

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
FUNERAL
SERVICE RITES,
RITUALS &
CEREMONIES

By
Todd W. Van Beck

INTRODUCTION

The basic needs of the grief stricken need to be met in such a way that people can move through their crises and not get bogged down in them. As funeral directors who serve the bereaved we want to help families emerge as whole and restored persons rather than as diminished and damaged individuals. From this perspective, the work of the funeral professional aligns itself much more on the professional /ministerial side than it does on the merchant/business side.

This book is not designed to include counseling techniques, philosophies, theories, or attending skills. The mission of this book is to identify and explain the various principles which make up funeral service counseling.

THE FOUNDATION OF FUNERAL COUNSELING

Funeral service counseling is a process that helps people work through their problems when death enters their lives. Death creates many different kinds of problems and nearly all of them have potentially serious emotional dimensions. In exploring the principles of funeral counseling we need to give attention to several foundations which set our path in the question of improving our own skills in fulfilling this important role.

THE HELPING PROFESSIONS – IS FUNERAL SERVICE ONE OF THEM?

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the world famous medical missionary said this concerning service to humanity: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know; the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

I have long held that this definition fits our beloved profession like a glove. In fact the very name of our profession "funeral service" includes service in its title. Service to others always seems to be magnified by the extent of the problems that other people are facing. If this evaluation is accurate then funeral service as a profession is a mission driven career in which helping people solve their problems when death enters their lives becomes the core, the epicenter, the nucleus of our lives as funeral professionals.

Let's explore this idea of helping people with problems a little further.

For instance, a lawyer helps people resolve the legal problems that distress them. A physician helps relieve the physical problems that cause suffering. The clergy work with the spiritual problems that bother people. The teacher works with educational problems.

The funeral professional helps people resolve the problems that surround the events of death. Given that the death rate is 100%, the type of help that funeral professionals offer is extremely important.

There has been somewhat of a debate over the years about whether or not funeral professionals are true authentic counselors. Dr. Rollo May in his classic book "The Art of Counseling" points out that anyone who helps a person through a life crisis is really a counselor. As he puts it, "personal counseling is any deep understanding between persons that results in a changing of personality." (p. 120). The relief of suffering produces a change in personality. Clearly then, the work of the funeral professionals, whose very mission in life is to help relieve some of the misery that death creates, falls within the boundaries of Dr. May's definition.

In the funeral counseling and the entire funeral process, people reflect their fears, curiosity, and concerns. These in return are invitations for information, insight, and understanding which the funeral professional is specially trained to offer.

Often the first questions from a family are tentative and exploratory. They indicate a deeper feeling that needs to be understood and explored. People come to a funeral professional voluntarily with the questions that trouble them about death, grief, and the funeral. Funeral professionals are also usually the first professional people that the bereaved talk to after a death. This is a wise method of coping with problems for the funeral professional can and does ease their doubts, fears, and uncertainties.

This, then, is a description of the process of funeral counseling. It involves the quest for information, guidance, suggestions, understanding, insight, reassurance, and options. It opens the doors for healthful action, relief of stress and emotional growth.

Counseling in funeral service is important because it helps people cope with the death crisis that disrupts life if unwisely managed. We usually think that a crisis happens outside of us - the accident, the fatality, the murder or the suicide may seem outside of us. But the emotional crisis of loss is always deep inside of the person who has attachments to the external event.

These emotional crises can cause a special type of pain. Grief emotions can and do shake a person's security system and his or her control mechanisms may be shattered. The person so affected will show the physical and emotional symptoms of their distress. They will ache, feel mental distress, emotional disturbance and basically be filled with self-doubts. One's whole life may be turbulent and uncertain as if he or she were caught off balance and could not right the situation again.

As hard and as difficult as this idea is, it is none the less absolutely true: the resources for ultimately restoring one's balance must come from within. No one can see for anyone else, breathe for another, or even suffer for another. But in a grief crisis, and more specifically a death crisis there can be a temporary process where help is given. An example would be that Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) helps a person carry on the function of breathing temporarily with outside help. When vision is obscured by circumstance, others can guide us. And talking about a loss can ease suffering and this is precisely the goal of funeral service counseling.

Dr. Rollo May says, "The counselor should not relieve his or her counsellee of suffering, but rather redirect his or her suffering into constructive channels." (p. 159). Instead of denying that the suffering exists, the funeral profession in funeral counseling tries to find with the bereaved a meaning in the loss that can sustain life. Many people are broken by death and loss while others are made wiser and better through it. By being a primary guide in the death crisis, funeral professionals keep their eye on the goal of bringing forth and developing inner resources that can enrich life and give meaning even to life's most distressing event.

Funeral counseling is important because it does not seek a superficial approach to the deep problems of life. Funeral service, through rites, rituals, and ceremonies, seeks out wisdom and understanding to help provide the strong resources that are essential for meeting the crises that death creates. As funeral professionals, you have often heard people say, "I did not know how I was going to get through those days, but the funeral helped me so much I found new strength deep inside." Such words imply that a wise and helpful funeral professional was at work. This is a major goal in the funeral profession and is the purpose of this book.

POSSIBLY THE MOST DIFFICULT QUESTION A HUMAN BEING CAN ASK – "WHO AM I?"

Who are we, as funeral directors, to be identified as persons to help the grieving? How do we help the grieving, and what are the easiest and most economically sensible resources that we have at our disposal, right now, to help bereaved families meet their emotional needs?

In the beginning of trying to answer the question of "who am I?" I would like to draw the reader's attention to two facts concerning funeral professionals that I believe are absolutely true: First they possess a tremendous amount of experiential expertise, which is equal and in many cases surpasses even the most rigorous academic accomplishments, and second is the fact that funeral counseling does not exclusively depend on high level academic achievements, instead funeral counseling mostly depends on the simple and very ethereal idea of someone helping someone else with a problem. It is this simple approach to counseling that this book will follow.

So who am I as a funeral professional to be counseling anyway? You may well ask a very valid question such as "I mean isn't counseling just for doctors, and therapists?" or "I always thought you had to go to college for years to be able to counsel someone." The answer to these questions is simple: NO. You don't have to have endless academic degrees to do counseling, and certainly counseling is not just the exclusive territory of doctors

and therapists. As was stated in the previous paragraph this book centers on a simple definition of counseling which is anytime anybody helps anybody with a problem.

This is not to discount education and training, and this book will absolutely encourage any funeral professional to pursue further educational experiences and attainments. All advanced education and training for any funeral professional which translates into enhanced care of bereaved families is a good thing.

However when I was in seminary we did not have one course in the psychology of grief, bereavement counseling or sociology of death and dying, and the seminary I attended was not the exception it was the rule! Hence even the ordained clergy who minister to be bereaved mostly operate under our definition of counseling – anytime anybody helps anybody else with a problem.

The truth is that all Mortuary College curriculums require almost 25% of the course work to be precisely in the areas of psychology of grief, bereavement counseling and sociology of death and dying. The case could easily be made that by adding the typical funeral professionals experiential expertise to the academic requirements required to graduate from a Mortuary College the typical contemporary funeral professional emerges as the most learned professional in the community when it comes to taking on the responsibility of being a counselor to the bereaved.

In fact as funeral professionals we really don't have the option of asking the question "am I a counselor" the only question funeral professionals can really ask is "Will I be a wise and insightful counselor?"

It has been my observation in my career that many times in life simple things are made extraordinarily complicated, and I would suggest that this has sometimes happened in defining the funeral professional's duties and responsibilities in the realm of counseling.

I have tried to simplify this complication by identifying five qualities that every human being in funeral service already possess, even though they might not be aware of these assets, or even if they are licensed or not – everybody in the funeral profession has these qualities at their fingertips.

Here they are:

1. Funeral counselors are people to talk to.
2. Funeral counselors give people something to do.
3. Funeral counselors give people ways to express feelings.
4. Funeral counselors give people something to hold on to.
5. Funeral counselors give people something to believe in.

Let's explore these five important funeral counselor qualities one by one:

1. FUNERAL COUNSELORS ARE PEOPLE TO TALK TO

Whenever we are faced with a tragic circumstance, there is a strong impulse to put the experience into words, to talk it out. This is vital to the process of facing reality of the situation, such as the death of a loved one. Hearing our own words, telling our own story, has a way of convincing our inner realm of feelings as to what has truly happened to us. The wise helping process of the funeral ritual is basically built upon the process of talking. This is the reason that times of funeral arrangements, wakes, public calling hours, Shiva, are so valuable. During these planned times people simply talk. Probably nothing earth shattering or profound will be said, the conversations will not change the political landscape of the country, but emotional healing will take place – it is basically how the therapy of the funeral ritual works. People in crisis usually seek someone who can understand their turbulent feelings and their efforts to put their feelings into words. This is the basic reason why phone lines are jammed in the aftermath of a crisis and/or disaster. Often, this process of understanding is essentially a form of people together discussing situations and the funeral professional using perceptive listening. A skillful listener, who is not threatened or fearful by what he or she hears becomes a sounding board against which the bereaved bounces his or her ideas, until they begin to make sense. The funeral arrangement conference and

conversation provides an unusual opportunity to provide this form of relationship building, communication and beginning healing.

Most people confronted with the problems that are created by death discover that talking the problems out is a highly effective way to deal wisely with them. In times of the death crisis, people are urged to ease their burden by sharing them with others who are specially trained to help them cope. **THIS IS REALLY WHAT FUNERAL SERVICE COUNSELING IS ALL ABOUT.**

EXAMPLE: "THE TAPE RECORDING SYNDROME"

The issue of talking out problems and stresses is easily observable in any funeral home. I have labelled this process the "Tape Recorder Syndrome" and it works this way.

The funeral professional sometimes greets the bereaved with this question: "I'm so sorry for your loss, how did it happen?" Then the bereaved tell their story: "I woke up at 2:30 a.m. and heard Fred coughing, by the time I called 911 he was unconscious, and he died on the trip to the hospital."

The next person, say at the visitation, greets the same bereaved and inquires "How did it happen?" and once again the bereaved will start out with: "I woke up at 2:30 a.m. and heard Fred coughing ...," and repeats verbatim the same exact story.

These repetitions of the same story can easily be told hundreds of times, using the same words, in the exact same sequence.

This pattern of repetition is extremely valuable for by repeated self-talk and doing it in a group supportive setting, the bereaved begins to actually believe what they themselves are saying.

This process usually takes place during the calling hours or time of sharing at the funeral home. This process does not take place as readily if the bereaved isolate themselves from group support.

One of the hallmark skills that most funeral counselors possess is a genuine, sincere and keen sense in the basic human skill of listening.

2. FUNERAL COUNSELORS GIVE PEOPLE SOMETHING TO DO

All societies and cultures surround life crises with acting-out ceremonies that we call rites and rituals. This is the basic idea behind all funeral activities. The funeral rituals is a premier example of a cultural universal. There is no place on earth where people don't do funerals.

These acting-out ceremonies are easily accessible to everyone, and may well be the most useful resources for acting out or expressing deep feelings that are too painful, difficult, or even impossible to put into words alone. As the clergy and psychologist Rev. Dr. Edgar N. Jackson said, "When words fail, people turn to rituals."

The need to do things at the time of crises gently leads a person into a kind of relationship which forms a communication that a person might not easily engage in if the opportunity for a ritual was not provided. Every culture whether contemporary or primitive surrounds the crises of life with acting out ceremonies.

At birth, adolescence, marriage, as well as educational, political and historical events and also at the time of death people used rites, rituals, and ceremonies to attempt to embrace and cope with the rapid changes that these rites of passage create.

Rituals provide important things that people can do to help work through the feelings associated with the event. Ritual and ceremonies are important and helpful activities that people can participate in to help work through the feelings associated with these significant and sometimes critical events.

THESE ACTING-OUT, OR RITUAL PROCESSES HAVE THREE THINGS IN COMMON:

FIRST: THEY SHARE A COMMON FORM OF COMMUNICATION THAT EVERYONE UNDERSTANDS.

CASE STUDY: "CULTURAL MORES"

The following example of common forms of communication that is understood by everyone illustrates the uniqueness that every funeral ritual exhibits.

I was born and raised in the Midwest, where most grief and mourning practices were very restrained and subdued. Rarely did people fall apart at funerals - usually the people I was raised around put on the strongest persona they could. While this restrained grieving was common practice, it definitely had its limitations, for an inordinate number of widows and widowers in my community were often cranky, ill-tempered, and distant. However for good or for ill, this was the form of communication that everyone understood to be "normal" and that's how it was.

When I was twenty years old, I moved to Boston to attend Mortuary College. I took room and board with an Italian Catholic funeral director on the North Shore and the form of communication that everyone understood at Italian funerals in Boston was significantly different from what I understood to be "normal" in the Midwest.

First, in the Italian community at funerals and wakes, people laughed, argued, cried, and even fainted! The participants at these funerals in Boston were much more expressive, dramatic, emotional, and volatile than I had seen back home in the ultra-conservative Midwest.

The Italian community in Boston expressed its grief in a big way. They were not emotionally constrained or restrained. At wakes, a healthy and very impressive series of human events took place. Feelings were not repressed they were without inhibition expressed.

Usually the funeral home chapel was packed with flowers literally wall to wall. Active behaviors included, arguing, making up, eating, drinking, sobbing some more, laughing, and staying at the funeral home for hours. The Italian culture in Boston expressed their feelings!

The common form of communication seen as "normal" between the Italian community in Boston and my Midwestern friends' was glaring. The Italians in Boston were not as cranky ill-tempered or distant as were the people in the Midwest after the funeral was over.

SECOND: ACTING OUT PROCESSES USUALLY CENTERS ON A FORMAL OR INFORMAL PARADE WHICH HAS DEEP SIGNIFICANCE FOR ALL WHO ARE CONCERNED.

EXAMPLE: "EVERYBODY LOVES A PARADE"

For example, when a child loses a pet, if the adults, and this is a big if, allow the child to express his or her inner needs, the child will implement a parade in the burial ceremonies for the dead pet. Without ever having gone to a funeral, children will instinctually initiate a parade when a significant event happens in their lives.

It is the same in times of crisis with people who absolutely need to "parade or process."

Nearly every significant event in life is signified and imprinted in our brains by having a parade. It may be the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, a processional for a wedding, or a procession/parade to a cemetery. Regardless of the form, the ability to parade allows for a nonverbal expression of the significance of the event people are involved with.

The statement is often heard that "I don't want people **PARADING** around me when I'm dead." While this idea may sound attractive, it contains two significant limitations.

First, the very term "funeral" is derived from the word "**funeralis**" which in Latin means a "torch light procession/parade." The funeral is one of the oldest processions or parades known to history.

Second, there is an ancient and well-recognized value in the concept of a human beings making or being involved actively in making a final pilgrimage.

Throughout life, significant events are signaled by a pilgrimage or parade or human beings. This can be walking down a church aisle to be married, marching in a St. Patrick's Day Parade, Christ's pilgrimage to Calvary, or viewing a casket and decedent during a file by at a funeral ritual. Regardless of the type of procession or recession, the concept of the parade is significant and should not be underestimated.

THIRD, ACTING OUT EVENTS, RITUALS EMPLOY ALL LEVELS OF HUMAN RESPONSE, BODY, MIND, AND SOUL. ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF THE FUNERAL IS THE FACT THAT IT INVOLVES THE TOTAL HUMAN IN RESPONSE TO THE EVENT.

The funeral implements the human *body* in two ways:

- 1). The Dead Body is used as the ultimate visible symbol of the life which has lived, and
- 2). The Living Body (the live mourners) who actively participates in the ritual by walking, talking, lifting, carrying, moving, etc.

The funeral implements the human *mind* by:

- 1). the mental expression of deep grief feelings,
- 2). the mental realization about what has actually happened and exploring what it means, and
- 3). the development of mental solutions to reenter the mainstream of life.

The funeral implements the human *soul* by:

- 1). Helping interpret the event of death,
- 2). Expressing the various belief systems of the bereaved and involved individuals,
- 3). Expressing emotions that accompany these beliefs, and
- 4). Giving way to overt conduct expressing these beliefs and emotions through rites, rituals, and ceremonies.

Dr. Edgar N. Jackson points out that the simple idea of doing something is of great importance. Dr. Jackson maintained that when people are not able to wisely act out their feelings, do something about the feelings, then the feelings often times take detours inwards and produce the organic and pathological acting-out that we call illness, or the detour creates types of personality modification that we call mental or emotional illness.

3. FUNERAL COUNSELORS GIVE PEOPLE WAYS TO EXPRESS FEELINGS

The need to express feelings needs to be supported by the setting within which the expression of feelings is valid and appropriate. For example, expressing deep feelings of grief at a funeral home, church, or private home is valid and appropriate -but expressing such feelings at a baseball game, at a public movie, or in the aisle of a grocery store in the midst of surprised strangers can be invalid and inappropriate. Important resources in meeting crises must stimulate the expression of valid feelings. Military service has been said to stimulate the works of heroic acts in historical and social events. Romantic people stimulate the tender emotions that may be expressed at a romantic encounter or a wedding. Funeral acting out rituals, special services, and funeral music and funeral colors are used at death occasions to stimulate the expression of the feelings that are appropriate in times of sorrow and tragedy. Even paid mourners have in times past been used to create the atmosphere for pouring out sad feelings. Not only the music, but also the decor, architecture and those other factors that help create "atmosphere" should be "responsive to" the situation.

The chance to express strong feelings without restraint or inhibition serves a therapeutic purpose. For the alternative is repression with the unhealthy and unfortunate effects that accompany the denial of emotion. The funeral home "atmosphere" quite adequately fulfills all these needs to express grief emotions in a valid and appropriate manner.

CASE STUDY: THE PRESSURE COOKER

I was called to respond to the death of a middle-aged man. When I arrived at the residence, the widow was the picture of composure and control. Her husband's death had not been unexpected she told me, however, she confessed she was a little surprised that he died as fast as he did.

At the funeral conference, her self-imposed self-control was still in fine form and she instructed me that there would be no calling hours, and she would plan the memorial service at a later date--on her own. She did not want the funeral home or the funeral professional involved.

The funeral home I was operating at the time also operated an emergency ambulance service.

It was about eight months later after the death of this gentleman that I received a call requesting our ambulance come to a small department store downtown. The person requesting the ambulance told us that a lady was "going nuts" in his store; the police were already on the scene.

When we arrived on the scene, it actually took me a while to recognize the hysterical woman as the same widow whose husband's death we had taken care of to eight months ago.

To say the very least, this woman now was in a bad way. She later told her physician that she felt like a pressure cooker was boiling inside ever since she knew of her husband's fatal diagnosis. She said at the beginning of her grief she truly thought she could hold it in and be the paragon of strength. As time passed, however she began to feel an impending explosion and what she encountered at the department store ignited here emotional fuse.

In the department store she walked past the record section. As she was browsing through the records she saw an album by Dean Martin. Dean Martin was her husband's favorite singer.

As she stared at the Dean Martin record album she described a pressure cooker volcano-type feeling which was boiling inside her and she could not hold it in, and she just exploded. She burst into tears, smashed the Dean Martin album, and then started throwing all the rest of the records like Frisbees around the store.

The owners of the store and other customers were utterly terrified and mortified, and did not in the least comprehend what was going on, nor should they have been expected to do so.

Had this emotional pressure been released within the funeral home environment, had a funeral professional been in attendance, the outburst would have been appropriate, valid, expected and **MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL - IT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNDERSTOOD.**

As it was this poor soul had basically delayed her healing a lengthy eight months by denying and working against the reality of death. If she had expressed her emotions openly, as difficult as that might well have been at the time of her husband's death in a safe and appropriate place in the presence of people who truly understood, she would have had by the time of her explosion eight months to process and explore this loss experience and hence be all that closer to possibly some type of beginning healing.

4. FUNERAL COUNSELORS GIVE PEOPLE SOME ONE TO HOLD ON TO

One of the more severe effects of the emotional crises concerning death is the sense of rapid, turbulent change, and the infusion of new people into one's life. The famous futurist Alvin Toffler in his book "Future Shock" shows that we have a built-in resistance to rapid change. It is safe to say that people resist rapid change – and some resist it with a vengeance.

We feel secure in the things we know. Too much change and too much confrontation with the unknown or the unfamiliar can produce organic and emotional reactions. We see this in the almost suspicious response people have to new trends and fads and people's feelings can often be overlooked in the response to change, and in the case of rapid change the normal sensitivities that most people possess seem to vanish as people are so preoccupied with how to cope with the change feelings are many times overlooked.

But change is a fact of life, particularly where death is concerned.

The changes created by death are a fact of life, but in our day of very rapid change through technological gadgets every hour, to impersonal business decisions, and the endless cycle of exploding knowledge, we are bound to experience exaggerated complications when the normal life changed which death creates occurs. In other words, contemporary bereaved people have to modify their ways of living much more significantly than our ancestors ever dreamed of doing.

When death comes there is bound to be a great and permanent change in human relationships and emotional states. In such turbulent times, it is important to have people around who have stability and dependability. This is one of the hallmark functions of funeral service and funeral professionals. **THIS IS ALSO ONE OF THE REASONS WHY FAMILIES TEND TO ENGAGE THE SAME FUNERAL HOME AND FUNERAL PROFESSIONAL TIME AFTER TIME A DEATH OCCURS.**

It is important to have ways of doing things that are so familiar that they reduce the emotional effect of too rapid a change. Stable funeral professionals who know how to manage and guide in times of death crises make it possible for the grief-disturbed to stabilize themselves. From this perspective, it is clear that funeral service and funeral professionals contribute indispensably to the mental health of people in their communities.

Familiar ways of doing things not only make it possible to act out deep feelings, but also brings security into life in the very process of acting out those deep feelings. This is why funeral traditions within groups are rarely tampered with. The funeral homes in our towns, villages, and cities provide ways of doing things that people can hold on to when everything else seems to be uncertain and insecure and funeral professionals are the central providers of guiding the bereaved in wise ways of dealing with changes created by death.

EXAMPLE: "THE NEW FUNERAL DIRECTOR IN TOWN."

One of the most interesting aspects of the funeral service profession is the length of time that some communities take in accepting a new funeral director. This practice which is very common is a premier example of how important it is for the bereaved to have something or someone that they know and trust to hold onto.

I remember very well when the "new" funeral director came to town. The funeral home in our community was founded in 1869 (the same year the town was founded). The founder operated the funeral home, furniture store, and ambulance service from 1869-1916, and then his two sons operated the funeral home from 1916 to 1970! In 1970, the youngest brother sold the funeral home when he was 86 years old.

My community was clearly suspicious of the "new funeral director." He did things differently and he was the subject of community gossip and criticism. In time, a level of comfort was attained, but it was not at all unusual for a family to request that the old funeral director who was now in his nineties show up for a funeral -and even though he was confined to a wheel chair, some people in our town just wanted the funeral service to be "done right."

Such is the connection of a funeral professional and what they represent in giving people something to hold on to in times of a death crisis.

5. FUNERAL DIRECTORS OFFER PEOPLE SOME THING TO BELIEVE IN

Death challenges our intellects. Death challenges how we live life. Our thoughts and feelings are deep inside us. When events, such as death, cause us strange internal reactions, it is important for us to be able to nourish the structure of the values and thoughts that sustain our life – game playing throughout life just won't accomplish this. For many, this process is synonymous with religious thought.

Even for people who are cynical or who do not affirm a faith, there is an evident need for exploring the meaning of this permanent event, for death can challenge even the most jaded views of life, and death will challenge even the most hardened impersonal and sterile view of life.

For many death propels them into a type of religious thinking whether they even know it let alone like it. You often hear people pronounce that "I am not religious, I am spiritual." It is not our purpose here to pick apart this view, however religious thought does have two cardinal virtues that many people, even jaded people, have found to be helpful when confronted with the stark realities of death. First all religions acknowledge that life is much more than a mere biological event, and second is that religions acknowledge the existence of the super natural. By offering the idea that the super natural exit religions offer people interpretations and guidance in

exploring the meaning of death in a person's life, which many times leads to deeper spiritual maturity, and greater insights into the character of the person on this grief journey.

We have for the first time in human history, a scientific framework within which we can view the indestructible energy of consciousness as a practical basis for the ideas of immortality. The nuclear physicist moves beyond sensory measurements of time and space and sees ultimate reality in terms of energy forms that are perceived only with the most delicate instruments. Modern people with a new cosmology and a new psychology can think of their existence with a built-in dimension and this can give them something to believe in, beyond mere physical existence, the presence of the event called death. So for both the religious and those who are not comfortable with religion or reject it outright, there is something to believe in that can bring security into life in times of death crisis and rapid change. All of these qualities are helpful for those going through the funeral process.

The helper in this process is the funeral professional, and here is an example of how funeral directors give people something to believe in.

EXAMPLE: "THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK"

One of the most poignant examples of a funeral professional giving people something to believe in is exemplified in this story which I call "The Little Black Book."

Many years ago I worked for a man whom today I call a Great American Funeral Director. This gentleman was one of life's "Unforgettable Characters." He was definitely from the old school in funeral service. His lifelong motto was "families first, no matter what" and he lived this with a consistency that few people ever achieve in attaining their ideals.

The funerals he conducted were flawless and people genuinely admired and respected him. He was a grand person. One of the most interesting aspects of this man was his "little black book." It was a small black book with a lock on the cover. It looked as if it was very old and it was his constant companion.

If you went to his office, you would see it lying on his desk. At funerals, he would pull the black book out and scribble brief notations in it. He wouldn't do this all the time, just once in a while.

If you picked up his suit coat, you could feel the black book in his coat pocket.

Can you just imagine the gossip and speculation around the funeral home coffee room by the staff as to what was in the black book? I remember the first day I worked for him, the embalmer told me to be on the lookout for the little black book. Soon enough, I saw him take it out and scribble in it. Later that day, I asked the embalmer what the book was for, and he responded with a very knowing glance, "Well what do you think is in the book?" I was not the sharpest knife in the drawer and very innocently said, "I have no idea." "Oh, come on farm boy," the embalmer replied. "He keeps his list of girlfriends in there." I was stunned!

Later I asked the receptionist about the black book, her response was that it was where he kept the list of the horses he bet on at the race track. Again, I was stunned. My employer was a womanizing horse better! I could not believe it.

For nearly three years the mysterious saga of the little black book continued. All the time, the stories, gossip, and intrigue getting more and more spectacular and ridiculous.

Then suddenly one day, while conducting a funeral, my boss, this great funeral director, died. He had a massive heart attack just as we were putting the casket in the funeral coach and was dead when he hit the ground. I was crushed.

Four days later, we had a grand funeral for him. He was laid out in a solid bronze casket, flowers were everywhere and when we took him to the church, the place was packed and the Governor of the State was in the front row.

I was standing in the back of the church with the church truck (that was my job), as the minister went on about what a great man my boss was and how just knowing him made us all better people. I couldn't have agreed with the minister more.

Then the minister asked my boss's widow to come up and talk about her husband's character. I thought, "Now this will be great," as she rose to walk to the pulpit. It was then I saw she was carrying his little black book! My tears of grief instantaneously turned to sweats of terror. "Gosh almighty, "I thought, "What will she say, Oh, what does she know?"

She walked to the pulpit, stood with complete dignity and looked at the assembly and said, "Thank you all for being here today. I want to share with you a secret about my husband's character." I thought, "Oh boy, here it comes!" She continued, "You see this small book. Most of you know he carried it with him constantly. I would like to read to you the first entry of the book dated April 17, 1920 - Mary Flannery she is all alone. The next entry August 8, 1920 - Fred Pritchard, he is all alone. The next entry – Edna Gale November 15, 1920, she is all alone.

You see, when he made funeral arrangements with somebody that he knew would now be all alone because of the death, he would write their name in this book. Then at Christmas time he would call each person, maybe only three or four people a year, and invite them to share a wonderful Christmas dinner at our house.

I want you to know that this was the true character of my husband; he was concerned, compassionate, and caring. This is what the little black book is all about, and I also want you to know that this being 1971, he did this for 56 Christmases."

There was not a dry eye in the church, and I remember thinking, "I knew that book wasn't a book of women or horses!"

Now many years after his death, I look back at the inner spirit that motivated this funeral director to do what he did. During his life he truly gave people, humble ordinary everyday people something to believe in.

May this belief in kind, thoughtful, and compassionate action guide each of us in our work in this great profession. Just think of the believing in others possibilities if every member of the funeral profession developed their own little black books. The results of believing in human kindness and acting on it would be staggering!

ASSESSMENT

We began this chapter by asking the most difficult question a human being can ask oneself is "Who Am I and/or Who Am I to be Counseling?" While this question is difficult, it need not be. To be sure the process of answering it can sometimes be painful, it is nonetheless ultimately required of every funeral professional who genuinely loves our great profession to ask.

Take time, every day, to ask this all important question. Your answers will help you improve your skills as a human being and as a funeral professional. And when we as funeral professionals improve our care of our families we serve will automatically improve, and this is a very admirable life goal.

As we move into our next areas of exploration the remaining information will build upon the five inner resources that everyone in our beloved profession already possess.

THE WISDOM AND LOGIC OF FUNERAL COUNSELING

A first principle in funeral service counseling is that helping the bereaved comes not only from what is said, but also from what is done.

The activities of the funeral are one of the most accessible and economical form of grief help available to everyone. It is an individually oriented process that starts with the death and culminates with the final disposition of the body and continues with aftercare to the living. This process is called the "Cycle of Service."

The funeral has its own built-in wisdom and logic for it responds to the need for people to go through a series of meaningful events that satisfy their deep needs. Whenever we study the ceremonies surrounding death,

whether in primitive culture or in modern society, we find this innate wisdom at work to satisfy the emotional needs of persons faced with the acute crises that death creates.

Paramount to the internal wisdom of funeral counseling is the social purposes and values of the funeral. In its most elementary form all funerals are a social function. Said another way, it is terribly difficult to have a funeral without people as wise procedures, wise insights, and wise counsel is the exclusive province of human beings. As crazy as this might sound people cannot obtain wise insights from animals, this can only be had by connections with other human beings.

THE SOCIAL PURPOSES OF THE FUNERAL

The funeral in its purest form is usually a public ritual to which all are invited and none are excluded. Socially, funerals serve a three valid purposes, and each one involves human beings:

1. They give all in the community a chance to share in the grief work.
2. They meet the acute needs of those who are in a state of emotional crises.
3. They give the general public a chance to do any unfinished grief work.

Because of this three-fold validity based inherent nature of the ancient wisdom of the funeral, the private funeral is truly a denial of the social wisdom lessons which generations of human being have learned from participating in funeral rituals and ceremonies. The effort to deal with death privately rejects the ancient wisdom which acknowledges the importance of the concern and support of the community. The private funeral violates the wisdom of the centuries and in the end the consequences is it deliberately or accidentally excludes and rejects most of the wise and therapeutic psychological aspects of the funeral process.

THE SIX LOGICAL STEPS OF THE FUNERAL

The funeral involves at least logical six steps that need to be accepted and implemented in proper order. When this order is violated, ignored, or denied, there is apt to be a denial and forfeiture of the basic resources that the value of the funeral affords. These six steps are:

1. The event of the death.
2. The notification of the event of death.
3. The confrontation of the reality of the death.
4. The inclusive support of the community.
5. The providing of religion, spiritual and/or philosophical support.
6. The farewell ritual for the decedent.

1. THE EVENT OF DEATH

The event of death is the starting point for the series of time limited events that characterize the funeral. Naturally, the death comes first.

2. THE NOTIFICATION OF THE EVENT

The notification of the event of death is an important part of the process of summoning family and community to participate in the funeral process. The family and friends and general community have a right to know of a death so that they can respond accordingly. This leads to the confrontation of the reality of the death. If, however, the confrontation precedes the notification, it can be traumatic.

When there is notification before the death or confusion surrounding the notification, a variety of embarrassing and interesting circumstances can develop.

This happened in the life of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. The press published his obituary prematurely and wrote that the man whose invention (dynamite in bombs) had killed thousands had died himself. Mr. Nobel read the brutal reports of his life and death with horror and when he tried to correct the error, it caused people to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed and at a loss for words as how to respond properly – it was not humorous. It was one gigantic mess! When there is in reality no death, it is inappropriate, distressing, and unfortunate as well as inaccurate. When this happens from the start this logical proper order is violated and the normal progressive nature of the funeral process is disturbed.

Interestingly Mr. Nobel was motivated by reading the scathing notices of his death that he resolved that the world would not remember him for inventing something that killed thousands of people. Hence Mr. Nobel, who was independently wealthy started a philanthropic organization known today as the Nobel Prize. The Nobel Prize is today given to people who are humanitarians of the first order, and whose work on behalf of the human race has made the world a much better place.

CASE STUDY: "TOO MUCH, TOO FAST – EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD"

This occurred in my funeral career. In 1975, a father called me and asked for advice and counsel concerning his daughter who had gone through the tragic experience of confrontation with death before notification.

She was attending college many miles away and had been riding one evening with a young man she was dating. They saw a car with motor trouble, stopped and the man got out of the car to inquire as to how they might be of help. When he turned back into the road, he was hit by a car traveling at high speed and was hurled a hundred and forty feet into a field. Death was instantaneous. The young woman frantically left her car and searched the field, in darkness, until she stumbled over his body in deep grass. The impact of this tragic moment of discovery deeply disturbed her.

The logical order of the funeral process was disrupted by circumstances, that truly were beyond anyone's control had turned into a psychologically harrowing experience with years of haunting memories, as the result.

As dramatic as this case study is, it is non-the-less the exception. Most people do not die this way, the point being that most people die with the opportunity for the logical sequence of notification to take place, and this is an extremely important portion of the entire funeral experience. To be sure sometimes we have no control in these types of circumstances, but truth is most time we do, and we should take advantage of proper notification.

In the end the logic of proper notification gives the chance for tentative exploration of the deep feelings of loss that are involved. This may at first involve denial, but it should engage the person in the orderly process of moving toward confrontation and then on through the other steps that are essential parts of the funeral process.

3. THE CONFRONTATION OF REALITY

This involves honest confrontation with what has happened, many times this is referred to as "establishing the reality of death".

Honest confrontation with what has really happened is important to break through the natural defenses which include denial and the desire to run away from the painful reality. **In fact, Dr. Erich Lindemann (the Harvard professor and author of "The Coconut Grove Fire Study") contended that this was the most important part of the whole funeral process, for when the living person confronts the dead body, he or she is compelled to break through any denials and come to terms with reality.**

The decedent is the ultimate symbol of death's final and permanent reality. It is a moment of truth that helps to marshal the inner resources essential to meet the deep inner needs to cope with loss.

Establishing the reality of death is most often the beginning point of the healing process for the bereaved. It is tremendously difficult for many to face up to this, but in the long run this essential wisdom inherent in the logical process of the funeral is very important. It should not be underestimated concerning its value and worth.

Yet there are people who seem to feel otherwise. They chant the repeated line "I would rather remember them when they were alive." However as catchy as these words may be people who hide behind them offer little support for this position other than, denial, humor, anxieties and sarcasm. It sounds good, but it is not good!

This approach to the reality of death is an ineffectual coping mechanism. People who advocate avoiding the painful task of facing reality appear to feel that they may in some mysterious or clever way avoid the pain of grief and the need to process mourning – this is a coping mechanism, but it is a poor coping mechanism.

"I would rather remember them when they were alive" is a poor coping mechanism because it is dishonest. The death person is NOT alive. This never really works, it is just an illusion of convenience. Another catchy phrase is "No funeral, no grief" may be attractive to people fearful of confronting honestly the reality of death, but the idea is full of perilous psychological traps.

The way our feelings work we do not have these simplistic and immature forms of choice that seem to be so neatly tied up in our catchy contemporary phraseologies.

We do not decide whether or not we will have a painful experience at the time of loss. The only choice we have is whether or not we will manage the loss so that we have a clean wound that can heal quickly, or whether we will have an infected wound that will heal slowly and with great difficulty. It seems to be a valid psychological observation that the more quickly and the more honestly a person confronts the fact and reality of death, the more quickly the process of rebuilding the inner being and resources will take place.

Naturally, as professionals want us the grieving people, who seek our guidance and help, to do the right thing AND SO WE WOULD NOT, AS FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS, encourage them or conspire with them to do things that violate their own best interest. Would we? Hence, I firmly recommend viewing the remains, so the bereaved might logically and emotionally experience the ultimate psychological benefits in confrontation with death.

CASE STUDY: "NEVER TOO LATE"

Several years ago I was privileged to visit the United States Mortuary at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The facilities and people were first class, and one left the experience with the unmistakable knowledge that the government of the United States believes in, endorses, and practices the ethic of reverence for the dead.

During the tour, I had an experience that literally reconfirmed for me, the importance of the work the funeral profession does to help the mental health of communities by establishing the reality of death, and by bringing formal closure to life through rites, rituals, and ceremonies.

While I was walking through the military mortuary facility, I eventually ended up on the place where the Missing in Action soldiers are identified. This room was quite large, and on numerous tables there were hundreds of bones with anthropologists trying to unravel the mystery of who these people were in life.

I struck up a conversation with one of the anthropologists, and this is what she told me about the value of saying goodbye, establishing the reality of death, the value, benefit and purpose of funeral rituals and bringing some closure to one of life's major events - the death of someone we are attached to.

Our conversation revolved around the identification of a U.S. service man who had been dead and missing for fifty-one years. The body was positively identified at the military mortuary, and this deceased man's mother was still alive and living in Pennsylvania.

Proper notification was made, and the mother's instructions were to bring her son back home for burial. The bones of the man were placed in a plastic body pouch, the uniform of his rank laid over the pouch, this was then placed in a military casket, and the casket was draped with the national colors.

An Air Force transport flew the body to San Francisco and then on to Pennsylvania.

The anthropologist went as an escort.

The anthropologist said that at the calling hours at the funeral home, the mother sat close by the head of the casket patting the casket and rubbing the flag on her cheek throughout the evening. The mother, the anthropologist thought, expressed her deep attachment to her son by this activity.

Interestingly the mother of the deceased ignored the anthropologist throughout all of the funeral rituals until they took the sacred remains to the cemetery for final consignment.

At the burial the next day, the military performed their customary ritual and presented this man's mother with the flag which covered his casket.

Following the committal, the mother finally approached the anthropologist and asked, "The undertaker tells me you are the person who identified my son?" The military anthropologist answered, "Yes, I am." With that, the mother's eyes welled up with tears, and she said, "My dear, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. Do you know what it is like not to sleep for fifty-one years? I worried about him so much, was he alive or dead? If he was alive why can't he get home, and if he is dead why can't they bring him home? They finally brought him home, and you know tonight I will finally sleep, tonight I know where my baby is."

The anthropologist was overwhelmed by this experience, and she relayed to me that at that moment she became committed to the value, benefit and purpose of the funeral, and in the therapeutic value of confronting reality of death no matter how long it had been since the event of loss.

4. GROUP SUPPORT

In times of crisis our social nature tends to reach out to others for group support. With this reach often times comes understanding, love, confirmation and support. Quite simply put, in times of crisis, many of us need human help and we can usually get it from other humans (this seems clearly to be the mission of the funeral profession).

Funeral help normally provides both formal and informal ways by which group support can be provided. A wake, visitation, calling hours, Shiva and times of sharing provides a very important time and place where people can meet, talk, and share their feelings. The more formal services also provide the opportunity for neighbors, friends, and the community to come together to provide this supportive relationship.

From this perspective then, the obituary is not a mere news announcement placed in the classified ads, but rather a serious call for support by grieving people. Most funeral professionals can attest to the critical importance of the proper placement and timing of the obituary, for if the obituary is wrong or worse is not even published the consequences for most every funeral professional on earth will be very unpleasant!

The informal funeral help from people may vary from place to place, but it usually involves gift-giving and gift-receiving. Whether it be a salad, a cake, a book, or flowers the intent is the same.

Flowers are the most ancient type of funeral gift and speak an eloquent, though non-verbal language. In many ways, the human community gathers around the emotionally wounded and seeks to give them strength to face the painful reality, as well as the assurance that their deep feelings are understood and accepted for what they are, the manifestations of a love or friendship that is fractured.

This social support by the group for the bereaved is one of the primary reasons that funeral homes even exist. The funeral home is the place where the isolation of the bereaved is liberated and the bereaved can be shown attention without invading the privacy of their own home.

CASE STUDY: "FAMILY FEUD"

In 1974, the father of two maiden sisters died and I was called to handle the funeral. The father was 102 years old and his two daughters were 78 and 80 years old. The two sisters had not spoken to each other since 1918 at the end of World War I. They had lived in the same town, only three blocks apart, but had not uttered one syllable to each other for fifty-six years. Everyone in town knew of their distance, but no one knew the real story.

The older sister had nursed the father throughout a lingering illness until his death. This sister took complete control of the funeral and requested that her sister's name be left out of the obituary. No amount of compassionate persuasion could change her mind and the obituary when printed listed only the elder daughter as the survivor.

We laid the father in the chapel and the elder daughter gave her blessing to the work we had done. There would be two days of calling hours and a funeral on the third day.

At three o'clock on the second day, the elder sister sat alone in the chapel when the younger sister came through the front door. The younger sister had a small black jewelry case and walked right over to her elder sister and said very bluntly, "This really belongs to you, I am sorry for keeping it so long, but I was jealous when Papa gave it to you - here take this and with it my apology, for what it is worth."

The elder sister sat down took the black jewelry case, opened it up, and sobbed for an hour, all the time embracing and kissing her younger sister. It was a touching and valuable moment, and none of us knew what was actually going on.

Only later, we learned that when the father had returned to the states after the war, he gave his elder daughter a military hero medal that General John J. Pershing had given him. One day in a fit of jealousy, the youngest daughter stole the medal but tried to convince the eldest daughter that it was just lost and would turn up someday. Of course the eldest daughter did not believe the story and hence a fifty-six year feud ensued.

There had been the event of death, a proper notification, and even the establishment of the reality of death, but it took another of the logical sequence of the wisdom of the funeral, namely group support, for this to happen. I question seriously if such healing would ever had taken place had not the funeral home had its doors opened, and available so emotions could be expressed. If the sisters hadn't been in the environment of the funeral home would this have happened anyway? Possibly, but remember friends they had lived only blocks away for over a half a century and nothing had taken place. The wisdom and logic of the funeral ritual is an unspoken motivator for the drama of human life to unfold – its potentials are truly limitless.

Such are the social possibilities of relationship healing through the funeral and the purpose of funeral home. I doubt very much whether this resolution of love and justice would have occurred in any place other than the funeral home under the circumstances; the funeral home was indeed the appropriate atmosphere to stimulate such behavior.

5. RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUPPORT

One aspect of the funeral process is so important that it deserves special attention. After a person has gone through the process of confronting the reality of death, and having that reality confirmed by themselves and the community, there is a need to move on from the confrontation of death to the confrontation of life and the resources for continued living.

The manner in which people process this movement varies widely. For instance, some people turn to drugs and alcohol as their resources for confronting life, others turn to the profession of psychiatric care, some turn on themselves and self-destruct through suicide, and others freeze their emotional growth for the rest of their lives, and hence are isolated and immune from both the joys and sorrows that life has in store.

For many, though, religion has become the resource for coping wisely from a loss that is experienced and this seems to have a great deal of wisdom behind it. Religion affirms first that the fact of life is more than a biological function. It has tried to assure people that there is something about the human that is more than a physical body, and that the supernatural exists and within that invisible realm hope of eternity is a reality.

For many, even avid anti-religious people, when they suffer a loss, they experience a need to experience a larger perspective on life because they have been thrust into a larger than life experience. The former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop summed this idea up very well when he wrote that "there are no atheists at the bedside of a dying child."

What Dr. Koop meant was this: death challenges most of our security and stability resources. When people die, oftentimes even for the unreligious, religious type thinking is stimulated whether the person labels it as religious or not.

Hence, what religious thought has to offer in the funeral and in the experience of funeral counseling is of great importance. In fact, this unique period of time of facing grief, stimulating faith, and gaining the larger perspective is so important that every effort should be made in funeral counseling to aid the religious officiant in her or his significant task. The importance of this issue is so evident that today funeral professionals are taking on the role of “surrogate” ministers by default of simply being present. Add to this that the “celebrant” movement has become ever more popular in our profession and this alone affirms the ancient need for the bereaved to find ways to express their feelings.

Even when people deny a specific form of religious faith, the psychological equivalent (celebrant services) should be provided by some form of service that puts the tragic events of life into a larger cosmic pattern.

Action upon emotions should provide some of the important values that are usually found in the religious service, even if the word religious is never mentioned. It is important to remember from a funeral service counseling perspective that just because people may not be religious in the strict sense is not a reason for denying them the resources that are a part of spiritual and meditative growth. Regardless of the form, the funeral needs to be designed around the following guidelines:

- The funeral ritual should be instructive. It has a teaching role which is limitless.
- The funeral ritual should indoctrinate people. Not indoctrination akin to brain-washing, but instead it is an opportunity to share belief systems. Indoctrination usually includes suggestions on avenues of help that the bereaved might well have never thought about before.
- The funeral should interpret events. It should explain why the loss has happened and the need to confront reality with honesty.

6. FAREWELL RITUAL FOR THE DECEDENT AND THE LIVING

Last, but certainly not least, is the farewell, leaving taking of the decedent through internment, cremation, or removal to a medical school for gross anatomical dissection. To leave a body without an accepted farewell is unsanitary, unlawful, and uncaring. There is a finality and completeness about this act of final farewell that is both symbolic and essential. Persons who have avoided this part of the funeral have reported to me that they have a feeling of incompleteness and amazingly these innocent people wonder why.

There is no life without death and vice versa. All that we are physically comes from the earth, and it is appropriate that the physical forms in which we have lived are returned to the earth either bodily or as cremated remains. Symbolically, what falls to the earth has a way of springing up into new life. We plant seeds with the hope of new growth. The meaning of this final farewell ritual and visually completing this part of the funeral process may be of great importance to those who have suffered loss.

Taking on the responsibility of fulfilling the principles of funeral counseling means never ignoring this critical step or underestimating its importance in the logical sequence of the healing nature of the funeral ritual.

CASE STUDY: "THE FOOTBALL TEAM"

In the mid 1970's, a young man who was the star of the high school football team in our community was tragically killed in an automobile accident. The person killed was 17 years old, came from a well-respected family, and was a good student.

Any funeral professional reading this case study can well imagine the explosion of grief reactions from the entire community and particularly the students and faculty of the high school.

Adolescent grief is a highly intense and volatile and thespian experience.

The six logical steps that I have already outlined here were indeed taking place, but it was at the cemetery, at the final farewell ritual that one could visually see that the members of his football team were in a particularly distressing situation.

These young men were at a loss as how to wisely express their grief. While the logical six steps had been valuable and effective for most of the community and bereaved family it was clear, even at the funeral home calling hours, that this important group of people were lost. They clearly didn't know how to express their emotions, as they simply stood around the lobby of the funeral home with their hands in their pockets, saying appropriate but stupid comments for teenagers, laughing at the wrong time, and just grunting when someone would try to engage any of them in conversation.

Most of these young men were extremely large in size and had already learned very well how to behave like "macho men."

Later nervousness, irritability, and insomnia were words used by the parents of these team members to describe their behavior, before they all went to participate in the final farewell ritual.

This internal tension was actually innocent grief ignorance which was awkwardly trying to find a way to express itself, but unfortunately, the first five steps of the funeral process failed to accommodate this pressing need.

We went in procession to the cemetery for the final farewell service. At the conclusion of the committal service the other mourners in turn left to go home, but the members of this football team lingered. They would not or could not leave the grave. Finally, by pure chance, I asked the young men if they would like to help the sexton fill in the grave. Immediately, they all responded with great interest and enthusiasm. The sexton also supported this idea (less work for him, understandably) and went to the shed get several more shovels.

These boys took off their jackets and began to work; and work they did! The dirt was flying everywhere; the boys were sweating profusely; and you could literally see the tension of their unresolved grief begin to disappear.

One hour later, the work was completed. Exhausted and covered with dirt and sweat these young men, now had a totally different mental attitude. They left the cemetery with the feeling that they had participated in their friend's final farewell and hence, they had done the right thing. Also, they had literally worked off much of their internal stress by using large muscle activity. This is the exact same principle as when someone jogs or exercises to relieve stress.

Later, the parents reported to me that their sons slept the sleep of the saved and innocent after they had participated in this valuable activity in the funeral process. I have often pondered how these young men would have fared had not the opportunity to participate in the final disposition of their good friend been afforded them? As with the two old spinster sisters who finally reconciled in the funeral home, even though they only lived block away from each other, this final logical step of farewell was afforded by the funeral – yes it might have happened somewhere else, in some other fashion, but they we will never know the answer to those questions, will we? What we know is that within the six logical steps of the ancient ritual we call the funeral lurks possibilities for grief help that people can only experience if they have a funeral and participate in the six logical steps.

OBJECTIVES IN FUNERAL COUNSELING

Within the structure of funeral service counseling, there are four major objectives. They are:

1. The need to face reality.
2. The need to express feelings.
3. The need for group support.
4. The need to develop inner resources.

1. THE NEED TO FACE REALITY

Under stress, people try to avoid pain and discomfort. With physical pain we can faint. With emotional pain we can try to deny the reality which is distressing. In effect we try to convince ourselves that it really isn't so. Some people even go so far as to think that if they have no funeral, in some magic or carefree way they can avoid the pain of death and grief. Quite the opposite is true. Denial spreads the crisis all through life and makes it even harder to manage it wisely. It is always more sound to face the facts no matter how difficult and reject the falsehood of denial. The things people do at the time of death help them face reality fully and completely. Only then are they in a position to healthfully work through the crisis. Illusion and delusion are components of emotional illness. An honest recognition of reality moves people toward emotional health.

CASE STUDY: "MARY"

I was called by Mary in 1979 to care for her mother's funeral. It was the first funeral that Mary had ever attended. Mary's mother had taken her own life. Mary had grown up in a family that protected children from death and evoked a great amount of death anxiety. Three of her grandparents had died when she was a child, but she did not attend the funerals.

Mary's other grandparent died in Florida when she was thirty-five. At this time, Mary was living in California and had just had a baby. Her parents strongly objected to her attending the funeral of the last grandparent. Mary's mother assured her that the grandparent would want everyone to remember her as she was alive. Mary did not attend the last grandparent's funeral.

When Mary's own mother died, she arranged a disposition with me that reflected her lifelong avoidance of death. Nothing I said in funeral counseling had any effect (this sometimes happens). Mary never saw her mother's corpse -and neither did anyone else. She insisted the casket be kept closed.

She later she told me that she was never totally convinced her mother was in it.

Years later, she relayed how she experienced frequent dream states where she received a telegram announcing that her dead mother had "finally been located" and that the report of the suicide was incorrect. Then she would awake from those dreams panicked, hopeful, and confused. Then as reality took over, she was overwhelmed by a rush of pain as raw and all consuming as it was on the day her mother had died.

Mary's difficulty originated in her systematic avoidance of the reality of her situations. Mary lived in a world of delusion that death had nothing to do with her, even when the event of death was intimately staring her in the face.

In effect, Mary spent years re-burying her mother through confusing dream states. In her effort to shelter herself and others from pain, she left open an emotional door which took her years to close.

When Mary's mother-in-law died seven years later, she availed the resources of the funeral to face reality and viewed the dead human body, availed the six logical steps, and had a healthy final farewell at the crematory.

2. THE NEED TO EXPRESS FEELINGS

Feelings have their own validity – people constantly try, but in truth no one can tell you how to feel. They are a valid part of us and cannot be compared or measured. We do not decide whether or not we are going to have feelings. All we can do is decide whether or not we are going to respect them and express them wisely. We have a tendency to feel uncomfortable in the presence of strong feelings. We may try to keep people from crying. This is unwise, for nature's safety valves have a purpose, and it is better to express feelings than to repress them.

CASE STUDY: "FOR YOUR OWN GOOD" It has often crossed my mind when I speak to younger funeral directors about the period of time that we operated the ambulance service how much they missed concerning learning about the raw data stuff of life.

Here is an experience that I had years ago when I innocently witnessed how allied professionals can unwittingly conspire to sacrifice a person's knowledge of grief's meaning and reality on the altar of their own anxieties.

When I was a student in Boston we received an ambulance call one afternoon where a construction worker had suffered a terrible accident where his left leg had been amputated.

This was years before the days of Emergency Medical Technicians and paramedics. What we offered was as sophisticated treatment as was possible at the time - Advanced First Aid. When we arrived at the scene, it was clear to most that the man was already dead, but the instructions from the State Police was to transport him to the hospital where he would be pronounced "Dead on Arrival."

In the meantime, while all the activity was taking place at the accident scene, the State Police had notified the man's wife and told her that we were in route to the hospital. The wife was not told that her husband was, in fact, already dead.

The timing was unbelievable. Just as we pulled into the ambulance entrance, the wife pulled up right behind the ambulance. No one actually realized who she was until she started screaming when we pulled her husband's body out of the back of the ambulance. There is no need to graphically describe what this scene looked like.

The wife followed us into the hospital and the following scenario was unfortunately played out. As the wife screamed and sobbed, the emergency room physician came out and pointed to her and said, "Get her the hell out of here!" A nurse came over and said, "Now, we can't have this here," and the chaplain came over and told her that for her own good she should return to her car until she could calm down because she was disturbing the other patients and staff. With this remark, the wife picked up a ceramic lamp and threw it across the waiting room. The hospital called security and she was escorted from the facility.

Now this happened many years ago and things have changed in many favorable ways as to how opportunities for the bereaved to express feelings is handled. The significance of this case study, however, is to ask for a close examination of our own attitudes towards loss and the development a healthy, sensitive and insightful appreciation of the needs of others to express their grief.

3. THE NEED FOR GROUP SUPPORT

We are social beings. Our language, our culture, our structure of relationships emanates from group processes. During the crises of life, we seek the understanding and response of those around us. In funeral service, this process takes the form of a wake, visitation, Shiva, or time of sharing. People affected by a death want to know what has happened and also to accept and share feelings. No one can be a complete person without fruitful relationships with others. No one can cope well with the major crises of life in isolation. Because of this, public sharing of the death experience is important because it is not safe to draw lines as to who is affected and who is not by a death. For this reason private funerals have identifiable limitations. So it is of great importance for people to be able to relate effectively and communicate meaningfully when they are in times of stress. This process of communication can take place formally or informally, through the funeral experience with family, neighbors, and friends.

CASE STUDY: "YOU KNOW WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE!"

In 1974, I made funeral arrangements with a man whose wife had died very suddenly. Throughout the arrangement conference, the bereaved husband was extremely agitated. He demanded absolute control, was supremely self-confident, but at the same time was almost in a panic state.

He had four children, but allowed none of them to attend the conference. He was about sixty years old and was financially successful.

Upon sitting down, he immediately gave me the following orders in almost a military style. First, he wanted the body of his wife disposed of immediately - no matter what method of disposition he wanted it done in the

quickest fashion possible even if it would cost more! Second, he was set on the fact that he did not want any people "parading around" (to use his exact phrase), or snooping around his home or the funeral home "fiddling" (to use his exact word) with his private business. He wanted to be alone so he refused all my suggestions concerning a public obituary.

The arrangement conference lasted thirty minutes and he made it clear that he wanted no assistance from me or the funeral home. The legal and business papers were signed and the formalities were completed.

Three weeks later, this same bereaved husband came to the funeral home to settle the expenses. Now, however, he had a totally different appearance. Whereas before he was an agitated ball of fire, barking orders, demanding his privacy even from his children. He was now actually so extremely sad. He stared at his shoelaces while I prepared the paperwork.

Finally, he looked at me in tears and said, "Boy, you sure know who your friends are when you get in a pinch." "How so?" I implied. "You know not one of my neighbors came over, called, wrote or anything after my wife died!" "How could they all ignore me like that?"

Without damaging his self-esteem, I suggested that now he might place an obituary in the newspaper and that this would help open the door for the type of group support that he so desperately needed.

4. THE NEED TO DEVELOP INNER RESOURCES

There is a human need to discover and develop the inner resources that can help a person through an emotional crisis. As external events produce internal crisis, so also the resources for resolving the external crisis must be developed from within. Of course, there can be help from those around the bereaved person. And because most times the funeral professional is on the scene we play an indispensable role.

But if there is to be a healthful resolving of life's crises, the inner being must be strong or must develop strength. These inner resources can come through reason, group support, personal insight, and perception on the events of life. The initial response to crises or threats to the security system of the individual usually triggers the basic defense mechanisms of the person. But no one can live continually with his or her defenses up. One must learn to build bridges from his or her initial emotional response to more calm and reasoned judgements. The alternatives certainly possess negative consequences. Only by so doing can one move into the future with the ability to manage life. Discovering the resources for this type of wise self-management is of great importance.

For this precise reason in funeral counseling aftercare programs and attempts take on an even more significant role.

CASE STUDY: I WILL BE ALRIGHT

In my early years of preparing to become a funeral director, I witnessed this happen in the funeral home I worked at.

We were called to handle the funeral of an eight year old girl who had contracted meningitis and had died a painful and debilitating death. Her parents had long since abandoned her and she had lived with her maternal grandparents. The family had moved from Mexico to our community where the grandfather had retired from the railroad. The grandparents and the granddaughter were devote Roman Catholics.

The preparation of the deceased proceeded very carefully and when the funeral arrangements were made, the grandparents honestly told my employer that because of legal troubles with the girl's parents, they were low on funds. They were highly relieved when they learned that our funeral home had a longstanding policy not to charge for the funerals of children.

A white child's casket was delivered, the body casketed and the symbols of mourning of the Church appropriately displayed.

At 10:30 a.m. the door-bell rang at the funeral home and the grandfather was standing on the porch. It was clear he had been drinking. He asked me if he could come in and spend some time with his "Baby" as he called her. The old man staggered into the Chapel and began to weep and sob. He did not stop for two hours. By 1:00 p.m. I could see that between the alcohol and crying he had exhausted himself. I asked him if he wanted a bite to eat and he said no. A half an hour later, I went to check on him and found him sound asleep on the floor next to the casket. I shut the doors of the Chapel and let him sleep. Formal calling hours were not to begin until the next day.

I was making this all up as I went, and I was scared to death!

At 6:30 p.m., five hours later, the doors to the Chapel opened and the grandfather was a new man. He had wept himself dry, and slept off the alcohol and stress, and sat with me for another hour talking about his granddaughter. When he left the funeral home, he turned around and said to me, "I will be alright."

You could see the man muster all his inner resources to get through this "valley of death" before your eyes - and he was alright. He had dealt with his shadows and continued to live a fruitful life.

This is yet another example of the influence of funeral service counseling. It is also a prime example that one, funeral service counseling does not have to be confined to the arrangement office of the funeral home, and two that our working definition that counseling is anytime anybody helps someone with a problem is highly applicable to our profession – in fact this case study shows that counseling happens all the time in every funeral home whether anybody calls it counseling or not!

THE CHALLENGES OF FUNERAL COUNSELING

UNPOPULAR SUBJECTS Because I am highly committed to funeral service and out of a deep love for the good funeral service does, I am compelled to sum up this glaring challenge of funeral counseling this way: **the subjects of death and funerals are not, have never, and probably will never ever be popular or even interesting to many people.** Herein lies the challenge that faces every funeral professional in the world: the death rate is 100% and people are not comfortable with the subject or that fact.

Given this combination it is no wonder that many people are on a collision course with the inevitable and poorly prepared both emotionally and situationally. It then becomes of great importance and significant as to how the funeral professionals handle this awkward and stressful situation.

When people are anxious and fearful about death, they usually think it is going to be very difficult to talk with someone about it, and as most funeral professionals can attest, it many times the case. **BUT THE ESSENTIAL FACT OF FUNERAL SERVICE COUNSELING IS THE FACT THAT IN TIMES OF GREAT NEED PEOPLE CAN AND DO RESPOND WELL TO THOSE IN FUNERAL SERVICE WHO REALLY TRY TO HELP THEM.**

Time and again people who have a loss enter a funeral counseling relationship feeling that it will be a great difficulty, but time after time, end up replacing those initial feeling of difficulty with confidence and genuine appreciation of the relationship they have built with the funeral professional through the counseling or helping process.

It is important that to understand the challenge of funeral counseling we respect and appreciate the magnitude and utter complexity of how people die. This statement seems to be true: there is only one way to be born, but there are a million ways to die. All death experiences are different and hence not all death is experienced the same way. To help us organize this complex subject, we can systematize the differences of degree and emotional response to death by categorizing death in two different ways. Each of these categories has its own particular set of feelings that as funeral counselors we need to be aware of.

EXPECTED NATURAL DEATH

Natural, timely death is most common. Nearly 70% of all deaths occur among people who have lived a full number of years. Here the element of acute tragedy is often times ameliorated because death is more

appropriate for the aged; however, this may not always be true and it is risky to make black and white comments concerning death.

Regardless, it is safe to say that if a person lives long enough, a process of slow physical deterioration takes place which is clearly visible. Strength wanes and vitality slips away. For the survivors, a long period of anticipating grief may be involved and so the person had a chance to prepare for the inevitable event. While sadness may exit, it is not so apt to be acute and the funeral process is entered into with a minimum of distress and a maximum of preparation.

With natural death, the funeral counseling process is less complicated. It provides the opportunity to act out the feelings appropriately and use the funeral as a final farewell ceremony on a life that has completed its natural course. All funerals are highly important, but in this death situation what is needed is a ceremony that offers group support, creates a climate for expressing feelings and offers the important chance to face the reality of the event. For the death of an older person it is most important to include children in the event so they begin to experience the learning elements of the cycle of life - the alpha to the omega.

TRAGIC, UNEXPECTED, UNTIMELY DEATH

Tragic, untimely, or unexpected death is usually more devastating to the survivors because they have had no chance to prepare, take a defensive stance nor do anticipatory grief work. These persons who suffer from acute grief are apt to retreat from the painful reality into denial. At first, they may want to avoid all funeral experiences as if to say that by denial of death they will be spared the painful feelings of grief. This is not only unsatisfactory as far as facing reality is concerned, but in the long run it may be definitely damaging - for it prevents the working through of deep feelings and may produce physical, mental and emotional illness.

With the people who have experienced the acute grief that comes with tragic suddenness, it is important to provide extra opportunities for group support, more time for talking out the deep feelings and added opportunities for facing the meaning of the highly significant events that have occurred. Instead of having fewer rites, rituals and ceremonies it is critical to have as many and as varied opportunities for acting out grief as possible. Instead of side stepping the six logical steps, now the wisdom of following them step by step is greatly magnified, and the avoidance of the logical steps has greatly magnified consequences.

The more these six logical steps are suggested by the funeral professional at the beginning, the more readily the person usually undertakes the painful but necessary task of withdrawing his or her emotional capital from the loved decedent so he or she can get on with the important task of healing and living.

DIAGNOSIS AND AFTERCARE

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis is the province of the physician, the specialist in emotional and physical disorders. Funeral professionals do not want to set themselves up as diagnosticians. However, as funeral professionals, we are people first, and we all know very well that as people we all perform functions that come close to diagnosis at times.

If your child is ill you decide whether or not the condition requires a doctor - you make a practical diagnosis on the way toward a more precise evaluation. If you slip and fall, you must decide whether it is serious enough to call a doctor or whether it is just a bruise that will take care of itself.

When you are dealing with people in the death crisis situation, you will often times see signs of distress and other evidence of what we call grief. This is usually a time relative modification of behavior that is clearly related to the observed cause, namely the loss of someone or something of significance. Here the person usually rights themselves in time.

EXCESSIVE BEHAVIOR

It is when the person has serious deviation from the normal course of grieving that we need to show special concern. If a person is not able to function, he or she needs special help. If they are excessively hostile, dependent, suspicious or anxious, these are danger signals. But the key word is excessively! Again it is important to realize that there are differences in people that help to determine what is normal for them. Extremes usually indicate a lack of inner balance. Observe it for a time. It may only be temporary and may right itself. If it doesn't, that is the time to evaluate the situation to see if special help may be indicated.

ALL FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS NEED TO BE CAREFUL WITH REFERRALS FOR IT WOULD BE EASY FOR A PERSON TO BE OFFENDED IF IT IS NOT DONE WISELY.

It would never be proper in a funeral home to walk up to a person and say, "I think you need a psychiatrist." Things have to be done much more delicately.

If a person seems to be excessively disturbed and you observe it and others do not seem to notice it, it might be wise to speak to a member of the family or the pastor. You might say something like, "John mentioned to me that he felt like giving up on life. Then he said he had an aunt kill herself once. I am concerned about him because he seems to be taking things so hard. It may be his grief expressing itself, but you can never tell. Things like this are too serious to ignore. What do you think would be the wise thing for us to do about it?" This shares the responsibility, alerts others and can lead to protective action.

If it is a lonely person and there seems to be no one with whom you could share responsibility, a more direct approach should be taken. For instance, a deeply disturbed widow might be spoken to in this way, "I sense how deeply you are suffering. Certainly, there must be some way to relieve your suffering and people who can help you. If there is anything I can do, please understand that I can connect you with helpful people. If you want to see someone, I can recommend some great people and I myself would be glad to talk to you – I won't have answers, but I am a good listener. I don't like to see you suffering so much, so if there is anything that I can do to help bring a measure of relief, I'm very willing."

I have used this approach and instead of being offended, the person will usually appreciate your concern and response to your efforts at helpfulness. After this process, it is well to simply wait patiently for a response. Remember: A person's initial response to a referral may well be negative, but in time may well be accepted as a positive.

AFTERCARE PROGRAMS – PRACTICAL THOUGHTS

Within the last several years, numerous funeral homes across the nation have embraced the concept of aftercare, which is always a good thing.

The mission of these programs are admirable, but all funeral homes before entering into an aftercare program should evaluate the program based on three simple criteria:

- Time
- Training
- Expense

These are some legitimate issues which must be considered before starting into any Aftercare program.

TIME

Think of this example about time. There are 365 days in a year. If you have a 150-call business, giving two days for each service, you are busy 300 days a year (sometimes night and day). If you add just 50 pre-need conferences to this, plus social, family, and civic responsibilities to your schedule, when will you, the funeral director, have time to make such "post funeral" calls?

If you suffer from burn out, you're of little value to yourself, let alone anyone else.

TRAINING

Words like "therapist," or "therapy" and the like truly connote people who have Ph.D.'s, have completed doctoral programs, or who are graduates of seminaries or law schools.

Due to this reality, funeral professionals who use terms like "therapist" or "therapy" are at risk for future litigation.

Attorney colleagues of mine in funeral service admonish the funeral professional to be careful in the area of after-care and stay away from risky titles and labels.

EXPENSE

Aftercare programs can be expensive, but they need not be. If a funeral home hires a full-time counselor, the expenses need not to be enumerated here. Everyone in management knows how expensive payroll and employee benefit programs are. Even part-time counselors are an expense and often they are not very reliable or permanent.

Aftercare programs in the funeral home environment should at minimum be a program which will do the following:

- Respect the funeral director's busy schedule.
- Be economic.
- Be effective.
- Have low liability risks.
- Be reasonable in expectations and outcomes.

UNIQUE SITUATIONS IN FUNERAL COUNSELING

In my experience in funeral counseling three specific situations seem to arise with such a regular consistency that each one needs to be addressed specifically. They are:

- I. Professionals who are opposed to funerals.
- II. Bringing children to funerals.
- III. Split and fractured family units.

I. PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE OPPOSED TO FUNERALS

It probably amazes every funeral professional in the world that certain other professional people, (example: some clergy, some teachers, most media people, etc.) are opposed to funerals.

Most funeral professionals have stood in amazement when a clergy for instance will endorse, encourage, and engage flowers at a wedding as being a good idea, but when it comes to funeral flowers – they declare it is such a waste; even though the flowers at both weddings and funerals all end up dead.

I well remember when a young person killed himself with a drug overdose and in an attempt at crisis intervention, the school asked me to address the students. When I arrived at the school, the principal, a professional educator, warned me, "Don't talk about death and morbid stuff too much."

Funeral counseling can and does come to a stop when the purity of the funeral experience is challenged by these kinds of situations and reactions. And as blatantly contradictory as endorsing wedding rituals and scorning funeral rituals is, it happens all the time.

Is there anything that we can do to help other professional people who are opposed to funerals, but who are consistently in a position to be confronted with funerals? I think there is.

It is very important in the beginning, to try to understand the roots of the opposition. Usually when a person exhibits trouble with funerals it is because he or she has a lot of death anxiety. Just as funeral directors have had bad experiences with other professional people, sometimes the root of the problem is that the professional people have had bad experiences with funeral directors.

In either instance, some things that are constructive can be done. Many people have had their minds changed by getting the facts in a wider perspective. All funeral professionals can try by their own behavior and attitude to make up for the bad experiences of the past and to make sure that as far as they are concerned, that will never happen again.

When death anxiety exists, people need help to resolve it. Usually this anxiety is caused by a diffused fear that is not easily brought into focus. Often just talking about things can help to bring the fears into the open and help to resolve them. At other times, accurate information can take the place of misinformation and a new point-of-view can help to see things differently.

During the last three decades or so, I have given seminars to more than 20,000 clergy of all faiths and have found them to be reasonable, concerned, and actively seeking the truth about funerals when it was made available. There is a tremendous amount of good and honest information available - all that needs to happen is for us to get about the task of getting this information out before these good people are confronted with a death situation both literally and professionally. It is critically important that funeral professionals tell their story.

CASE STUDY: "TELL YOUR STORY"

I was giving a clergy seminar to a group of about 80 clergy in a middle-size town in a southern state.

The seminar was a long one. It went from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. I felt well prepared and the subject was going to be on the value of rites, rituals and ceremonies at the time of death.

I started out at 9:00 a.m. In the front row there was a clergyman who I could tell was not liking or appreciating me or my message. At 9:10 a.m., he stood up and exclaimed, "Young man you are overstating your case." He continued, "If a person has a great faith then they will handle death all right. They don't need funerals or a funeral director and, in fact, funerals are pagan. Naturally, the undertaker would be in favor of funerals!"

Then he sat down. I was dumbfounded and humiliated. Then I was terrified for I realized I had five hours and fifty minutes to go with this group. I stopped, froze, stumbled, sputtered and almost cried. Then I remembered what a great teacher of mine told me - TELL YOUR STORY!

So I gathered my courage and composure and went on. At the break the funeral director who had invited me to speak came over to comfort me. He told me that the minister had been in town a long time, was well liked, and was a very nice and skilled person - just one thing . . . he hated funerals, and thought funeral directors were crooks. He also explained that this minister had made his pre-arrangements at his funeral home and that it was a direct disposal of the body with no services. Nothing.

Surprisingly, the antagonistic minister attended the entire afternoon session. I presented the material the best I could, but all afternoon I was like a raw nerve just waiting for him to jump on me again. The session ended and the minister left without saying a word.

Two weeks later my funeral director friend called me up to relay that this minister had just revised his pre-arrangements and had added a period of time when his friends could offer their support to his family.

Such is the power of telling the story of the good works of this great profession and at least one of our six logical steps of the funeral was secure.

CHILDREN

After all the thousands of books, tapes, pamphlets, programs, videos and seminars that have been devoted to the subject of children and funerals over the last 30 years, the question still arises - "Should we bring children to the funeral?"

For those who are familiar with the literature on grief and mourning, the answer is a quick "yes."

It is clear, however, from the frequency of the question that even though we have thousands of pieces of information on the subject of children and funerals, most parents have not or have chosen not to read the

materials. This state of affairs is understandable given the immature attitude so many people have concerning loss and death.

In any event from a funeral counseling perspective, if the child would like to participate in a funeral and he or she are old enough to share in such an event it is probably wise to let them attend. If they do not want to come, it is usually a sign that they have already acquired some anxiety about death and this should be worked through carefully. It is never wise to force a child to attend a funeral or wake.

However, on the other hand if they are included in other family activities it would be natural to let them share in the funeral. It can be an important learning experience for them.

Children are responsive to emotional happenings in the family. Their factual knowledge of the world is very limited but their feeling capacity about the world is limitless. They may not understand all that is going on, but they do feel a part of whatever it is.

When there is some kind of ceremony children naturally want to be part of it because they love happenings. They need not be expected to understand it all. For example a little girl can be a flower girl at a wedding without understanding all about adult sex and the responsibilities of marriage.

Likewise a child can attend a funeral without understanding all about loss and death. Yet if and when they are excluded children are apt to think something is wrong. Their imaginations go to work which often create a more stressful and exaggerated reality than the death event itself.

They pick up anxiety rather than the healthy attitude that we would like to communicate. Therefore, in most instances it is wise to offer to include children rather than to exclude them. If they are too young to attend the more formal service, it might be possible to go to the funeral home at a time when there is no service. They can see the beautiful flowers, sense the quiet dignity of the setting, see the casket with the deceased prepared for viewing, and have their questions answered in a simple, honest manner. Then rather than being filled with anxiety, they may well gain the idea that death is something that can be wisely managed. They see a role model in mourning practices.

With children, as with adults, it is important to remember that an honest fear of death can help them to protect and preserve life. Having emotional anxiety, however, about death may lead to unwise and life-threatening behavior that is designed to test the boundaries of life and often injure life in the process. It may be that death anxiety planted in early childhood leads to drug use, reckless driving, and death-defying games like "chicken" and "Russian roulette."

CASE STUDY: "MOMMY LET'S GO HOME"

In 1975 a very elderly woman died. She was a maiden woman and left only one great nephew as a relative. He lived in the same town with his wife and two daughters, ages four and six.

The nephew came to the funeral home and made arrangements. His main question was whether or not his two daughters should see their deceased great-great aunt.

I assured him that it would be all right if the girls came to the funeral home and even sighted some literature for him, but he was reserved. Naturally he did not want his two daughters to experience any harm.

We finished all the preparation work and had the deceased great-aunt lying in state in the funeral home chapel. That afternoon, the nephew called up and said that he, and his wife and the girls were going to come over to the funeral home to see the dead body.

I was out in the parking lot when they arrived and as they got out of the car, the mother had a few more questions to ask before they went in to see their aunt.

As we stood there deeply engrossed in adult talking, the two little girls got impatient and asked their mother if they could go walk to the front of the funeral home and wait at the front door. The mother gave her approval and off the little ones went, while we adults kept on talking and talking and talking.

Unbeknownst to us was that while we were gabbing about psychology, the two little girls had gone on into the funeral home alone. They walked right into the Chapel, went up to the casket, took a long look at their dead great-great aunt, and returned to the front porch of the funeral home.

As the father, mother and I walked to the front of the building, the two sisters were just sitting on the steps watching the world go by. The mother leaned over to the girls and told them that after a long discussion and for their own well-being the decision had been made to let them go inside and see "Aunt Amanda." The older sister looked up at her mother and said, "Oh, we've already been in there and seen her. Mommy let's go home."

I felt like an idiot.

IT IS ALWAYS WISE TO INCLUDE CHILDREN IN THE LIFE EVENTS OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE.

FRACTURED FAMILIES

For a half of a century the divorce rate has been hovering at around 50 percent. Thousands of families must wade through the negative phase of adolescence where stress and problems abound. Money problems cause stress, people get disillusioned, and children rarely have a parent at home after school. As attractive as the ideal is of the family structure seen on television with "The Walton's" and "7th Heaven," the reality of family life is much different.

Since the funeral ritual reflects everything about human life, both good and bad, no one should be surprised that dysfunctional families cause tension and difficulties in both arranging and executing funerals.

Most human situations inevitably involve conflicts. Sometimes it is divorce, separation, cheating, drug use or alcoholism. Sometimes it is a family squabble that has kept people apart. When death comes, their feelings are bound to be projected into the funeral process.

What can be done? Sometimes the funeral process can restore communication that can lead to a healing of wounds, this is an ideal. Sometimes the compassion of the moment brings people together in such a way that old enmities are put aside out of respect for the mutual experience of death and grief. There is always a risk – no guarantees.

When it does not seem possible to bring about this form of healing of angry feelings, it is sometimes wise to work out two separate services to be held to meet the needs of the fractured group. This takes some work, but it has been done many times, and successfully!

CASE STUDY: "MIRACLES HAPPEN"

I received a death call early one morning from a man whose mother had just died. After the initial first call we made an appointment for the next morning. I detected nothing unique in my initial contact. When the son and his wife arrived at the funeral home, the situation changed dramatically. The son confided to me that his oldest brother was a criminal on the run and that his crimes had been very serious and that the family was terrified that he would secretly find his way to the funeral and they were very apprehensive as to the consequences.

After a lengthy discussion, more distressing facts emerged concerning this man's erratic lifestyle. After I gained more information, I myself was uneasy as to the potential happenings over the next four days.

Upon the request of the family, I contacted the County Sheriff who immediately conceded agreement as to the potential danger of the black sheep brother. The Sheriff took the position that the brother was not to be allowed in the county, and because the brother's photo was prominently displayed in the post office lobby the Sheriff notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The calling hours commenced with plain clothed Sheriff Officers throughout the mortuary. Nothing happened. On the day of the funeral, precisely in the middle of the service, the criminal brother marched down the center aisle of the church and sat right by his brother who had made the arrangements.

The entire church was stunned, the minister stopped and within second's law enforcement officers with weapons drawn had surrounded him. The criminal's brother whispered something to his younger brother; they

both started crying, embraced each other and the brother gave himself up to the County Sheriff. They put him in handcuffs on the spot. Before they removed him from the sanctuary, they allowed him to lean over and kiss his mother goodbye.

Later, the younger brother told me that his brother had told him that on his mother's grave he would turn himself in and take his due punishment. He said that he could not bear the idea of his mother looking down at him from heaven and see all the terrible things he was doing.

It was a beautiful experience which is an example of how death and funeral ceremonies can transform a person's life.

OF COURSE, NOT ALL FUNERALS WORK OUT SO INSPIRINGLY.

CASE STUDY: "THE SNOWBALL FIGHT"

This is a situation that happened in the winter of 1979. I received a death call late one evening notifying me that an elderly man had died at his residence. When we arrived at the house to make the removal, I learned that there were fourteen children surviving, and that a twenty-year-old feud based on divorces, cheating, stealing, alcohol, drugs, lying, and much more was still raging in force. In fact, the sides were drawn seven against seven.

There were seven pro-father children and seven pro-mother children. The mother had died fifteen years previously in another town.

As I sat down with the seven pro-father children, I was told that under no circumstances did they want to set sight on any of the seven pro-mother children.

After a lengthy conversation, it was determined that we would have staggered hours for each group. For example, from 1-4 p.m. would be calling hours for the pro-mother group, and from 6-9 p.m. would be for the pro-father group. Two separate funeral services would be held. For mother's group the services would be held at 9:00 a.m.; the father's group at 10:30 a.m. There would even be two graveside services. That night it snowed three feet.

The wishes of the family were executed flawlessly, even though the obituary was very long and very complicated. Everything went fine until the trip to the cemetery. The committals were scheduled for the first group at 11:30 a.m., and the second group at noon. As I drove through the gates of the cemetery with the 11:30 a.m. pro-mother group, I saw with great surprise that the noon pro-father group was already standing around the grave. Even the minister I was driving looked fearful. There was no turning back and as I got out of the lead car, I could see several pro-father children hopping through the snow yelling profanities at the pro-mother group.

I tried, in vain, to bring some resemblance of peace to the group as did the minister when all of the sudden out of the blue a snowball was thrown and hit one of the older daughters square in her face. Then the largest snowball fight ensued that I had ever witnessed. The minister and I just sat in the lead car in absolute quiet watching helplessly as this ridiculous site unfolded before our eyes.

Years of repressed and suppressed emotions were being expressed. After about twenty minutes both groups were exhausted and the first group left to wait their turn for the committal. They never made up, the area around the grave looked like a tornado had gone by, and with all this drama finally the original plan was executed.

ASSESSMENT

One of the most fascinating aspects is the uniqueness of each and every interaction. Funeral professionals possess special abilities as organizational specialists and are well versed at bringing order to chaos. Funeral professionals are asked to face up to some of the most unique, special and yes sometimes distasteful occurrences in a community and they do so with tact, gentleness, dignity and honor.

THE DISTINCTIVE TRAITS OF FUNERAL SERVICE COUNSELING

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

As a member of a caregiving, caretaking and a care-providing profession funeral directors not only have the right but the obligation to counsel and advice bereaved families. Funeral directors touch the lives of people in their time of greatest need. Our sensitivity to the needs of the bereaved may have a significant bearing on their health and well-being for years to come. The funeral director is a staple in the community; a wise counselor who takes responsibility seriously, is understanding and skilled in human relationships.

In funeral counseling, a knowledge of psychology is extremely important, for counseling is applied psychology. There are two types of psychological knowledge. Usually they complement each other. One is practical knowledge about people and how they function. The other is formal knowledge that is usually learned in the classroom. Both are important for they tend to support each other.

Funeral directors, because of their vast experiences with people in crisis develop a body of information and observations about people that is important -we call this experiential expertise. This learning from experiences has been of great value to those funeral directors who have a warm, responsive nature and who tend to do the right things in a death crisis because of their basic concern for people.

Many compassionate and sensitive funeral directors, and especially younger ones, want to get the benefit of others' experiences because in a time of rapid change they feel they cannot afford the long, slow process of learning by experience. These persons seek to increase their understanding through reading and classroom work which is readily accessible through mortuary colleges, colleges, professional school, workshops, and seminars.

No one in a community has more knowledge and experience in dealing wisely with the death crisis situation than the funeral director. Because of the critical and important nature of the work, communities expect and have a right to expect that in times of crisis they can go to a professionally competent funeral director for counsel and advice.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FUNERAL COUNSELING IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE.

Here and there the objection is made by funeral directors that they are not counselors, and do not believe in counseling. This may be understandable, but it does not work. Even funeral directors who claim not to counsel, are actually counseling. There really is no choice in the matter. Whenever a funeral director works with people in a time of crisis then they automatically become a counselor. The only choice we have is whether or not we will be a wise and helpful counselor.

To reject the responsibility of counseling is tantamount to saying that there is a part of your role you want to avoid and this is the same thing as saying that you are content to remain an incomplete funeral director. When persons come to us seeking options, suggestions, insights and answers to questions that are important to them and the response is "I simply am here to take your service order and sell you something," that person is missing an important opportunity to serve and the family will rightfully feel awkward and defensive.

Much of funeral counseling is listening. The wise funeral counselor is willing to listen for he or she knows that many people resolve their problems by the very process of putting their thoughts and feelings into words. They gain new perspective by listening to their own ideas as they express them to another and gauge their response. It is also rude not to want to listen to another, especially in time of great need.

As most funeral directors are well aware, time can be a critical issue in funeral counseling. But it is well to remember that not all time is the same. At least emotional time is relative. In times of crises there may be very rapid emotional activity. To be there at this important time is advantageous. The funeral director is with the family during prime time as far as a counseling opportunity is concerned. So it is not a matter of whether the funeral conference or funeral service lasts a half-hour or five hours, what is important is how well you are

prepared to use this prime time to the best advantage of the family served. There are three aspects which needs attention:

First, you need to have a genuine desire to help people and be willing to give the time and effort required to improve your skill.

Second, you need to study. Most colleges have courses in counseling. If you cannot easily access a college, there are courses you can take online courses as well as many useful books in libraries. Also reading a variety of case histories in professional journals is important, for this tells you what people are like and how they react to life crises.

Third, you need to practice. Make as many funeral arrangements as possible. Perhaps there is nothing like actually working with people to make you sensitive to how they respond. Here it is important to go back over your conversations to see where you might also have done things more wisely and sensitively.

One last thought on responsibility: There is a risk in promoting yourself as a grief counselor or grief therapist. In the funeral service profession there exists an unspoken sense of professional humility that usually makes it wise to avoid fancy titles. If a funeral director knows what he or she is doing that is the all-important thing. Often people resist counseling if they know that is what is going on, but welcome it if they feel it is a friendly conversation with a concerned friend. In funeral counseling, the process is the important thing, not the name that is given to it.

The beauty of the funeral is that it does at least four specific things which are available to everyone.

- 1. It provides acting out ceremonies that give expression to feelings too deep to be put into words.** The funeral is the most accessible and most adequate resource for this purpose, and the most economical. The funeral has the great advantage of being generally understood, and of possessing within its process, the resources for meeting the varied social, emotional, and spiritual needs of the bereaved. Each step of the way has its own built-in wisdom to assist people in making thoughtful decisions during the crisis of death.
- 2. It provides the framework for group support. It makes it possible for people to get together, to visit, to communicate and to relate to each other.** It provides many ways by which people can express love and concern and makes people feel comfortable in doing what would otherwise be more distressing. There is a risk in judging whom and who will not be affected by a death. Too old, no friends, too young, no friends is a fragile position in which to make once in a lifetime decisions.
- 3. It encourages the expression of feelings.** The whole funeral process is a feeling oriented activity. Feelings are so important that they need to be recognized and expressed.
- 4. The funeral provides values to live by.** It confirms the value of life in the presence of death. It not only shows respect for the dead, but also for the living. Each funeral carries with it a challenge to a new and better life.

These four points then challenge the idea that the customer is always right concerning the funeral.

Knowledge of the death crisis is necessary for healthy bereavement. The conviction of belief in the benefits of the funeral communicated to everyone by the funeral director can and does help direct poorly thought ideas and decisions into healthier and more meaningful channels.

Hinging on the future of the funeral is the funeral director's own belief in what he or she does and an adherence to the issue of confirming the reality of death in the minds of the bereaved.

Viewing dead people has somewhat fallen out of the vogue over the last few years. This is not only unfortunate but can be tragic as well. Much of the future of funeral service counseling pivots on re-embracing this vital form of psychological knowledge.

So why all the fuss about facing reality when many claim they know it already? It is important here to realize that knowing has many levels. If the state police call and ask your Daughter's name, make of car and registration number, and then tells you that she has been killed in a highway accident, you know the fact. That is, you understand the words that were spoken to you. You know how to put them together in a sentence and understand what the sentence meant. But the kind of knowing that is involved in funeral counseling is much deeper. It is so deep that other parts of your being may instantly be stimulated to say, "It can't be so." There is a great difference between verbal meaning and emotional meaning. The system needs a variety of events to confirm the verbal reality beyond all emotional denial. The funeral provides that variety of acting out procedures that speak to the total being, mind, reason, feelings, and spirit. It is this larger form of knowing that the funeral is all about.

Much of the future of this great profession is dependent upon the willingness of funeral directors to consistently expand their counseling skills and the helping network of the funeral home. This seems to be a most admirable and attainable professional goal.

CASE STUDY: "THE LEAST OF THESE"

I received a call in 1981 to care for a young mother who had experienced a neonatal death. When I arrived at the hospital, the mother was still unable to be seen and so I spoke with her husband.

This young man was trying his best to be "in control." He announced that since no one knew the baby, and since the baby was not even a live birth, he felt strongly that the body should be disposed of as quickly as possible. Then he looked straight at me and announced that he did not want his wife involved with anything. She was to know as little as possible about what happened.

I listened to him until he was completely exhausted and then began to ask him some questions. "What was the last funeral you attended?" "What did you find helpful about that experience?" He responded that it was helpful to see his family and friends. Then, I asked about his parents and his wife's parents. After a time, I shared some information about things that might be important to his wife. I think we spoke to each other for about five hours and throughout this process, he experienced a change in attitude.

Ten days later, after his wife was able to leave the hospital and felt physically better, we had a funeral in a church, with flowers and lots of people. In fact, it proved to be one of the largest funerals I ever conducted.

Even from the least of these, the long arm effect of grief expressed itself. The parents had legions of friends as did the grandparents. Everyone really wanted to say goodbye and through the wise and careful management of the funeral this was accomplished.

It was my responsibility as a funeral professional to do so.

ASSESSMENT

Funeral directors take their responsibility to care for the dead and the living very seriously few vocations carry such a heavy burden. Responsibility in funeral service can easily be witnessed by the numbers of years the average funeral home has been servicing their communities. Funeral firms with service heritages of 50, 75, 100 or even 150 years are not uncommon. Such numbers imply that a responsible funeral professional was and is at work.

THE FUTURE

Much of the future of funeral counseling will depend on the funeral director's ability to adapt and initiate new types of services which fill the needs of new types of people's expectations.

We live in a time of rapid change and this trend shows no signs of abating. People move about the country and learn to do things differently. Hence, it is critical to make possible the types of services that have meaning and value to the various types of people who are involved. The Roman Catholic Church has a new funeral ritual,

new types of national and ethnic communities are scattered throughout North America, people have embraced cremation as a conviction, more and more people are unchurched and the list of changes concerning funeral service goes on and on.

The important thing is to have valid services that can and do serve psychological needs. Just because a person is young or old, a believer or a nonbeliever, wants cremation over burial, should not determine whether or not they should be denied the benefits of the funeral process. Rather, some form of meaningful service should be made accessible for everyone. Some of the new types of services do this very well. Be creative for this is where new ideas emerge.

A word of caution: some types of service innovations may work in the opposite direction. Some services recommended by some agencies and thinkers tend to reduce the funeral process and eliminate some of its most significant and therapeutic parts. This can be hazardous for bereaved people and deny them what is needed most in the time of crisis. Such "abridged" funerals reduce the basic benefits of the funeral, taking all that we have learned to be psychologically "unsound," and putting it together in one package. This does not make sense for it leads to the immediate disposal decision.

In funeral counseling, it is important to try to find out what lies behind the request for an immediate disposal of the body without any of the proven psychological benefits of the funeral process. Some people have the mistaken idea that if they have no funeral, or numb themselves with drugs or alcohol, they will avoid any grief. Others have the idea that by quick disposal they will avoid expense. Still others may have done anticipatory grief work over a long period of time and when the person finally dies they feel no need for any of the funeral process. All of these possibilities have limitations.

There exists funeral directors who tell families, when they request immediate disposal, that it is their practice to have a funeral for all bodies entrusted to them. If the family did not want to plan it or participate in it that was up to them, but as a funeral director he explained he could not stay in this type of profession if they did not believe in the funeral. These funeral directors have found that in nearly every case, after a few hours the family would call to inquire about the time of the service and to ask if friends and family could attend. In most cases the people became engaged in the complete funeral process.

Now these funerals consisted simply of this: reciting the name of the deceased, giving his or her birthdate and death date, acknowledging that he or she lived life and a brief conclusion about the fragility and worth of every human life. Then the body was conveyed to the crematory, cemetery or medical school.

No chapel, no flowers, no music, but a funeral none the less. Most of the families wrote this funeral director to thank him for being so considerate and for believing so much in what he did for a living. He was never chastised for his stance, but on the contrary he was recommended as one who really cared about people! This is called professional conviction. What this funeral director did was to make the funeral process available because he believed in it, and then people found themselves wanting to share in it because his belief convinced them of the value of what he did. Any funeral director could employ this conviction of belief in funeral counseling.

CONCLUSION

Ah, the ticking of the clock – tick, tock, tick tock. The hands of time march forward, never backward. Tick, tock, tick tock.

The future comes to each of us with a simple ticking of the clock.

Inscribed on a sundial at Oxford University are the Latin words "Periunt et Impurtanture," meaning "the hours perish and are laid to your charge."

Learning funeral counseling takes time, actual funeral counseling takes time; and the rituals of death take time – time then is an essential ingredient in our beloved profession.

For your families' benefit and your own professional growth, devote all the time you can afford to our professions noble mission which is to minister and assist in alleviating some of the pain from grief that our families, friends and neighbors confront and experience as they "walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

Our profession's ancient call us to assist the bereaved in a counseling relationship is truly a most admirable and worthy thing to do.