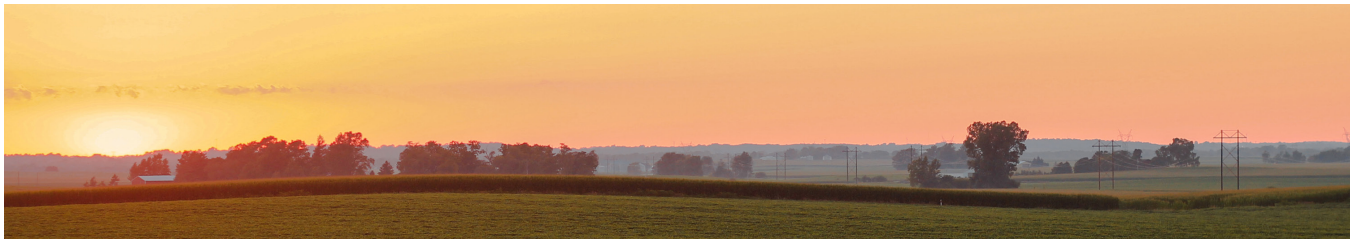
Millennials are no more or less likely to prioritize these fac-

tors than other generations, just as they’re no more or less likely to do the work required to achieve them.

Bruce Pfau, in a 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, summed it up neatly: “While pithy descriptions of what makes millennials unique are presented as self-evident and seem to have a ring of truth to them, very few are supported with solid empirical research. On the contrary, a growing body of evidence suggests that employees of all ages are much more alike than different in their attitudes and values at work. To the extent that any gaps do exist, they amount to small differences that have always existed between younger and older workers throughout history and have little to do with the millennial generation per se.”

So, yes, I’m sick of millennials, but it’s particularly the construct of millennials – especially when it’s used to sow discord. At a time when declining burial rates and local oversupply threaten the future of many funeral homes, I’m sick of the attention given to the artificial division created by perceived differences between generations. We’re more alike than we are different. Our goals are the same. Serving families effectively now and in the future will require the participation of all ages, and funeral service can’t do that if it’s more concerned with arbitrary delineations than these fundamental needs.

*Sarah Rickerd is a marketing consultant and freelance writer focusing on business, technology and social issues.*



# A Visit to the Cemetery

By Todd W. Van Beck

The plane flew down the runway at about 6:30 p.m. as I left Eppley Airfield in Omaha, Nebraska, for the two-and-a-half-hour flight back to my world. I’d spent a long weekend visiting my hometown in Iowa to celebrate my father’s 80-something birthday.

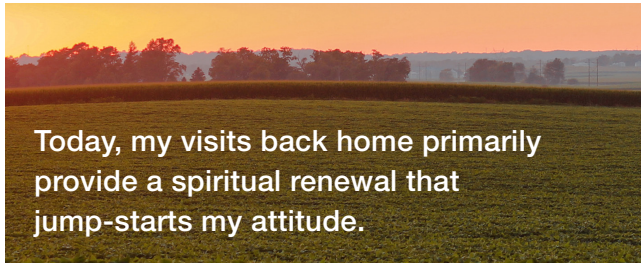
Iowa in October is filled with sensations as the greens of summer turn quickly to the golds and browns of harvest season, and everywhere one travels, the ancient activity of bringing in the crops is evident. Morning, noon and night, farmers swing back and forth on their large, impressive machines, taking from Mother Earth more than enough foodstuffs to feed the world.

Growing up in the agrarian world is much like being a member of a Masonic lodge; unless you have been admitted as a member, the proceedings are a secret and a mystery to outsiders. I have never encountered a city person who understood the secret handshake of the farmer.

Whenever I visit my home state, I take some time to drive through the countryside and always visit certain places that hold exclusive memories for me. Thus, my visits back home involve more than just a duty call to see my family or for business or even for a reunion. Today, they primarily provide a spiritual renewal that jump-starts my attitude and renews the visceral makeup of my DNA courtesy of the sights,

sounds and sensations from a thousand and one stimuli.

I always feel sad when the plane reaches the end of the runway, rises and breaks the physical connection with the place that helped set the foundation of my life. In the air, I'm often haunted by feelings of "would have, could have, should have" as I reflect on my life, while at other times, I recall the great moments.



Today, my visits back home primarily provide a spiritual renewal that jump-starts my attitude.

## 1970: GREAT TIMES

June 1970 was one of the latter moments when everything seemed to come together for me. I had just graduated from high school; I had a gorgeous girlfriend who lived in Omaha, Nebraska; and I was working for the prestigious Heafey & Heafey Mortuary at 3522 Farnam Street on what was then called "Mortuary Row" since the majority of Omaha funeral homes were located within an eight-block radius of the historic street.

Everything seemed to come together for me then, including the fact that my boss let me borrow the lead car to take my "city chick" out on the town in downtown Omaha. I was also enrolled to start college in the fall and then planned to go to mortuary college in Boston and eventually own a chain of funeral homes in southwestern Iowa. As I saw things back then, the sky was the limit.

Moreover, I was happy to shake off high school in Avoca, Iowa! I must admit I was a terrible student. I know of only two teachers during my time in high school who liked me. The rest viewed me as a complete loser. When I walked across the stage in the school's old gym to get my diploma, I was initially surprised that I got one. Then I remember looking out at the crowd of teachers and thought, "Thank God I am rid of them. They never took the time to get to know me and understand me!"

While I stood in line waiting to get my diploma, I talked to a fellow student, Tom Sewing. Tom and I always stood next to each other because our high school followed a penal-type organizational structure whereby students were always lined up alphabetically, even in fire drills. Someone would yell, "SEWING" and determine that, yes, Tom was where he should be.

There were no Ts or Us in our school, but there was one V:

"VAN BECK," someone would yell. "VAN BECK! IS VAN BECK HERE?" I was often daydreaming or talking with Sewing before I would finally raise my hand.

Anyway, Tom and I chummed around throughout our time in school. His parents were formally connected to the Underwood, Iowa, community at this time, and his father, Marvin, worked a farm southwest of our town, but they were mighty fine people. Tom also had a beautiful sister, two years younger, named Renae.

I used to do odd jobs for the old man who owned the farm where the Sewing family lived, and after I completed my work, I would visit the Sewing family. I really liked all of them, and they always seemed to laugh at my stupid stories, jokes or remarks. They also let me play their small electronic organ. Despite making terrible mistakes while I was playing, the Sewings always clapped and told me how great I was. It was great!

Tom Sewing was the envy of the high school even though he did not have a girlfriend, money, great athletic power or an acne-free face. But he did have something much, much better – a car. He owned an honest-to-God, 1960-something Barracuda, and he drove that machine with top-notch skill and speed. He could spin the wheels and burn rubber, pop the clutch and turn that vehicle on a dime.

Students lined up to get rides in his impressive car, which once prompted me to suggest that Sewing charge a 25 cent fee to the poor kids and 50 cents to the rich kids for a ride. Out of the goodness of my heart, I kindly offered to help by collecting the money and then splitting the profits 60/40 with him at the end of the day. (I'd take 60% of the cash for marketing and handling charges.)

He firmly declined my offer but, happily, our friendship survived his rejection. Sewing was simply a nice, uncomplicated 18-year-old that night we received our high school diplomas.

His little sister, Renae, was a sweetheart. She had the most beautiful smile, was a talented student and excelled in athletics. I could tease her and she was always a good sport. She also liked to ride on the back of Tom's other vehicle, a motorcycle, on which the two of them would fly like the wind on the back roads of southwestern Iowa.

Tom liked to go fast...

## 2005: THE MEMORY TOUR

My father's 80-something birthday dinner was held on a Saturday night in October 2005 at a well-known restaurant in Omaha called Johnny's Café, which my family has patronized for many, many years. The next day, my brother had to fly back to Houston, but I was scheduled to stay one more

day and then fly back to Atlanta on Monday afternoon.

Thus, around 5 o'clock on Sunday afternoon, I decided to take a ride and visit the places of my boyhood so I could refresh my spirit before I left the next day. For my memory tour, I planned to drive into Council Bluffs, Iowa, before continuing on to Omaha for dinner.

As I drove alone down Highway 6, I had entered the town of Underwood, Iowa, when a feeling came over me. I've learned to pay attention to this feeling over the years. It's always the same – a simultaneous combination of great peace, sadness, reverence and a yearning for something. It's a pleasantly haunting type of experience.

Once again, I felt this familiar, significant feeling, which overwhelmed me. It was about 5:30 p.m., the sun was setting, the colors in the sky were spectacular and the farmers were still working in their fields.

### 1970: THE PHONE CALL

I wish I could remember precisely everything about the moment I received the phone call, but I have to confess I cannot. I am confident, however, that my gorgeous girlfriend in Omaha called me late in the afternoon that day. I also know that I was working and living at Heafey & Heafey Mortuary and was in my apartment above the carriage house when I answered.

"Todd?"

"Yes."

"It's Patty. I don't know how to tell you this."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Todd, oh, it's terrible news. Tom Sewing and his sister were killed this afternoon in an accident."

I stood alone in my apartment, stunned.

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, my Aunt Georgia just called and said I should let you know before you saw it on the news."

"Both? Are you sure?" I repeated the questions.

I distinctly remember that it was truly a beautiful June day when Patty called me because Heafey & Heafey had conducted a funeral that morning for a priest at Dowd Memorial Chapel on Boy's Town Campus, and Monsignor Wegner had commented on the beauty of the day. When Patty called, I had just finished washing the funeral coach because we had another large service the next morning.

Tom and Renae must have thought it was a beautiful day, too. It was summer, Tom had just graduated and Renae had the entire summer off.

As I pieced together the story, I learned that Tom and his little sister took off on his motorcycle sometime before noon. As they traveled up a town road in Minden and were just crossing Interstate 80, a truck pulled out in front of them. The collision was horrendous. My two friends were taken to the hospital in Council Bluffs, but the trip proved futile, and in time, both were pronounced dead.

The next several days were full of activities. I was asked to assist in conducting the funeral and remember that I had the honor of driving the funeral coach in which Renae's body rested. The funeral was held in the sanctuary of Trinity Lutheran Church simply because it was the largest building of a religious nature in our town, even though the school gym was larger and available. But the Sewings were religious people, so to the church we went.



Tom and Renae Sewing were buried side by side in the Sewing family plot. For 35 years, I did not step foot in that cemetery.

Tom and Renae Sewing were buried side by side in the Sewing family plot, where at least two generations rested, in the H.D. Fisher Cemetery outside Underwood. On that day, I left the cemetery around 5:30 p.m. with an empty funeral coach, drove back to Avoca, parked the vehicle at the local funeral home and drove into Omaha that evening to see college friends and drown my sorrows.

For 35 years, I did not step foot in the H.D. Fisher Cemetery – until the day after my father's 80-something birthday.

### 2005: THE CEMETERY

At 5:30 on that Sunday afternoon in October 2005 during my memory tour, knowing that overwhelming feeling had a vice grip on me, I inched my car down the main street of Underwood. Soon I could see the evergreen trees that mark the H.D. Fisher Cemetery to the west, so I turned to the right and started down a gravel road. At a four-corner intersection, I stopped and a female jogger ran past, sweating. I smiled and waved; she just waved. (I have never seen a happy jogger in my life.)

I turned left and eventually stopped on top of a hill, at which point I got out of the car and stood for a moment. The view reminded me of playing King of the Mountain as a child. I could see for miles and miles as farmers worked the land all around me.

One farmer drove by on his John Deere tractor and waved to me. (Everybody in Iowa waves to each other.) I waved back.

The farmer's expression and wave told me he knew I wasn't just a tourist and that I had a connection to the place.

A warm autumn breeze was my companion as I entered through the gates of the cemetery. It did not take long to locate Tom and Renae's graves. They rest side by side and share a single upright, gray granite headstone with their different birthdates but the same death date chiseled twice on the headstone.

As I studied the gravestone carefully, I began to take stock of my own life, feeling humbled and grateful in the presence of the earthly symbol denoting the end of the too-brief lives of my dear friends 35 years earlier. What a blessing! Soon enough, a single thought began to radiate and repeat itself, filling my mind, body and soul: "God Almighty, life is a precious gift!"

I felt puny and embarrassed as I recalled my reactions and responses to certain episodes in my life that I thought were unfair or unwarranted and that caused me stress and unhappiness. I felt ashamed as I recalled times when I was not able to appreciate and/or feel thankful for everything life threw at me. Eventually, I realized that despite the many times I felt life was unfair and "picking on me," at least I was still alive, breathing and experiencing life – even as my young friends spent those many years right here, together, in the grave.

Looking out at the farmers and their land, I thought about how many crops had been planted and harvested and how the many winters, springs, summers and autumns had changed the scenery of this graveyard while my young friends lay together in the grave all this time. Meanwhile, I realized how blessed and fortunate I was just to be alive, to experience, to be present, to contribute, to try make a difference in this crazy world.

I thought about my various failures and successes. Someone else got my gorgeous girlfriend from Omaha and someone else got the chain of funeral homes I planned to own in southwestern Iowa.

While I'd often thought that someone else had always done better than me, I reflected on the fact that I have a wonderful son, a great career I never imagined would happen, many friends and associates worldwide, a great church home and my health. In addition, I've traveled the world over, came from really good people and received a great education. Most important, during their lifetimes, my parents were just my "parents" – they were not known or referred to as the "bereaved parents" who witnessed the burial of their children.

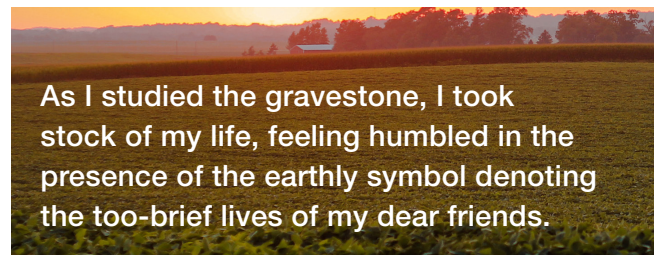
## LESSONS LEARNED

There is nothing more difficult than for parents to bury their child. Earl Grollman, a wise rabbi from Boston, once told me: "When your parents die, you lose your past; when your

spouse dies, you lose your present; but if your child dies, you lose your future."

Standing in front of the gravestone of Thomas and Renae Sewing, I felt humbled to my core and said a prayer of thanksgiving for the many good fortunes in my life. It was a great comfort to let this experience in a cemetery soak into the core of my spirit. Eventually, I realized it was funny that I'd thought about the Sewings consistently for 35 years, but it was only after I entered the gates encompassing the gentle pastoral scene of their resting place atop a country hill in western Iowa that the Holy Spirit reawakened in me a genuine appreciation of the precious gift of life.

Tom and Renae were physically stopped in life during their youth. They never got to experience the joys of children, the pride of a career or the benefits of an advanced education. On the other hand, they also never experienced the torments and toils of getting old. Both had bright, quick brains that were, even at their young ages, the center of a thousand subtleties of thought and deed. They both had great hearts, and they were both growing into adults capable of seeking truth and creating beauty in life. But on that single June day, death seized them in an instant and no one could stop the life-changing intrusion of the pesky Grim Reaper, for he is everywhere.



As a funeral director, I have learned a few lessons about life. Here is one of them: Death wins.

As I walked back to my car that day, a farmer was fiddling with his tractor. I stopped and asked how the crops looked this year.

"It's another bumper crop!" he responded with a great big grin.

I said, "It must be great to see life grow and blossom year after year."

He responded, "Yeah, I guess it's the Lord's work."

I was now standing in the middle of the road. I looked left toward Tom and Renae's gravestone and right to my new farmer friend who was working the land to create new life come springtime. At that moment, I remembered visiting the Sewings on their farm and seeing the light stream across the cornfields. I remember playing with Tom and Renae and remember their sheer joy as they ran madly across the lawn in

front of the farmhouse laughing, calling, yelling and panting for breath. What energy, what spirit, what happiness! What did we care then about death?

Reaching my car, I looked back one last time at the farmer. “Ah, yes, the work of the Lord,” I thought; no truer words have ever been spoken. Heading back toward the highway, I decided it was time for a nice cocktail – or two or three – and a wonderful Omaha steak.

Then something struck me about this life-affirming experience in a cemetery. I was not thinking about Tom and Renae in the grave or about the farmer across the road harvesting the old and making way to create new life in the spring.

Instead, a strange connection struck my fancy as I thought about the insects that make their homes in the graveyards and

farming fields around the globe. I thought about how, in the midst of life and death, creation and destruction, the simple murmur of insects signals their constant call to their mates.

Human beings experience this same powerful, God-given life force whenever they similarly call to their lovers by exchanging glances through eager and lowered eyes, clasping hands, touching lips...

As the sun finally settled behind the magnificent panorama of the western Iowa sky while diligent farmers kept up their work, I thought of another lesson this funeral director has learned: Life wins.

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

## The Core Purpose of a Funeral Service Education

By Tremaine L. Jordan



The core purpose of a funeral service education is for students to obtain knowledge and prepare to enter the field with some “PEP” in their step, i.e., to practice professionally, ethically and proficiently.

stantial effort and will cause you to make sacrifices you never thought possible in order to persevere. The pride and euphoric feeling you’ll possess once you conquer what was once unimaginable is surreal.

**Morbid curiosity will not sustain you; mortuary school is a grueling regimen.**

The United States offers the best colleges and universities in the world, which employ top instructors and professors. The education profession requires a skillset paired with consistency to achieve the ultimate outcome: providing a rewarding experience that allows the student to develop and excel. The process is realized by transmitting knowledge and skills from the instructor to the student. A successful transmission is measured by the student’s acquisition of knowledge at the end of the course or program.

I remember vividly that feeling when I graduated from Gupton-Jones August 23, 2002, at 10:30 on a 90-degree morning! It is not easy, but the solution is simple: Stop delaying and commit (or in some cases recommit) to yourself. Life will not always bring you the perfect set of circumstances, but life will continue moving. Since you are certain to be a few years older in 2021, you may as well be older and have a degree to your name.

**“Somebody said it couldn’t be done, but he, with a chuckle, replied that ‘maybe it couldn’t’ but he would be one who wouldn’t say so ‘til he tried.”**

**“You might fail, but you might conquer. See it through.”**

If you’re an aspiring mortuary science student yet to embark on your academic journey, here are a few key points to consider. Morbid curiosity will not sustain you, as you will surely find the curriculum irrelevant or unsatisfying. Mortuary school is a grueling regimen that demands your attention, requires a sub-

To students currently enrolled in a program, whether full time or part time, traditional or online, you have done what few people have the courage to do, which is take the first step toward achieving your goal.

As an instructor, I frequently encounter two types of students – the accountable and the entitled. I expend a lot of energy clashing with students about the grades they earn. The accountable students usually share several characteris-

tics: They are honest about their preparation efforts, do not blame others or make excuses and are proactive in solving their problems. Simply put, the accountable student exudes responsibility.

A peculiar occurrence takes place when entitled students earn a desirable grade on an exam – they heap enormous praise on themselves. When the same entitled students earn an unsatisfactory grade or a failing one, strangely enough, the instructor is the root cause.

My campus president often says, “You cannot have two rules for one thing.” As a result, the pressure to give students unearned grades is a growing epidemic. Grade inflation is cancerous, as are educators who succumb to the pressure to inflate. (This is me being accountable for the actions of my colleagues throughout the education landscape since it is now a huge problem on virtually every campus.)

Grades do not reflect your mastery of subject matter. Studies show that you won’t invest your time to learn the content if your artificial A or B grade falsely suggests that you know the material. Furthermore, you are unlikely to work harder to catch up if you are focusing on your artificial grade when, in reality, you are behind.

A high performance does not automatically translate to success in the field. I have seen many mediocre- to low-performing students go on to have distinguished careers in funeral service. The key ingredient is to have that PEP in your step!

**“I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.”**

To the alumni of all mortuary science programs: I hope you appreciate the many people who unselfishly emptied themselves to uplift you, even when they did not have much left to give. You are a reflection of your institution each day, during

each funeral and in each encounter with a member of the public unfamiliar with our profession.

You have an obligation to uphold your funeral service oath, part of which reads: “I shall be faithful to those who have placed their trust in me.” The families you serve, your colleagues and your instructors each trust you to practice nobly while enjoying the satisfaction of helping families at their most difficult time.

**“For I’se still goin’, honey, I’se still climbin’,  
and life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”**

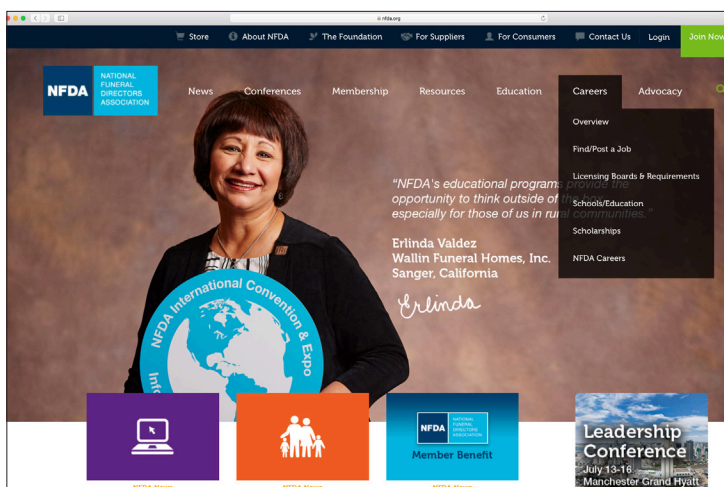
As an 8-year-old boy playing in the suburban neighborhoods of Decatur, Georgia, I dreamed of a career in funeral service. The privilege to practice is an honor I do not take for granted. I am proud of my funeral service education and feel that all of my instructors did an overwhelmingly good job in cultivating me, regardless of the grades I earned. The concepts and theories I learned have served me well beyond my academic career.

**High educational performance does not automatically translate to success in the field.**

As a result, I am a well-versed funeral director who can think critically and generate solutions when faced with challenges. I am forever indebted to all who contributed to my funeral service education.

Thank you!

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## Need Money for School?

**The Careers section of the NFDNA website** contains a variety of resources for exploring and learning more about scholarships for funeral service education. Visit [nfda.org/careers/scholarships](http://nfda.org/careers/scholarships) to review a comprehensive list of scholarships available from funeral service organizations, including NFDNA, the Funeral Service Foundation, state funeral directors associations and mortuary science colleges.

*From the Editor's Desk...*

## Change of Season



This month signaled a change of season. I know, spring allegedly started last month, but I'm talking about the dawn of a new Major League Baseball season (although, technically, the season also started in March, right around St. Patrick's Day, if you were lucky enough to score tickets for the Seattle Mariners-Oakland A's games in Tokyo – the final games Ichiro Suzuki played before announcing his retirement).

Anyway, to the true baseball fan, there are few things as sacred as opening day. But even this venerable sport has had to bend to the times. Remember when opening day was traditionally held in Cincinnati? That's changed. And to accommodate nationwide TV deals, opening day is not always held during the day anymore.

On the threshold of the new season, baseball commissioner Rob Manfred said on CBS Radio: "I think when people talk about changing the game, sometimes they lose sight of the fact that the game is changing. It has changed dramatically in the last 10 or 15 years: the number of strikeouts [and] home runs, the shifts, how often balls are put into play, the way we use relief pitchers. I try to make people understand that we're not talking about changing the game so much as we are [talking] about managing the change that is otherwise taking place in the game."

Baseball has endured some changes for the sake of speeding up the game. New this year, for instance, is an automatic intentional walk, which no longer requires a pitcher to lob four balls outside the strike zone.

The commissioner has even proposed more radical new rules, such as assigning an automatic runner to second base in games that go past 11 innings – a change many old-schoolers find too jarring.

Putting Manfred's comments into a more familiar context (as you knew I would), funeral directors might talk about changing the funeral, but the fact is that funerals have already changed dramatically. The hard part has been managing these changes. Visitations have shrunk – the last one I attended was just one four-hour session – and many families now eschew them altogether.

But funeral service has seen even more drastic changes take place over the past two decades.

It's all about managing the change, which is decidedly different than simply reacting to it.

Edward J. Defort  
Editor

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