

FUNERAL RITUALS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Goal: To enable practitioners to more effectively communicate the profound importance and value of a funeral service, to any client, whether pre-need or at-need.

Objectives: After completion, this course should enable you to:

- Identify specific steps involved in the funeral process
- Gain a thorough understanding of how funerals can facilitate emotional healing
- Better appreciate the benefits of funeral rituals and symbols
- Recognize the potential risks in decisions to reduce or eliminate funeral rituals

Introduction

This course could well be titled: 'The Eternal Value of Funeral Rituals,' because it provides the kinds of insight and wisdom that transcend time. Both the seasoned professional and eager newcomer will benefit from its powerful reasoning, and poignant case studies that offer indispensable guidance when used during funeral consultations.

The integrity of the funeral experience is preserved not only in what it is, but also through relating it to the age-old wisdom and order in which it developed over time. The design of the funeral should be to help persons move through the phases of grief in an emotionally healthy way, with the use of demonstrative procedures that deal with feelings in a progressive manner.

Funeral rituals are necessary if the bereaved are to have the opportunity for a healthy existence, after the death of a loved one. It is clear that the absence or severe reduction of ritual can result in psycho-social disorders in the bereaved.

For this reason alone, cemeterians need the foundation knowledge to understand the value, heritage, and impact of rituals. At the same time, they should become familiar with the new rites and rituals that funeral professionals are offering. This will help them better manage and adapt to future trends.

Funeral counseling takes time; rituals of death take time. For the clients' benefit and your own professional growth, devote all the time you can afford to the families, friends, and neighbors of a deceased loved one, as they "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." It is a most admirable thing to do.

Important Note: This material is presented for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace competent professional legal, medical, or governmental advice. Anyone involved in the preparation or dissemination of this course shall not be liable for any inappropriate use of the information contained in the course beyond the purposes stated above. It is the student's responsibility to follow laws and regulations related to any aspect of this course and its materials. The 'thumbs-up' symbol is intended to be used as a reference tool. All the information in this course is important, but these are items that merit special attention.

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I. THE WISDOM AND LOGIC OF FUNERAL RITUAL

Animals Ritualize and So Should We

Elephants and Death

Iain Douglas-Hamilton shares the following account of the remarkable bond that is instinctually exhibited by the elephant family when a member dies:

"The dying cow sinks to her haunches as members of the herd form a protective semi-circle around her. With a large convulsion the cow heaves to her side, and dies. One bull remains beside her and tries repeatedly to lift the cow to her feet. Other elephants put their trunks into the cow's mouth, and push against her again and again. The bull of the herd trumpets loud and long, and finally he attempts to mount her, as if he had tried every behavior he could think of and in desperation he turned to sex. The elephants stayed with the dead cow for several hours, as if they could not immediately adjust to the finality of death. After ten days, the corpse was rotten, and the herd returned. They sniffed cautiously at first. The tusks of the dead cow were the cause of excited interest, and eventually the tusks of the dead cow were taken with the herd. It appeared as if it was a planned ceremony."

National Geographic Society - January, 1986

Allow Pet to See and Sniff Body of Dead Animal Companion

Dear Readers: Why some of our animal companions grieve deeply when another pet in the family dies, and why others don't grieve, is a question psychologists have yet to answer. But there is a growing consensus that allowing a cat or dog to see and sniff another family pet that has just died, can help them deal with the grief that often comes when a loved one suddenly disappears.

The tendency to "search and pine" for the deceased companion is reduced, if the pet is allowed to see the body of a dead companion.

Letter to Dr. Michael Fox, D.V.M
Cincinnati Enquirer - May 14, 1992

Social Purposes of the Funeral Ritual

The oldest human burial, which has religious connotations, is known from circa 60,000 B.C.E. among Homo sapiens neanderthalensis in the Shanidar Cave, Northern Iraq.

Guinness Book of World Records - Religions

👍 The funeral is usually a public ceremony to which all are invited and none are excluded. Socially, funerals serve three purposes. Specifically, they:

- Give everyone in the community a chance to share in the grief;
- Meet the acute needs of those who are in a state of emotional crisis; and,
- They provide the general public a chance to resolve “unfinished” grief issues.

Because of this three-fold nature of the funeral, the private service is truly a denial of the social meaning of the process. The choice to deal with death “privately” rejects the concern and support of the community, which it deliberately or (accidentally excludes), and rejects most of the important psychological aspects of the funeral process.

👍 **The Six Ritual Steps of the Funeral**

The activities of the funeral are one of the most accessible and economical forms of grief support available to everyone. It is an individually oriented process that starts with the death, culminates with the final disposition of the body, and continues with aftercare for the living. This process is called the "Cycle of Service." The funeral has its own built-in logic: It responds to the need for people to go through a series of meaningful events that can satisfy very 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.

Much of the healing process in funeral rituals comes not only from what is said, but also from what is done. 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 the:

- Event of death
- Notification of the event
- Confrontation of the reality of the event
- Community Support
- Providing of religious, spiritual, or philosophical support
- Disposition of the physical remains with ceremony

1. Event of Death

The event of death is the starting point for the series of time-limited events that characterize the funeral. Obviously, the death comes first. When there is notification before the event, 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 had killed thousands had died himself. Nobel read the insulting 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 to respond properly. In other words: It was one gigantic mess! When notification precedes the death, it is inappropriate, distressing and unfortunate, as well as inaccurate. Proper order is violated and the normal progressive nature of the funeral process is disturbed.

2. 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. Family, 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. The following case study reflects this in a very powerful manner.

CASE STUDY: "Too Much, Too Fast"

In 1975, a father called me and asked for advice and counsel concerning his daughter, who had gone through the tragic experience of confrontation 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 proper order of the funeral process was disrupted by circumstances: What would have been deeply disturbing, at best, turned into a psychologically harrowing experience with years of haunting memories.

Proper notification gives the chance for tentative exploration of the profound 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 and grief resolution.

3. Confrontation of Reality of the Event

This involves honest confrontation with what has happened. This confrontation 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 (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 corpse 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.

Yet there are people who seem to feel otherwise. They offer little support for their position other than humor, anxieties, and sarcasm (and perhaps the hope), that if they avoid the painful task of facing reality they may, in some mysterious or clever way, avoid the pain of grief and the need to process mourning. Is this effective, or an illusion of convenience? "No funeral, no grief" may sound catchy, but the idea is full of perilous psychological traps.

👍 Human feelings are complex. Much as we might like, 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 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, we want the grieving people, who seek our guidance and help to do the right thing, AND SO WE WOULD NOT, AS FUNERAL DIRECTORS, CLERGY, OR OTHER HELPERS, encourage or conspire with them to do things that violate their own best interest. Hence, we recommend, whenever possible and appropriate, to view the remains. The goal is for the bereaved to experience the ultimate psychological confrontation with death, painful as that might be.

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 ethics 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 bringing formal closure to life through rites, rituals, and ceremonies.

While I was walking through the mortuary facility, I eventually ended up at the place where the Missing in Action 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 she told me about the value of saying goodbye and bringing formal closure to one of life's major events — the death of someone we are attached to. Our conversation revolved around the identification of a service man who had been dead and missing for fifty-one years. The body was positively identified at the mortuary, and this man's mother was still alive and

living in Pennsylvania.

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 lay over the pouch, this was then placed in an 18-gauge military issue 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, the mother sat close by the head of the casket patting the bottom molding of the burial case throughout the evening. The mother, the anthropologist thought, expressed her deep attachment to her son by this activity. 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 approached the anthropologist and asked, "Are you the person who identified my son?" The military person 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? But tonight I will finally rest, for tonight I know where my baby is."

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

4. Community Support

In times of crisis our social nature tends to reach out to others for group support. With this reach often come understanding, love, confirmation, and support. Quite simply put: In times of crisis we need help, and we can usually get it from other humans. The funeral process normally provides both formal and informal ways by which this group support can be provided. A wake, visitation, calling hours, shiva, or time of sharing provide 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 increase supportive relationships.

👍 From this perspective, the obituary is not a mere news announcement, but rather a serious call for support by grieving people. The informal funeral process 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 fractured love or friendship. This social support 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. Neither had uttered one syllable to the other for fifty-six years. Everyone in town knew 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 arrangements and requested that her sister's name be left out of the obituary. No amount of compassionate pleading could change her mind, and the obituary 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, "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."

The elder sister sat down and sobbed for an hour, all the time embracing and kissing her younger sister. It was a touching and valuable moment. Later, we learned that when the father had returned to the states after the war, he gave his elder daughter a medal that General Pershing had given him. One day, in a fit of jealousy, the youngest daughter took the medal but tried to convince the eldest daughter that it had been lost. Of course the eldest daughter did not believe the story, hence a fifty-six year feud ensued.

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

5. Providing 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 psychiatric care, some turn on themselves and self-destruct through suicide; 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 or some spiritual practice has become the resource for coping

from a loss that is experienced, and this seems to have a great deal of wisdom behind it. Spiritual practices affirm the fact that life is more than a biological function. It seeks to assure people that there is something about the human that is more than a physical body.

Non-religious people may suffer a loss when they need to experience a larger perspective on life. 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 simply this: Death can challenge our sense of security and stability. When people die, oftentimes even for the non-religious, spiritual thinking is stimulated.

 Hence, what religious thought has to offer in the funeral is of great importance. In fact, this time of facing grief, stimulating faith, and gaining the larger perspective is so important that every effort should be made to aid the religious officiant in her or his significant task. Even when people deny a specific form of religious faith, the psychological equivalent should be provided by some form of service that puts the tragic events of life into a larger cosmic perspective. Here the humanist funeral service should provide some of the important values that are usually found in the religious service. It is important to remember from a funeral service perspective that, just because people may not be religious in the strict sense, it is not a reason for denying them the resources that are a part of spiritual and meditative growth. Regardless of the form, the funeral ritual needs to be designed around the following guidelines:

- The funeral ritual needs to be instructive: It has a teaching role.
- The funeral ritual needs to indoctrinate people: It is an opportunity to share belief systems.
- The funeral ritual needs to interpret events: It needs to explain why the loss has happened.

6. Disposition of the Physical Remains with Ceremony

Last, but certainly not least, is disposition of the remains through interment, cremation, or removal to a medical school for gross anatomical dissection. To leave a body without final disposal is unsanitary, unlawful, and uncaring. There is a finality and completeness about this act that is both symbolic and essential. Persons who have avoided this part of the funeral have reported that they have a feeling of incompleteness and, amazingly, they 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 and visually completing part of the funeral process may be of great importance to those who have suffered loss.

CASE STUDY: "The Football Team"

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

Any funeral director reading this case study can well imagine the explosion of grief reaction from the entire community, particularly the high school. ADOLESCENT GRIEF IS A HIGHLY INTENSE AND VOLATILE EXPERIENCE. The six steps that we have already outlined here were taking place, but one could visually see that the members of his football team were in a particularly distressing situation.

Those young men were at a loss as how to 'acceptably' express their grief. Most were extremely large in size, and had already learned very well how to behave like "macho men." Nervousness, irritability, and insomnia were words used by the parents of team members to describe their behavior.

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

👍 We went to the cemetery for the burial service. At the conclusion of the committal service the other mourners left to go home, but the members of the 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 and went to get several more shovels.

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

One hour later the work was completed and the young men, with a totally different mental attitude, left the cemetery with the feeling that they had participated in their friend's burial and, hence, 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.

👍 **Potential Risks When Steps are Disorganized or Altered**

When any part of this logical process is taken out of its proper order, it tends to disorganize the funeral and cause stress to the survivors. In fact, if any one step is too disorganized and stressful, the bereaved may halt the entire process in its tracks and remove themselves from any further involvement. The logic being, of course, "If this part was so awkward and stressful, what will the rest of it be like?"

Hence, by violating these six steps, we end up with something that is incomplete and unsatisfying. The possibilities for group support and the specific requests of the family

may be lost or diffused. When the service of disposition is conducted before the religious service, there is a potential fracturing of the process, and the finality comes before there is an effort to provide the introspective support needed to face the initial event. When there is confrontation with the dead body after the religious services, it tends to interfere with the important task of the religious aspect which is trying to provide resources to help people see beyond the physical aspect of death. Likewise, when there is no notification, or a private service, the community at large is denied a chance to respond and express its feelings and the bereaved are denied the chance to gain group support. And when there is no confrontation with the body, the lack of reality may cause the feelings to be so difficult that they cannot be brought into focus and actively expressed.

The integrity of the funeral experience is preserved not only in what it is, but also through relating it to the age-old wisdom and order in which it developed over time. The design of the funeral should be to help persons move through the phases of grief in an emotionally healthy way, with the help of demonstrative procedures that deal with feelings progressively.

II. RITUALS: AN ANALYSIS FROM A FUNERAL SERVICE PERSPECTIVE

The condition of truth is to let suffering speak.

— Cornel West

What the American psychologist Erik Erickson has said about "ritual," in general, relates meaningfully to the funeral ritual:

👍 Without participation in ritual, or the appropriation of the elements which it mediates, the human person faces psychological conflict, personality impairment, and estrangement from the inner self and outer society. Correspondingly, hollow or weak rituals will threaten the ability of the person to incorporate new members and maintain a stable existence in the flow of history. Neither individuals nor communities can survive psychologically without ritual.

Rites, rituals, and ceremonies are the foundation of the funeral service profession. They are older than writing itself; in fact, they are the oldest activities ever to have been documented.

The oldest rite, ritual, or ceremony was documented 62,000 years ago by the Neanderthals and was in the form of a funeral. Today, funeral rituals are as vital and important as they were in the Neanderthals' world, and perhaps even more so because of the complexity of our modern society.

The purpose of this section is to point out to the cemeterian, the value and benefits of rites, rituals, and ceremonies at the time of death.

Defining the Terms

A rite is a specific act or function within a ritual. An example of a rite is the singing of a hymn in church, or the blessing of a body during a funeral mass.

A ritual is a series of rites that initiate action, are filled with symbolic content, and reflect and express the feelings of the participants. An example of a ritual is the series of rites in a church service, funeral mass, baptism, or graduation.

A ceremony is similar to a ritual, but usually lacks symbolism. An example of a ceremony is the ringing of the bell to call people to church. (The bell is used here for notification purposes only and is not charged with symbolic content even though the ringing is done every week.)

Examples of the Rite / Ritual Structure

Church Ritual with Eleven Rites

1. Prelude-Processional
2. Invocation
3. Hymn
4. Prayer
5. Creed
6. Hymn
7. Sermon
8. Offering
9. Hymn
10. Benediction
11. Postlude - Recessional

Committal Ritual with Four Rites

1. Funeral Procession
2. Carry casket to grave
3. Committal rite
 - a. prayer
 - b. reading
 - c. benediction
4. Leave taking

Purpose of the Funeral Ritual

Rituals help people assimilate and integrate a larger than life experience. Such experiences:

- Cannot be explained
- Fill you with awe
- Make you fearful/uneasy/attracted, all at the same time
- Make you want to do something

“The Unknown Soldier”

This excerpt, from an essay by Todd Van Beck, reflects the value of ritual both for individuals and society-at-large. As you read, note the elements of a committal ritual.

At 8:30 a.m. on Armistice Day, November 11, 1921, gun salvos sounded from Fort Myer and continued every sixty seconds during the five ceremonial hours. No military potentate of high rank or great achievements who died in the course of any war, received such a funeral as fell to this nameless soldier who, on this day, would be interred as the “Unknown Soldier” in America's most hallowed and revered cemetery - Arlington.

The ceremony represented the eternal gratitude of the whole nation to the common soldiers who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. While the nation titled this man "Unknown" on that chilly November morning, it did not seem an unknown warrior at all whose body came on the carrier down Pennsylvania Avenue, where thousands were waiting for him. He was known to all. He was one of "our boys," not warriors as they were called throughout the centuries in the dark days of war.

To some women that day, weeping a little in the crowd after an all night vigil, he was *their* boy who was missing one day and never found until now. Their souls went searching for him through dreadful places in the night through their dreams - and whose ancestors would be repeating the same 'dream' searches, over and over nearly 70 years later.

To many men among those packed densely on each side of the famous Washington Street, wearing ribbons and badges of mourning on now civilian clothes, he was a familiar figure: one of their own; the one they liked best, maybe; the one who went to their taverns; the one who went out onto the fields of death and stayed there with great, noble, and honored companionship.

As the **funeral procession** went by that day, a chilling thought entered the mind of many men: "That could have been me." Doubtless, every man or woman that day realized that the funeral procession was a symbol of attained and cherished freedom and peace - that the world would now be a better place.

It was the red, white and blue of Old Glory draped over the gray casket, that revealed him instantly, not as a mythical warrior, aloof from common humanity, but as one of those fellows: dressed in the drab of khaki, stained by mud and grease, who went into the ditches and dirty trenches with this flag leading his way, and in his heart the unspoken things, which made him one of us in courage and in fear, with some kind of faith not clear, he was all of complication, often dim, but in the watchwords of that war he and we were then, and are now, under the same flag.

The military officers, who walked about with drawn swords, wore crepe on their left arms. Presently they passed the word along "Reverse arms," and all down the lines of the

funeral procession, soldiers turned over their rifles and bent their heads over the butts.

Before the ordered silence the dense lines of people had kept their places without movement, and spoke little in their long time of waiting. Then, as they caught their first glimpse of the caravan, were utterly quiet, all heads bared and bent. One could feel the spirit of the crowd. This gathering of everyday people was touched with a sharp, yet comforting thought: Freedom.

The military bands passed with their inspiring music and their drums thumping at the hearts of men, women and children. Guards with their reversed arms passed, and then the caravan, with its team of horses, halted in front of where President Harding stood. Every hand was raised to salute the soldier who died that he or she might live, chosen by fate for this honor, which is in remembrance of that great army of patriots who went out with "our boy" to fight for his country.

Lining the caravan was the most ancient of funeral tributes: flowers in the form of wreaths and crosses. Then all was still and the picture was complete: The soul of the nation at its best, purified in this moment by emotion, was there in silence surrounding the Unknown.

Suddenly the silence ended. Funeral guns were being fired somewhere in the distance. Some word rang out, bugles were blowing they were sounding the 'three over the tomb' – the ancient in war – that the battle is over for the warrior but must continue for the rest who are alive. In the crowd women were weeping quietly. It was the cry from their hearts that was heard farthest perhaps. The men's faces were hard, like masks, hiding all they thought and felt.

At the entrance to the ceremonial platform, the **casket was carried** shoulder high by eight tall military men. On the platform, the casket was centered in the pathway usually held for kings, prime ministers and presidents. The actual service was as simple as in any village church in the land, and included a **reading of the Twenty-third Psalm**.

The gray metal casket was lowered into the tomb. A clergy said something about "earth to earth." The casket was sprinkled with soil brought from France. The service was

concluded. The ritual had accomplished its mystical and unexplainable purpose: It made people feel they had done the right thing.

As the words of blessing died away, from far up the line you could hear a whisper of sound. The sound grew and grew and it seemed that all were ***taking leave***, on the march back to the joys and sorrows of daily life.

As the last person left, and as the last roll of drums faded, two soldiers came forward to serve as the host guard for this glorious dead, and who from that day onward would forever be on guard at the entrance to the tomb of "our boy" - the hallowed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

A Few Facts About Guard Duty at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

The tomb has been patrolled, without interruption, since 1930, and guards are changed every 30 minutes during summer months (60 minutes in the winter). Each guard: spends five hours a day preparing his uniform; cannot drink alcohol, on or off duty, for the rest of his life; cannot swear in public. After two years, a guard is given a wreath pin signifying his service at the tomb: Presently, there are only 400 pins worn.

Anyone who has visited Arlington Cemetery, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, cannot help but be moved by the ritual power of the "Changing of the Guard."



What Do Funeral Rituals Accomplish?

1. Mutuality of recognition.

Funeral rituals reach what is called "mutuality of recognition." In other words, people in grief usually choose to return to the places and people that are familiar.

Examples are:

- Burial in the familiar cemetery.
- Returning to their hometown for a funeral (same streets, places, familiar people, etc.)
- Engaging the same funeral home time after time.

The process of the mutuality of recognition in the funeral ritual is of vital importance. It is because of this that most people are extremely reluctant to introduce new ideas and/or change the rites and rituals of funerals. This conservative attitude significantly helps the bereaved by offering stability and security.

2. Social relationships.

The funeral ritual is a statement of the social relationships, or lack of them, in a community. In its most elementary form, the funeral is a group-centered social function. The sense of community helps address the needs of the bereaved by offering attention, sympathy, and emotional support.

3. Finding a sense of balance.

The funeral ritual is vital in helping people deal with the tensions in life and in finding a sense of balance. It can help grieving people deal with sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, shock, distress, and/or helplessness. As a process, it diffuses tension by providing a vehicle for the bereaved to:

- express and receive attention
- reduce loneliness
- receive emotional support and relief from perceived threats
- interpret the event of death.

4. Breaking down illusions.

The funeral ritual helps break down the illusions of an idealized self-image that says "I have my act together," or "I don't need anyone to help me!" It helps make sure that the bereaved are with others in the here and now and not 'imagining,' in social or mental isolation, that this death does not have significance. In this manner, it sets the stage for building new relationships.

5. Making a statement.

Both socially and privately, the funeral ritual says that we are interdependent people. It teaches us that "joy shared is joy increased;" likewise, "grief shared is grief diminished." The funeral helps to gently remind the bereaved that they are living in a world of other

people and that to become independent of grief, they must first acknowledge their interdependence.

6. Challenging the "Take care of yourself" attitude.

The funeral ritual challenges any excessive attitude of “me, me, me.” By using all the possible components of rites, it helps the bereaved move from a sense of alienation, loneliness and fear, to the more positive position of assimilating the event, sensing companionship, and realizing that life goes on. The funeral helps the bereaved see the importance of grasping the promising aspects of a new life situation, rather than emphasizing the negative.

7. The instructional benefit.

The funeral ritual teaches us how death is handled in our community, and imparts a sense of peace of mind. Confronting the reality of death, seeing the dead human body (the prepared and restored symbol of death) is an instructional process. This specific rite teaches that one who was once alive is no longer alive: The bereaved need to recognize this fact for honest grieving to take place.

8. Interpreting the death.

The funeral ritual interprets death for us by establishing the reality of death in a structured situation. The events created by death are chaotic. The structure of the funeral ritual brings a sense of order, purpose, and direction to these confusing events. The interpretation of the event of death bestows upon the bereaved, the reality of events which they need to recognize in order to move on with life. A funeral helps us honestly interpret the: who, what, where, why, and how of what has happened.

9. Integrating the local and world view.

The funeral ritual indoctrinates people by placing the experience of death within a world view, as well as within a local community view, and helps make the bereaved a member of both. The funeral ritual indoctrinates us with an identity both on a large and small scale. It identifies us with our ‘global’ culture (for funerals are universal) as well as our local culture, and helps the bereaved answer the all-important question: "Who Am I?"

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS - Funeral Rites and Ritual Analysis

EVENT	RITES	RITUAL
1. Death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covering the body • Documenting the death 	Ritual of Death
2. Notification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal notification • Obituaries • Word-of-mouth • Announcements • Separation from association with the deceased 	Ritual of Notification/ Separation
3. Confrontation with Reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual/tactile confrontation with the Primary Symbol of Death — the dead human body • Visual/tactile confrontation with the Secondary Symbols of Death: (e.g., casket, vault, flowers, vehicles, facilities, music, processions, disposition, mementos, monuments) • Combing hair • Touching remains • Staring at remains • Talking to remains 	Ritual of Reality
4. Need for Group Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Visitation/facilities/casket b. Wake c. Rosary service d. Lodge service e. Creative mementos 	Ritual of Support

EVENT	rites	RITUAL
4. Group Support (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Gift giving/gift receiving b. Flowers c. Visits to residence d. Story telling 	Ritual of Support
5. Religious and Ceremonial Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal rituals/music • Religious convictions • Ethical convictions (Reverence for the Dead) • Participatory rituals 	Ritual of Funeralization
6. Final Consignment of Remains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procession • Funeral vehicles • Vault/urn • Memorials/monuments 	Ritual of Finality

Synopsis of Ritual Behavior: What it Does

1. Rituals teach mutuality of recognition, because they:
 - A. Teach discrimination between good and bad;
 - B. Afford us dramatic elaborations so we can remember significant rites of passage; and,
 - C. Help teach us the rules of the community in which we live.
2. Rituals are vital in dealing with the tensions of life and the search for balance.
3. Rituals help integrate the possibilities created by opposites (i.e., the tension between life and death).

4. Rituals help break through idealized self images. When you are with others you identify with others in the here and now. ("Grief shared is grief diminished.")
5. Rituals state that we are interdependent co-beings. By my interdependence I find independence: "I belong to a group as an individual."
6. Rituals interpret existence and challenge, the "take care of yourself" attitude. Rituals challenge excessive individualization and help us move from alienation, loneliness, and fear, to assimilation, companionship, and contact.
7. Rituals are a statement of social relationships existing in a community.
8. Rituals reflect each participant's ability to be interpersonal.
9. Rituals are repetitive and, as such, function in giving a sense of security to the participants.
10. Rituals help individuals assimilate and cope with rapidly changing circumstances in life.
11. Rituals are instructional, interpretive, and indoctrinating:
 - A. Rituals instruct through repetition.
 - B. Rituals help interpret the experience of reality (both sorrowful and joyful), by placing the experience within structural formats and relationship.
 - C. Rituals instruct by leading people to a solidarity of conviction.

The Significance of Funeral Ritual

Funeral rituals are necessary if the bereaved are to have the opportunity for a healthy existence, after the death of a loved one. It is clear that the absence or severe reduction of ritual can result in psycho-social disorders in the bereaved.

For this reason alone, cemeterians need the foundation knowledge to understand the value, heritage, and impact of rituals. At the same time, they should become familiar with

the new rites and rituals that funeral professionals are offering. This will help them better manage and adapt to future trends.

III. THE LANGUAGE OF RITUALS: SYMBOLS

- What are symbols?
- How do they work?
- How can we use them?

“Through rituals, Heaven and earth join in harmony, the sun and moon shine, the four seasons proceed in order, the stars and constellations march, the rivers flow, and all things flourish ... Through rituals the root and the branch are put in proper order”


--Hsiin Tzu, ancient Confucian text

The services of the funeral profession, including the funeral ritual, are actually symbols that are implemented to care for the living as well as the dead. The purpose of this section is to discuss the importance of symbols in the funeral. This is essential information for the cemeterian.

Defining the Term

Symbols abound throughout life. In fact without them, life, as we know it, would be drastically different. For instance, the symbol for the letter D is: "D." Not that it couldn't have been "XX," but it is recognized as a line with a half circle: "D." Without this type of symbol recognition one would not be able to read, much less understand, this course. The type of symbol recognition referred to here is also known as “learning.”

Regarding the actual funeral service, we certainly use the process of symbols in learning but, for our profession, the use of symbols goes much deeper.

 Here is the definition of symbol that we will use:

A symbol is something which, in addition to being what we see, also holds other meanings. In other words, it leads to knowledge *other* than itself. This deeper notion of

symbols is that they help people make an unknown reality understandable.

The following is a real life example of how a symbol can help people relate to an unknown reality:

The practice of firing three rifles volleys over the grave of a service person is seen today as a part of the military funeral. Guns, bullets, shell casings and people are involved. The volley is what people see and hear, but what is the deeper symbolism behind this practice?

Symbolically, the firing of three volleys over a grave means that the battle is over, that the dead warriors must be given attention, and that what the warrior did in battle was important and deserves a moment of recognition and honor.

The historical background that gave rise to this symbolic ritual had its origin in the old custom of halting the fighting by firing three volleys, so that the dead could be removed from the battlefield. When each army had cleared its dead, it would fire three volleys to indicate that the dead had been ethically cared for and that they were ready to return to the fight.

Today the symbol of the battle is not a literal war, but the battle of life. The symbol of the three volleys is a recognition that the war of life has ended, that the dead person (warrior) is gone from life (the battlefield), and that our lives go on (return to fight). The funeral ritual is full of this type of valuable symbolism.

The remainder of this section will explain the symbols of the funeral profession, and outline a blueprint for their use in the ritualistic process in funerals.

The story of our funeral symbols is a fascinating one which combines history, psychology, liturgy, and many other disciplines.

1. Examples of symbols.

- a. The rite of draping the casket with a flag.
 - (1) History - This custom began during the Napoleonic Wars (1806 - 1815).
The dead were carried from the field of battle in flags.
 - (2) Symbolism - Covering the casket with a flag is symbolic of the dead person being carried away from the battlefield of life.

- b. The rite of depositing a sprig of acacia at Masonic funerals.
 - (1) History - The Hebrew custom is to plant a branch of acacia vera on the graves of departed relatives.
 - (2) Symbolism - The texture and color of the Masonic apron is similar to the acacia. The acacia then becomes a symbol of innocence, since the Masonic Apron is a badge of innocence for all Freemasons.

Primary and Secondary Symbols of Death

There is only one supreme, primary symbol of death, and that is the prepared and restored dead human body. By viewing and touching the primary symbol of death, the bereaved are seeing something that helps make an unknown reality, known (the death of a significant person).

The remaining symbols (e.g., caskets, flowers, hearses, mementos), are described as secondary symbols of death.

The ideal way to experience the reality of death and the beneficial nature of the funeral is by using the primary and secondary symbols of death in unison. If the primary symbol of death is not used, then people can utilize the secondary symbols to establish the reality of death. The most unhealthy decision is for the bereaved to utilize neither the primary nor secondary symbols.

1. The primary death symbol: The prepared and restored dead human body.
 - (1) Visual and tactile confrontation
 - (2) Establish the reality of death
 - (3) Not offensive

2. Examples of secondary symbols of death:

- (1) Casket
- (2) Flowers
- (3) Procession

Analysis of Secondary Symbols of Death

A. CASKET	METAL OR WOOD CONTAINER	1.	TANGIBLE SYMBOL OF DEATH
		2.	RELATIONSHIP OF THE DECEASED
		3.	'ORDERLY' CONTAINMENT OF DEATH
		4.	SEPARATION
		5.	REALITY OF LOSS
		6.	RITUAL PROCESS
		7.	PARTITION BETWEEN LIFE & DEATH
B. OUTER RECEPTACLE	CONCRETE OR METAL CONTAINER	1.	PEACE OF MIND
		2.	DURABILITY
		3.	IMMORTALITY
		4.	FRAGILITY OF LIFE
C. FLOWERS	ORGANIC PLANTS	1.	NEED FOR BEAUTY AT DEATH
		2.	NEW LIFE
		3.	LIFE "CUT FROM THE STEM"
		4.	FRAGILITY OF LIFE
D. FUNERAL VEHICLES	HEARSE; FLOWER CAR	1.	UNIVERSALITY OF DEATH
		2.	DEATH 'GOES' EVERYWHERE
		3.	THE DEATH BEARER
		4.	MOBILITY OF DEATH
E. FUNERAL HOME BUILDING		1.	PLACE WHERE DEATH IS CONFRONTED
		2.	DIGNITY
		3.	RECOGNITION THAT DEATH OCCURS (E.G., FUNERAL HOME SIGN, LIGHTING)

F. FUNERAL MUSIC NOTES, SOUND	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOL THAT LIFE IS TEMPORAL 2. SYMBOL OF LIFE THEMES 3. SYMBOL OF ATTITUDES AND RELATIONSHIPS 4. SYMBOL OF COMFORT 5. SYMBOL OF AFFECTION 6. SYMBOL OF PAST TRADITIONS 7. SYMBOL OF NEW TRADITIONS
G. FUNERAL PROCESSION AUTOS LINED UP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOL OF A PILGRIMAGE 2. SYMBOL OF ORGANIZING WHAT WE DON'T UNDERSTAND 3. SYMBOL OF RECOGNITION 4. SYMBOL OF THE BEGINNING, AND ARRIVAL AT THE FINAL DESTINATION IN THE JOURNEY OF LIFE
H. FINAL CONSIGNMENT LEGAL REQUIREMENT (DISPOSITION)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOL OF FORCED FINALITY 2. SYMBOL OF FINAL FAREWELL 3. SYMBOL OF CLOSURE 4. SYMBOL OF THE LIVING TOUCHING THE EARTH 5. SYMBOL OF NEW LIFE 6. SYMBOL OF OUR OWN END 7. SYMBOL OF CHOSEN FINALITY
I. PERSONAL MEMENTOS TRINKETS AND THINGS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOL OF COMMEMORATING LIFE 2. SYMBOL OF ATTACHMENTS
J. FRATERNAL AND SOCIETAL RECOGNITION INSIGNIA , MEDAL, SASH	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. SYMBOL OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS 4. SYMBOL OF LIFE THEMES 5. SYMBOL OF LIFE INTERPRETATION 6. SYMBOL OF IMMORTALITY
K. PERMANENT MONUMENTS BLOCKS OF STONE OR BRONZE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOLIC IMMORTALITY 2. SYMBOL OF IDENTITY 3. SYMBOL OF COMMUNITY 4. SYMBOL OF BELIEFS 5. SYMBOL OF RELATIONSHIPS 6. SYMBOL OF HISTORY
I. URN PLASTIC, WOOD, OR METAL CONTAINER	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. SYMBOLIZES ORGANIZATION 2. SYMBOLIZES AN ATTEMPT TO PUT SOMETHING BACK TOGETHER AGAIN (ASHES) 3. SYMBOLIZES PORTABILITY / TRANSCENDENCE

By being aware of the symbolism behind the different funeral services and options, cemeterians can be more knowledgeable for business purposes and *especially* for their client.

IV. The Future of Ritual

“Rituals can alter the state of the world because they invoke power. The power is treated as inherent in the ritual itself “

- Edmund Leach



Much of the future of funeral rituals will depend on the funeral director's ability to adapt and initiate new types of services which fill the needs of different people's expectations. We live in a time of rapid change, and this trend is likely to continue: Increasingly, we are a country of diversity. 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.

New types of national, ethnic, or spiritual communities are increasingly scattered throughout North America; “organized” religions may conduct differing funeral rituals; more and more people are unchurched; many have embraced cremation as a conviction ... 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 available to everyone. Some of the new types of services do this very well, so be creative for that is where new ideas emerge.

A word of caution: 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 a time of crisis. Such "abridged" funerals reduce the benefits of the funeral, instead

taking all that we have learned to be psychologically "unsound," and putting it together in one package. This sometimes 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, that choice lacks 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.

When a family requests immediate disposal, there are funeral directors who state that it is their practice to have a funeral for all bodies entrusted to them. If the family did not want to plan or participate in it, that was up to them. But as a funeral director, they explain, it would not be possible to stay in this profession if they did not believe in the funeral. Those funeral directors often have found that, after a few hours, the family would call to inquire about the time of the service and 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 birth date and death date, acknowledging that he or she lived life, then 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. Many of the families write funeral directors to thank them for being so considerate, and for believing so much in what they do for a living. Don't be surprised if you are recommended to other families, because you are seen as one who really cares about people! This is called professional "**Conviction of Belief**," and any director can express this during funeral counseling. Making the funeral process available, because you believe in it, can enable people to share in your belief.

The Cycle of Service

THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR'S "CONVICTION OF BELIEF" IS WHAT THE INTEGRITY OF THE PROFESSION HINGES ON: THE VALUE OF THE FUNERAL, FIRST AND ALWAYS!

 The funeral 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 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, resources for meeting the varied social, emotional, and spiritual needs of the bereaved. The “Cycle of Service” starts with the death, culminates with the final disposition of the body, and continues with aftercare for the living. Each step of the way has its own built-in wisdom, to help people do what is essential for wisely managing 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 relate to each other. It provides many ways by which people can express love and concern, enabling them to feel comfortable in doing what would otherwise be more distressing. There is a risk in judging who will and who won't be affected by a death: too old and no friends? too young and no friends? These are fragile positions from 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 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 uninformed 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 fashion in recent times, which is very unfortunate. 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 knowledge has many levels. If the state police call and ask your daughter's name, make of car and registration number, then tell 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 means. But the kind of ‘knowing’ that is involved in funeral counseling is much deeper. It is so deep that a person confronting the death of a loved one may instantly be stimulated to say, "It can't be so." There is a great difference between verbal meaning and emotional meaning. Human beings need a variety of events to confirm the reality of death beyond all emotional denial. The funeral provides various procedures that speak to the total being: mind, reason, feelings, and spirit. It is this “larger – and deeper – 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 neo-natal 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: "When was the last funeral you attended?" and "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, through 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. 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, that was accomplished.

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

V. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This course has detailed the importance of funeral rituals. It began by explaining the social value and six ritual steps – along with the risks of altering those steps – through an analysis of what the process achieves, followed by an exploration of primary and secondary symbols of death. Poignant and powerful case studies were utilized to illustrate many of the most essential concepts presented, including the many ways funeralization can facilitate emotional healing.

It is appropriate, here, to emphasize what was stated in the course's Introduction:
Funeral counseling takes time; rituals of death take time. For the clients' benefit and your own professional growth, devote all the time you can afford to the families, friends, and neighbors of deceased loved one, as they "walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

It is a most admirable thing to do.