THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR: MAINTAINING BUSINESS, REPUTATION AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper, based upon direct and participant observation, a review of literature, and personal interviews, explores the world of funerals, the occupation of funeral director, and the role of customer. The literature and the data are woven together. Described in this paper are the activities of a funeral director and what happens during the funeral process.

INTRODUCTION

The occupation of funeral directing has been the focus of many recent studies in sociology. It has been examined from many angles, such as the stigma surrounding the funeral director (Thompson 1991), the semiotics of the funeral home (Barley 1983), and the status strain of the funeral director (Abbott 1981). In this paper, the interaction between the funeral director and the client was chosen as the area of investigation, beginning from the funeral director taking the "first call" until the completion of the interment of the deceased.

The duties of funeral directors have been a gradual accumulation of those that were previously performed by barbers, embalmers, casket makers, midwives, and clergy. These roles have been combined creating the distinctive nature of the work of directing, conducting, arranging, and officiating at funerals and burials. According to Trice (1993 30), funeral directors have developed ways of lessening the emotional content of their work. For example, for a death occurring in a home, they may quickly rearrange the room where the body was found, in order to portray the image of a room where no death occurred. Posing the corpse so it resembles a sleeping person and arranging funeral home furniture to resemble that of a living room or parlor also allow funeral directors to decrease the high level of distress that can be found in this environment.

The likelihood of errors, mistakes, and conflict during periods of emotional distress and personal trauma illustrates the importance of studying the activities of the funeral director and what happens during the funereal process. The management of this process affects all areas of the funeral home system, including the establishment of certain codes of behavior. Therefore, this paper seeks to shed more light on certain aspects of this consultant/client relationship in order to better understand the normative behavior within this stigmatized occupation and the performance of social dramas connected to disposing of the dead.

METHODS

A variety of qualitative methods was used in this research. The content of this paper is based partially upon information, impressions, and experiences gained as participant observers at funerals, as a professor of classes dealing with death and dying, and interviews and conversations with funeral directors, the bereaved, funeral home staff and others in the industry or with knowledge of the industry.

The role of college professor in several death and dying classes allowed immersion into the business world and occupational culture of funeral directing. Four funeral directors were routinely asked to speak to students in these classes. There were also class tours of funeral homes, embalming and casket rooms, business offices, as well as the local coroner's office and autopsy room.

The information gleaned from the above contexts are supplemental, however, to the primary methodology of interviewing. Twenty-two funeral directors (21 males and 1 female) were interviewed by the authors using an interview guide that allowed the directors to speak freely about their business and the funereal process.

THE FUNERAL

Each funeral brings together those responsible for the burial of the deceased into the much avoided behavioral and emotional systems surrounding physical death and worldly departure. The funeral director is, as

the title implies, the master of this process. As routine, ordinary, and normalized as the ceremony is for the director, it is rather unique and extraordinary for the clients and those attending funeral services. The "routine" funeral for the director becomes an individually singular, or non-normalized, event for the bereaved. This creates an ongoing tension which has the potential to produce violations of standards, grave and burial decorum, normative expectations, even "funeral deviance" as the director manages private performances in contrasting ways. Mistakes can occur during each step of the funereal process as the funeral director maneuvers through each working stage of the performance.

The First Call

The job of the funeral director begins the moment that he/she receives what is termed the "first call." This is literally the first call notifying the funeral director that there has been a death. The call itself can come from family members or friends of the deceased, hospital personnel, or the coroner's office, depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. During this call, the funeral director gathers necessary information for his/her services, such as the name of the deceased and the cause of death, the name of the person calling (if it's a family member), and the name of the next of kin, who is legally in charge of handling the decisions. If pre-arrangements have been made, then from this point on those pre-arrangements take precedence over the requests made by the family. However some funeral homes allow decisions to be made by the family even if they conflict with pre-arrangements made by the deceased.

One interview during this study began when the male funeral director was terminating a phone conversation. He explained that a woman had died the previous day and she had preplans arranged for her own services and that they requested that these services be held locally. Her family wanted to overlook the preplans and have the services held in their hometown, so that it could be more convenient for the remaining family. When questioned about the matter, the funeral director answered,

> Dead people don't sue. That's a joke we have in this business. Dead people don't sue.

The above comment illustrates the belief by some funeral homes that family members, who are present, and in most cases are paying for the funeral services, are in charge; therefore, whatever services decided initially by the recently deceased are not "set in stone."

During the first call, the funeral director determines a "call time," in which the next of kin and their family will come in and make arrangements for the funeral services. The funeral director must also determine where the deceased is located and arrange to have the body picked up, either by the director or staff. Sometimes, however, special circumstances, such as someone dying in one state and wanting their funeral in another, prevent that funeral director from retrieving the body personally. In a case like this the funeral director has several options. The first is that the funeral director can contact a funeral home within the city and state in which the person died. He/She will make arrangements for this funeral home to pick up the body and then transport it to an airport where it will be flown into the state where the funeral will take place. Another option is for the funeral director, or someone on staff, to drive out-of-state to pick up the body. A third possibility is that an out-of-state funeral home is asked to drive the body to the chosen funeral home from their out-of-state location.

Process of Removal

Under typical circumstances, the process following that of the first call is the removal of the body by the funeral home. Some funeral directors consider the removal process another area of stress. Because of the emotional nature of the situation, funeral directors may not receive essential information, such as the name of next-of-kin, unless they ask directly. One funeral director explained that certain family members want to take control of the removal process because of the desire to protect their loved one when being handled by a third party. For example, this funeral director participated in one such removal where a married man, in his mid-twenties died and at his removal the mother attempted to take control of the situation. However, because he was married, the mother was not legally in charge; therefore, she had no legal say in those circumstances. Thus, if

possible, the next-of-kin is usually verified when the funeral director receives the "first call" of a death.

The funeral directors face various problems in order to complete necessary tasks, such as the physical removal of a body or bodies. One quandary they can be faced with is upsetting the family during the removal process. Many funeral directors interviewed implied that grieving families could be further distressed when they witness a removal team handling their loved one in an aggressive manner. The goal of the funeral director and those on the removal team is to remove the body from the home as quickly as possible.

> Home removals can be said to be more difficult than hospital removals, because in hospitals, the death is less disturbing to the family and the body is easier to remove. The perceived serenity of the family's home has been upset; therefore, they want to limit the amount of undue attention that their work may receive, so as to protect the family from further grief. (Barley 1983 407)

The removal team attempts to move as much furniture out of the way as will be allowed. They want to avoid making noise while handling the body.

> ...if any noises are heard from the room where the removal team is working, the family may interpret this as the body being bumped into furniture or being dropped on the floor. (Barley 1983 407)

However, in certain situations funeral directors must handle the body aggressively if the environment is not favorable for an easy removal. One funeral director told about one such removal that occurred at a local retirement home. When they began the removal process, the funeral director found that the retirement home had no elevators. The only way to the ground floor was to use an extremely narrow stairwell. The body had to be tilted vertically in order to fit. This mishandling of the body could have been offensive to the family members present, but the funeral director in charge felt that it was the only option available. Similar modifications occur when extremely obese individuals die at home, even necessitating tearing out a wall or enlarging doorways in order to remove the body. Unruh (1979 253) explains that there are rules and ideologies established in order to control the risks and unforeseen occurrences that can take place at any point of the funeral process. However, he points out that these control only "a small number of things that can go awry."

When the body has been removed from the premises it is then brought to the funeral home. Historically, funeral directors would have to embalm the body as soon as it was brought to the funeral home, but today that is no longer necessary (Unruh 1979). They are allowed to wait until the scheduled funeral director arrives at the funeral home the following morning. Because the timing of one's death is usually uncertain, some funeral directors feel that it is not only the act of the removal itself which can be stressful, but it is also the time of day at which the removal process actually occurs. One funeral director felt that the time spent "on call" was difficult, meaning he could be called to remove a body at any time, day or night. Another funeral director spoke of an instance where he was called for a removal very late at night. When he arrived at the home of the deceased, the family asked if he would wait until another relative had arrived to begin removing the body. The "courteous" funeral director and his colleagues had to wait four hours for that person's arrival. In these cases, many funeral directors will encourage the family members to go into another room for coffee, which allows the removal team to work without onlookers and lessens the chance of offending the family (Barley 1983 407).

Arrangement Process

During the determined "call time," the family comes to the funeral home and meets with the funeral director, where they complete any necessary paperwork, such as assisting in the preparation of the death certificate. They also determine the time and date of the funeral services and the type of burial, whether a cremation or regular embalming. Once most paperwork has been completed, they are brought into a "selection room" to choose a burial container (casket or urn). However, sometimes there is conflict between family members on what would be best for the deceased. One funeral director explained that there are occasional personality clashes between family members, such as when a prodigal biological child and a

loyal stepchild converge for the arrangement of a parent's funeral. Or when a "westernized" Muslim woman wants to go to the cemetery (traditionally only the men of the Muslim family go to the cemetery and the women are forced to stay away). Personal conflict will sometimes erupt during the arrangement stage. Each family member has ideas about how the loved one should be handled and this can lead to disagreements and even to attempted physical harm of the funeral director. Each funeral director develops their own style for dealing with these conflicts.

> Basically it has to be brought out that decisions have to be made. I've had debates over what the name of the deceased is. Half of the family sat on one side the table and the other half sat on the opposite side. Every time I would ask a question they would break out into an argument. At that point in time I didn't feel like I was going to get anywhere with them. If one person can't speak for all I have to make a judgement call. I've even gone as far as to getting a phone book out and telling them to pick out another funeral home because apparently I will not be able to accommodate their needs. This usually works and they usually realize they have to work together in some way or they will not find anyone to handle their arrangements. Sometimes people just can't get over their differences and I politely tell them they will have to go somewhere else to make their funeral arrangements. Most of the time it's just a lot of stress. Death seems to bring out distrust in people. Most of the time it's just a matter of making them understand that they need to get through this and they can handle their differences later. That usually works pretty well.

The funeral industry supports the personalization of the funeral service. This personalization comes into play during the arrangement process. Many funeral homes allow and even encourage families to request whatever it is that they feel will honor the memory of their loved one. They now "pride themselves" on catering to the desires of the families. According to Unruh (1979 247), the funeral director is judged on the experiences they create, instead of a particular concrete product, increasing the importance of pleasing the family. They agree to many requests made by family members, even though they may not fit within traditional bounds. The funeral director may find some funeral services to be more important than others (Unruh 1979 250). For example, one funeral home allowed the family's beloved Labrador retriever to "stand guard" next to his master's casket. Another funeral party requested that a Harley-Davidson motorcycle be placed next to the casket of the deceased. One family asked that the deceased be presented with a fishing pole placed in his hands. One biker's family wanted beer and drug paraphernalia in his casket. Another family asked that their father's mouth remain open because that is how they remembered him. Once at grave side a family smoked pot before putting the body into the ground.

However, even though this trend of "personalizing the funeral" is common in today's funeral homes, funeral directors can cause problems when they allow things that are outside of the "rules" of the funeral home. Many funeral homes, though they allow family requests, have put limits in order to keep some margin of control over their clients. However, as Unruh (1979 249) points out, a funeral home's "organizational ideology" may not be used consistently with all clients. If they do allow requests that fall outside of the designated "rules," then they are at risk of affecting the perception that others have of their reputation, their business, and their job performance.

> Unlike the building construction worker who can cover up nearly all of his mistakes and repair his product before clients see it...much of what the funeral director does is open to public scrutiny, either on the spot or soon after preparation. (Unruh 1979 248)

At a funeral attended by one of the authors, the corpse, while lying at state in an open coffin, started to ooze a small amount of reddish fluid from the right side of the mouth. When notified of this, the funeral director quickly obtained cleaning supplies, wax, and suturing instruments and, while visitors stood by a few feet away, hovered over the corpse, positioning himself so as to block the view of visitors, and cleaned, tightened sutures, and reapplied makeup to the skin of the corpse. This illustrates the immediacy that exists in the funeral director's work (Unruh 1979 248).

The reactions to the funeral director's de-

cisions are immediate and can affect not only the family of the deceased, but also other families being served by that funeral home. For example, a female funeral director gave an explanation regarding the "most unusual funeral" that she had ever seen. A man died in California, and was sent to two other major cities for wakes, before arriving at a local funeral home for his final disposition. Aside from the multi-wake service he requested, his family also told that funeral director that the man had asked that he, and his casket, be presented vertically at each service. His reasoning, given before he died, was that "he did not want everyone staring down at him, he wanted to stare down at everyone himself." Someone at this funeral could have taken offense to the way he was presented and criticized this funeral home when speaking to others. This can affect future business. Other customers who are being served alongside the families with extraordinary requests, may begin to feel cheated, or that their particular situation is not "important" enough to require "specialized" services and attention. There also may be problems regarding accessibility, equipment, and a deterioration of the peaceful environment due to such unusual requests (Unruh 1979 250).

Every case that enters a funeral home will include some uniqueness, because the funeral director must handle each body according to the circumstances surrounding it (Unruh 1979). Decisions made by the funeral director may contradict the organizational ideology that is usually followed at a particular funeral home. These ideologies are set up specifically to minimize the risk of mistakes during this process.

> In short, a funeral home organization cannot appear to be concerned, efficient, thoughtful, and competent if the funeral director and employees do not seem to embody those traits. (Unruh 1979 248)

Those working in the medical industry similarly develop new guidelines for each patient who enters the hospital (Friedson 1970 315-325; Roth 1972). The funeral director may be pressured to manipulate the funeral home ideology into a new context depending on the situation surrounding each new case accepted (Unruh 1979 249). One "notorious" event reported by one of the funeral directors included in this study had to do with the request of a particular ethnic group known for its strong family ties and caste-like family structure. The funeral home usually closed "visiting hours" at 10:00 p.m. This group, however, wanted to have the funeral home left open around the clock to accommodate the arrival of over 100 relatives driving and flying from all over the country to pay respects to the departed patriarch. The funeral home reluctantly complied but it "turned into a three-day circus" before it was over. Therefore, it can be concluded that the idea of "bending the rules" is not only practiced, but to some extent supported. One funeral director interviewed stated that his funeral home was very open to considering the ideas that the families had for funeral services. It fact this funeral home was "all about service." It was something that the owner himself highly endorsed.

Payment of services, including expenses incurred for any necessary service from a third party, such as musical and flower arrangements, burial sites, and hospitality services for out-of-town visitors occurs during the arrangement process. Third party expenses are separate from that of the funeral homes; however, in order to make things simpler for the families those prices may be discussed during this stage. Even though this is a well-known aspect of the arrangement process, the discussion of finances has been said to cause stress among funeral directors. One funeral director attributed job stress to working with families during a very emotional time. This can be trying for both the director and the family. It is made even more difficult when the family he is waiting on has little money or if the insurance claims and expected benefits are not clearly understood and established. He is aware of how much families end up paying for his services and he realizes the consequences of financial stress and strain.

Most funeral directors will work with the families in order to give them the best deal they can, so that they can have a proper service for their deceased family member without spending all of their savings. One funeral home included in this study had special options for those families who could not afford an elaborate funeral, but wanted to give their loved one a decent ceremony. According to Kephart (1950), many neighborhood funeral directors are aware of the economic status of the families that visit; therefore, it can be

surmised that, while they are required by law to present all prices for the funeral service, the funeral director will use his abilities to give them a good deal.

In fact, many funeral homes now have incorporated affordable funeral merchandise into their selections. For example, some families may opt for a "welfare casket." These "caskets" are usually made of cardboard and fashioned like a casket or they are simply a wooden "tray" with a canvas cover. These caskets have been said to be presented in a manner that will detract the attention of the clients, by presenting one in a shade of green, to other "nicer" caskets during the selection process. However, families may not even be aware of these types of caskets, because they may not be explicitly shown in the selection room, even though they are considered to be valid containers for burial. The price for these caskets is under $500 dollars. On the opposite end of the scale, there are those who are willing to pay a lot of money for the merchandise for their loved one. At one funeral home, the most expensive casket on the price list was $26,000 dollars. These prices include the casket only. Many funeral homes also charge an overhead service fee, which does not include the actual services. Each element of the funeral service, such as use of the hearse, viewing rooms, and kitchen facilities, copies made on the copying machine, phone calls, etc. are all separate and distinct charges. According to Kephart (1950), proportionately, the lower and middle classes spend more of their income on funerals than do those in the upper class. He also found in his study that the more educated clients of funeral homes were more likely to come into the funeral home asking for the cheapest prices possible.

The funeral director also requests during this stage that the family, at their convenience, complete or assist in the completion of the obituary and in the selection of the newspapers designated to carry the obituary. Honorary and actual pall bearers are also to be named at this stage as are ministers and assistant ministers. Those who make pre-arrangements (if those arrangements are not contradicted by survivors) assist in removing the uncertainty surrounding these services. Some funeral homes offer detailed hard copy and online information about how to pre-arrange one's funeral.

Preparation Process

Once the family members have made their decisions, the funeral director, if he/she is licensed to embalm and/or cremate, is free to begin the preparation of the body. If he/she is not licensed to embalm then usually that funeral home will have a licensed embalmer on staff. The preparation process includes the embalming and also any restorative work that is necessary to make the body presentable. Before embalming, the body is cleaned and then the features of the face (particularly the lips and eyelids) and hands are fixed and set, mimicking the position of one who is sleeping. After embalming fluid replaces human blood, after internal organs are manipulated as needed, the body is dressed and the hair and make-up are done. Then the body is placed into the casket chosen by the family. The preparation and embalming process have been said to be a source of stress for funeral directors, because of the "perfection" required by their occupation. They want to make sure that the deceased looks as "normal" as possible, in order to present the deceased as being in a state of peaceful sleep. During one interview the funeral director was asked if he considered his job to be "stressful." He said, "I like my job [but] as far as job stress, this is the only job that requires perfection." Families want to make sure that the deceased "looks good." Making the deceased look as "normal" as possible is the goal of the funeral director. According to Barley, a "flawless" presentation of the deceased is to

> invoke an interpretation of familiarity or naturalness that is opposed to the foreignness of...death and the viewing of the corpse. (1983 24-25)

By putting the deceased into a position of restful sleep, and taking care to position the body not too high or too low in the casket, adjusting the indirect lighting in the viewing room to match the shade of make-up used on the corpse (and to camouflage any scarring left by trauma or autopsies), the funeral director hopes to put the family and funeral attendees at ease.

Sometimes, funeral directors are placed in a position where their emotional involvement can be tested. For example, one funeral director, who was also licensed to embalm, spoke about the difficulty of em-

balming his father. He had wanted to prepare his father's body. Because his father had been a funeral director himself, the son felt obligated to be the one in charge of embalming. He said that body was the hardest to complete, because he wanted to spend more time than was possible in order to make it "perfect." Another funeral director stated that the same emotional aspects that existed for physicians could also be found in mortuary work. There are difficulties encountered while working on infants when one has children or when working on someone who is the same age as the funeral director. According to Thompson (1991), many funeral directors practice "emotional detachment" in order to overcome the negative or uncomfortable feelings they have when they deal with death. Many funeral directors normalize or routinize the work in order to complete it without being emotionally affected (Charmaz 1980). They focus on the "mechanics" of each step and they consider each body as a special entity with individual circumstances. One funeral director interviewed specifically agreed with this strategy. She said that each funeral director has a unique but typical routine. As a whole it is the same for all funeral directors who are licensed to embalm. However, over time, funeral directors develop their own way of doing things, or their own work habits. She said that it is easier to focus on the circumstances surrounding the deceased than it is to think about the actual person being embalmed.

Public Viewing, Funeral, Burial

After the body has been prepared, it is brought into a viewing room where first the family is encouraged to come for a private viewing. There they can request any necessary changes if they are unhappy with their family member's appearance. This usually occurs about one to two hours before the scheduled public viewing. During the public viewing friends and relatives are invited to come to honor the loved one's memory and to offer their condolences to the family. Because of the emotional nature of the situation, some funeral participants may become upset; a distraction for those who are participating calmly.

People generally transfer their hostility and fears about death to the funeral director (Pine 1975; Thompson 1991). During an interview, one funeral director sarcastically explained that funerals "bring out the best in people," meaning that because of the emotional nature of the funeral or wake, participants may become unusually upset, angry, or belligerent. He has witnessed people kicking chairs when they became upset during a service. The funeral director, who would normally leave someone to work through his or her own grief, will then step in at a moment like this and address the participant. He expressed that he will not allow anyone to destroy funeral home property, suggesting that they go outside to collect themselves instead. Sometimes old unresolved family issues and relational "sore spots," or even immediate issues surrounding the nature of the death of the loved one, exacerbated by the emotional environment, may cause emotional or violent outbursts, arguments, and accusations. Unruh (1979 256) points out that the reaction expected from funeral participants should occur within "reasonable limits." Those who step outside of these boundaries may endanger the believability of the service, because they are upsetting those around them.

The funeral usually takes place the day after the wake and, in modern times, usually occurs at a funeral home (or "parlor"). As Pine (1975) describes it, the service of every funeral is "essentially the same." The funeral director and his/her staff are prepared and waiting for the family and their guests to arrive. Regardless of the funeral's location, the family is customarily directed to sit in the front row during the ceremony. Most families are encouraged to process through the congregation to their seats as the funeral begins. Pine explains that many funeral-goers expect the family members to grieve "appropriately." The funeral director, through his/her activities, encourages women and men alike to mourn openly. Thus, to some extent, it is because of the director's

> behavior that the bereaved come to have a definition of the funeral as a useful social process to attend death. (Pine 1975 99)

If the family of the deceased remains stoic, then this could cause the family to be labeled as "unemotional" and the funeral director to be seen as "inadequate" (Pine 1975 99). After the funeral service, the funeral procession continues to the burial site, where the services are concluded, the casket lowered

into the vault, the vault sealed, the grave filled, and flowers appropriately placed around the grave.

Apparently funeral directors engage in witticism thought to be offensive if revealed to the general public. Much of this humor might be thought of as macabre in that stories abound about what can and has happened to funeral directors. Bodies may be lost, may fall out of hearses onto the freeway, may be misidentified, may be mistakenly cremated, may be inappropriately stored for months awaiting cremation, or may make "funny" noises while being prepared for viewing. A recurring joke has to do with the exceptionally tall man whose body was to be buried in the only available, regular sized, coffin. "Yeah, we had to break his legs to make him fit. But you couldn't tell it when we got the bottom part of the coffin closed!" Hearses may run out of gas or break down while enroute to a burial. Burial sites may not be prepared (the ground not "opened" by a backhoe excavator or the marble slab not removed from the mausoleum chamber) when the body arrives at the grave site. Burial urns may be misplaced and expensive marble markers may be inappropriately stenciled, leaving family names misspelled or emblems of fraternal orders inappropriately applied. Funeral directors, some of whom offer grave side remarks, may forget their lines, or forget to conduct the pall bearers' march (where pall bearers go before family members seated at the grave and give them the boutonnières previously attached to their lapels). Military funerals may also go awry. In times of scarce personnel, the playing of "taps" at a grave site may be accomplished by playing a recording of "taps" on a battery powered cassette player. The resultant sound quality may not be the greatest; one funeral attended resulted in an embarrassing attempt to play taps and to synchronize the rifle retorts of a three gun salute. Also, the honor guard, apparently quickly pressed into service, failed to be able to ceremoniously fold and prepare the United States flag for presentation to the widow of the service man being buried. After having to repeatedly unfold the flag in attempts to fold the flag properly, the honor guard gave up trying for perfection and handed a misshapen folded flag to the widow ("on behalf of a grateful nation.")

The performance of a funeral or burial can go amiss for a variety of reasons. Equipment failure (e.g., air conditioning going out in the funeral home) may put a crimp in one's funereal style. Miscues (e.g., music starting too soon or too late) may destroy the smooth and solemn flow of a service. A poorly chosen minister (possibly an in-house minister unknown to the family) may speak ill of the dead, to the chagrin of the family. The same minister may mispronounce the name of the deceased or the names of significant family members in attendance. The casket may be dropped unceremoniously into the grave when being lowered by too few or inexperienced funeral workers. At one burial attended in a rural area, the casket of a rather large woman tilted sideways and jammed against the wall of the grave when the persons holding the casket straps failed to maintain control of the casket while lowering it into the grave. The workers had to then jump into the grave, on top of the casket, and manipulate the casket into an acceptable (though far from perfect) position.

During one disinterment participated in by one of the authors, a family wanted to move the remains of a long-dead relative to a new burial site. The funeral home workers "opened" the existing grave and, wearing gloves and work clothing, shoveled through the outer rim of a decayed coffin and handed out the bones of the deceased to another worker who placed the bones in a somewhat natural arrangement on a plastic tarpaulin beside the open grave. One of the elderly family members who accompanied the workers to the old family graveyard got out of his private vehicle, which was parked close to the disinterment site and, using a walking stick, ambled over to the bones for a closer look. He studied the remains and then, using his cane, started turning the bones over for a more comprehensive look. When he came to the skull he stuck his cane in the lower part of the skull, turned it right-side up, and declared,

> Yes, that's [name of relative]. You can tell from the shape of her teeth. Hell [he chuckled], her teeth are still better than mine are now!

Having satisfied himself that the remains were indeed those of the family member in question, he returned to his vehicle and sat down, awaiting the trip to the new burial site

"in town." It was apparent that the funeral workers thought his behavior was inappropriate but they did nothing to stop this old man from rummaging through the bones of his dead relative. In other contexts this may have constituted "desecration."

In essence, the funeral director attempts to manage events by a host of devices, for example, being able to assign events to particular places and times.

> The viewing of the deceased is to take place in the Rose Petal Room from 6:00 p.m. until 9:00 on Wednesday night. A rosary will be said in the chapel at 2:00 p.m. before the funeral takes place at 3:00 p.m. with burial scheduled at Green Lawn cemetery at 5:00 p.m.

Out of perceived necessity, clients are forced to turn to those with the experience, expertise, equipment (funeral homes, embalming rooms), unique supplies (caskets, memorial cards), skills (applying makeup to corpses) and trained personnel to properly dispose of loved ones. The trappings of this business are advanced by the external and internal architectural design of the funeral home itself, the stages, props, emblems, and décor of the parlors, chapels, visiting rooms, and funeral hearses, and by the general ambience ("subdued concern") of the places and personnel of the funeral home. Additional control of the definition of the funereal situation (as apparent in the terms director, conductor, arranger, officiator, etc.) occurs by scripting the words used, the music played, the sequencing of events and movements, the planning of the opening and closing of ceremonies (and several subcomponents of the ceremonies), the ushering of certain people to certain places at certain times to perform certain rituals, the establishment and maintenance of certain queues (e.g., lining people up for the "last look" or to show the "final respect" to the body lying in an open coffin), and the opening and closing of the casket, grave or tomb, and the maneuvering and positioning of the casketed body in the funeral home, at the chapel or church, into the hearse, and to the grave or tomb for burial or entombment.

Another element of the directing of the funeral performance lies in the fact that the funeral home has on call a host of specialists and subspecialists who play critical roles in the funeral: musicians, hair stylists, floral suppliers and arrangers, substitute hearse drivers, grave diggers, cemetery proprietors, bankers, and, if the need arises, attorneys. The fact that a funeral director is "licensed" assists in the playing of the role of funeral director as this person is perceived as the one who can legitimately and legally conduct funeral and burial services. (What one can actually do with the body or cremains of an individual varies by state and locality. Suffice it to say, however, the modern funeral is much more elaborate and ceremonial than is required by law.)

Problems associated with funeral activities are related to the violation of, or failure of, any of the management techniques and scripts governing the funeral performance. One funeral director described a burial, in which after the casket had been completely lowered into the grave site, the son leaped into the grave landing on top of the coffin. Several relatives and the funeral director had to climb into the grave and "pry" the son from his father's coffin as he clung to it with his arms and legs. During the entire incident he was screaming that his father not leave him. Unruly, uncooperative, inept, or traumatized individuals may make a mockery of the attempt to bring dignified closure to a person's life. (Certain outbursts serve to poke a hole in the dramaturgical curtain surrounding the funereal event and to exaggerate the fragile nature of the social construction of the attendant ceremonies.) Just as equipment failure can ruin the performance, so can failure of untrained clients to read and respond to cues, hints, body language, and verbal commands.

Fragile indeed is the modern funeral and the worth and success of the funeral director is directly related to the degree to which they can script, orchestrate, oversee, and finalize a successful performance. As the research presented here indicates, those who are hired to dispose of our dead will continue to offer a fertile ground for research.

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