

The Body of the Deceased in Funeral Industry Periodicals

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*For presentation to the Canadian Sociological Association, May 2007,
Saskatoon, SK.*

Dying is the most embarrassing thing that can ever happen to you, because someone's got to take care of all your details.... You'd like to help them, and most of all you'd like to do the whole thing yourself, but you're dead so you can't (Andy Warhol, cited in Quigley, 1996: 311).

"What do we call that object in the casket in the corner?" The question, at first, may seem to have a deceptively-simple response. Death is clearly a transition in social and physical terms, but it is also marked by a transition in relation to language. During this transition, the subject fractures into an object and a set of memories, each of which may be referred to with different terms. There is, in our society, some controversy around when a fetus becomes a person; the issue at base in this paper is of a similar nature, only it relates to the other end of a lifetime, or when a person is no longer referred to as a person.

Naturally there are the nagging questions of "So what?" "Who cares?" "Does it matter what term is used for that object in the casket?" For one, tracking the changes in terms helps to chart the changes in the functions and purposes of funerals, as surely as tracking the change from a "mortician" to an "undertaker" to a "funeral director" to a "funeral services consultant" marks the professionalization of Funeral Services workers. Secondly, noting the changes illustrates the complex nature of this service industry, wherein the central subject/object of the industry is sometimes absent in the discourse because it causes widespread discomfort. Thirdly, the changes in the terms indicate the transition of the person from subject to object, from the level of the individual

to the level of non-specific material (“remains” does not imply individuality, but rather a particular type of biological material in a state of suspended or actual decomposition - as in what remains at the completion of some event or process).

Furthermore, Funeral Services itself understands the crucial importance of terms. Edward Martin’s classic Psychology of Funeral Service suggested a number of acceptable terms which funeral directors should use for the person who died. He suggested they use “Mr., Mrs., Miss Blank” instead of “corpse” or “body,” to use “deceased” rather than “dead,” and to use “baby” or “infant” instead of “stillborn” (cited in Coriolis, 1967: 133-134). In a more recent example, an article which was subtitled “The importance of semantics in funeral service,” stated:

Using terms like “the deceased” is not only impersonal and crude, but it also does little to assure the family member that the funeral home will carefully take care of the precious body of someone they have loved. Instead, funeral home staff members should say “your mother” or whatever term best captures the surviving family member’s relationship to the person who died (Wolfelt, 2000: 16).

In modern parlance, the clients of the Funeral Director are the family/friends who are requesting service on behalf of someone who has died. What does this imply regarding the subjectivity of the deceased? Seale wrote that “the material end of the body is only roughly congruent with the end of the social self” (1998: 34). There are people, such as those who are extremely old, who are socially isolated but physically alive. They are objects, but not subjects. On the other

hand, sometimes there is a social presence which can outlast the body, as in the case of ancestor worship. These might be subjects, but not objects. In the past, stillbirths were often treated not as subjects, but as objects; they were removed from the parents' view as soon as possible and were disposed of in the same manner as medical waste. Currently, stillbirths are increasingly being given a subjectivity (of sorts) before they are cremated or buried. The parents are urged to name the child, to photograph it, to spend time with it, to mourn it and to talk about the experience (even if few wish to listen to them). But if our identity and subjectivity were only tied to our physical presence, then why, after death, do we try to find ways to reassert the identities of the person who died (through memorial services and funeral rites)? Is that how we make sense of their life, to reconfirm their identity, and thus (for one last time) celebrate them as a subject?

In order to explore these questions in an empirical manner, this paper analyzes the rhetoric used to describe the dead within the midstage areas of Funeral Services publications. As an occupational group which works with the dead on a regular basis, it is valuable to analyze how the dead are represented in the publications designed for Funeral Services workers. The paper is organized as follows: (1) a brief discussion of the symbolic voyage of transition which the dead are making during funeral rituals, to set the context; (2) a general consideration of the difficulties of naming the dead as being dead, including the widespread use of euphemism; (3) the terms for the dead which

are used in the publications; (4) specific themes and representations of the dead within Funeral Services publications.

The liminal body: The dead as subjects in transition

The period of time which surrounds funeral ritual, in our culture as well as in others, is one where the physical body of the deceased is slowly and gradually losing its importance as a physical object and is being replaced by memory. Van Gennep (1961) saw the purpose of funeral ritual as an opportunity to incorporate the deceased into the “world of the dead.” This is symbolized physically through funeral ritual. For example, the travel to the cemetery for the committal is when the living and the dead both leave the land of the living to go to the land of the dead (assuming that there is a strong distinction between these two places). Then, after interment, the living leave the land of the dead to return to the land of the living. This is a ritual which confirms the rite of passage, the voyage of the now-dead person. Through the funeral rituals, “the deceased is symbolically transferred from his or her social community to the ‘afterlife’” (Canine, 1999: 105). It may be that, in our rush to talk about how funerals are for the living these days, we have forgotten the function of the funeral for the deceased.

What makes this transition period different from centuries ago is the services which are provided by funeral directors and embalmers (and the phalanx of “deathcare” industries which produce the products and services which are

used in the funeral process). Embalmers care for the body, returning it (albeit briefly) to the family in a restored state for one final "memory picture." "By taking the tasks of laying out and funeralizing the dead out of the home, funeral directors have allowed members of the public to dissociate themselves from death physically" (Quigley, 1996: 307). Indeed, in our connected world, there are increasing opportunities to locate this memory not only in our own minds, but on the internet as well (for a fee). The relevant services come with names such as "Memorials Online," "LifeFiles," "Legacy.com" and "HeavenlyDoor.com." Or there is "Funeral-Cast," a company which will webcast funerals; thus, mourners who are not able to be physically present can click and watch the event from their desktops.

To underscore the extent to which this transitional phase still exists, in medical contexts the bodies of the newly-dead are treated *as if* they are liminal,. For example, a study of medical students found that there was a difference between anatomy dissection and autopsies (which were performed on recently-deceased individuals). Part of the concern of the students was the ambiguity about the status of the corpse in the case of an autopsy. The opening of the body, that first incision which would bleed just as if the body were alive, was the most upsetting part of the autopsy. "The opening meant the transition from a human being to a corpse, an irrevocable destruction of a wholeness" (Sanner, 1997: 180).

The move from life through to remembrance is marked by different terms for

the body. From “a person” or “a deceased person” to the “deceased” to a “body” to “remains” or a “case.” Can we put these terms on a continuum from subject to object, or from alive to physically dead to socially dead? These are the questions engaged in the discussion to follow.

The polluted body: deflecting stigma with euphemism:

Because they do not wish to prepare and bury their own dead, many people wonder why anyone would (Quigley, 1996: 306).

To spend one’s days making a living by preparing dead strangers for burial continues to be a source of stigma within our society. We accept all manner of intervention in other aspects of our lives, giving strangers almost free rein and even access to our physical bodies and financial profiles without serious question. We understand that professionals sometimes have to look into our mouths, draw our blood, question our credit history, challenge our accounting of events at an accident scene and even see us naked. This is accepted, without stigmatizing the professional who is engaged in the intervention. But this is not the case with funeral service workers (cf. Barley, 1983; Thompson, 1991).

Gorer (1955) suggested that the discussion of death had become the "pornography" of the modern age, the knowledge that is not to be uttered in mixed company. Indeed, one way to deflect the widespread stigma regarding the discussion of death and dying is to use euphemisms. This is also a

strategy which is available to funeral professionals. But does the funeral profession use euphemisms for their actions and (especially) as a way to refer to death and the dead? Indeed, there is some direct criticism within industry publications of the societal tendency to use euphemisms. For example, an article with Dr. Earl Grollman discussed the necessity of avoiding euphemisms in discussions of death with young children. The article suggests that terms like “passed away” are unclear (Canadian Funeral News, 2001). In a review of a book on death for children, Peterson writes:

Refreshingly, the book uses the word “die” throughout. It doesn’t try to gloss over the fact that someone is dead by using clichés that could confuse the child more than they help preserve the illusion some adults seem to need, that the dead person is only “asleep” or “gone” (2001b).

However, even in their own obituaries, the Canadian Funeral News (almost without exception) used the term “passed away” instead of “died.” On the other hand, in announcing obituaries of its members and readers, both The Director and the American Funeral Director used the term “died” in their obituaries.

There is also a critique of the term “lose” within one publication's discussion of the changing language of grief: “We lose things: car keys, houses, jobs, but never, never, do we lose people! They *die* or *leave*, but we do not *lose* them or the love we shared” (Sims, 2001: 25). Nevertheless, the term “lose” or “lost” (to refer to a death) is used in both articles and (especially) in advertisements in industry periodicals. An advertisement for Wilbert grave vaults for children refers to when a child “is lost,” and a testimonial from a funeral home states:

“We lost children so we know the grief, anytime we can help a family who lost a child we are in turn helping ourselves” (Funeral Ark, 2001).¹

As for the possible euphemisms for the dead, this may be dependent upon the context. In articles on bereavement and aftercare, the person who died is more likely to be referred to in tender terms, such as “loved one,” whereas in an article on cremation statistics they might be a “case,” and in an article on shipping protocols they become “remains” or “human remains.” The context of the article affects the language used to represent the dead and the way that the person who died is represented.

Terms from Funeral Services Publications

Although civil and legal institutions do not agree on exactly when life ends, most people are able to recognize a corpse without referring to a dictionary (Long and Reim, cited in Quigley, 1996: 1).

In order to understand the terms used by Funeral Services personnel, a content analysis was conducted of approximately one year of coverage in five Funeral Services periodicals. In all, 44 issues were analysed, including copies of: Canadian Funeral Director, Canadian Funeral News, American Funeral

¹ Fortunately, reference to the dead as "sleeping" is now virtually absent in Funeral Services publications. The only exception in the sample was an article about a mortuary in California which was used as a voting location. A spokesperson stated: “We’re a friendly place with a casket showroom, a beautiful chapel, a really warm slumber room” (American Funeral Director, 2001). The use of this old term, "slumber room," implies that the dead are simply nodding off for awhile.

Director, The Director and The Dodge Magazine. In analyzing the issues, I looked for the terms which were used for the person who had died, whether it be in news items, special features or advertisements, and whether it be in the context of industry news, embalming tips or best practices.

The absent body. To begin, pictures of bodies of the dead are generally absent from these publications. The only exceptions in the sample were a photograph of Eva Peron, a shot of the torso of what is assumed to be a person who has died, and two line drawings which include bodies (one is the reproduction of an old advertisement for a British embalmer and the second is an advertisement for a lifting device).² There are no bodies in the caskets or the hearses or the stretchers. Indeed, there are more dead bodies in the daily newspaper than in Funeral Services publications.

Not only is there a physical absence, but sometimes bodies are also semantically absent. For example, in a discussion of a new facility, the author notes: “The chapel at the cemetery has also been very well used, and has a witness area where families can gather to view the casket entering the cremation retort, should they wish” (Peterson, 2001a: 23). There is no mention here that there may be a body in the casket. Likewise, during an interview a

² This pictorial absence was not always the case. An advertisement from 1902 for Bisga Embalming Fluid featured a corpse (called the “Bisga Man”) which had been embalmed three months before the photo; it showed the remarkable effects of the Embalming fluid (Troyer, 2001: 35).

funeral director and aftercare specialist is asked about one of her most difficult times. The response is: “the death of a six-month-old infant... Placing her casket in the grave on that cold, snowy afternoon caused me to question my profession” (LesStrang, 2000: 77). It was likely the small body within the casket which provoked such strong feelings, rather than the casket itself. However, the casket comes to replace, linguistically, the person who died.

Regular features of most of these publications include stories on individual funeral homes, accompanied by a variety of pictures. However, the pictures are generally of entrance ways, lounge areas, chapels, fireplace features and parking lots, not of visitation rooms (in general) and certainly not of the backstage (yet crucially important) areas such as embalming suites. What follows are nine terms which commonly appear as nouns for the dead, within the Funeral Services literature. The frequencies for these terms are shown in Table I.

Table I: Terms used for the person who died

| Term (listed in order of frequency for all journals) | Canadian Funeral News | American Funeral Director | Canadian Funeral Director | The Director | Dodge Magazine |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1) The body | 32 (31%) | 77 (31%) | 13 (28%) | 94 (29%) | 97 (44%) |
| 2) The deceased | 18 (17%) | 49 (20%) | 8 (17%) | 66 (20%) | 38 (17%) |
| 3) The remains | 4 (4%) | 56 (22%) | 2 (4%) | 25 (8%) | 38 (17%) |
| 4) The loved one | 16 (15%) | 15 (6%) | 9 (20%) | 51 (16%) | 11 (5%) |
| 5) The person | 6 (6%) | 5 (2%) | - | 37 (11%) | 12 (5%) |
| 6) The case | 8 (8%) | 7 (3%) | 3 (6%) | 17 (5%) | 15 (7%) |
| 7) Dead (the dead) | 9 (9%) | 5 (2%) | 8 (17%) | 13 (4%) | 5 (2%) |
| 8/9) Human remains | 5 (5%) | 16 (6%) | 1 (2%) | 2 (1%) | 1 (-) |
| 8/9) The cremated remains | 3 (3%) | 14 (6%) | 1 (2%) | 7 (2%) | - |
| 10) The corpse | 3 (5%) | 3 (1%) | 1 (2%) | 12 (4%) | - |
| 11) Cremains | - | 3 (1%) | - | - | 2 (1%) |
| Totals | 104 | 250 | 46 | 324 | 219 |

Body. As the most common term, “body” focuses on the physical shell of the individual. To refer to “body of the deceased” implies that what we view is indeed a physical shell of something else (the deceased, who is and was someone). But a body is no longer a subject.

Deceased. This is the second most common term, with a robust range of usages. On rare occasions, the more legal term, “decedent,” is used. We see “deceased” as a standard term in codes of ethics, for example. The word can also be used as a noun, but it has a shading of a verb accompanying it, some sense of the action of dying which is still clinging to the word.

Remains. This term is often used in the context of embalming issues, the shipping of people who have died and post-cremation materials (which can be referred to as “cremains”). In these situations, the person who died is more likely to present a technical problem or a challenge to the funeral worker, and it is this challenge which is being referenced. The term implies that something essential has “gone,” and what is left is what “remains.”

Loved One. This is the fourth major term, and one which implies a higher level of endearment than either “body” or “deceased.” It is very common in advertisements (when they refer to a person who died), but also in articles on aftercare. Sometimes the term is combined with another, such as with “deceased loved one” or “loved one who has died.” The one advantage of this term is that it makes no direct reference to a body but to a relationship (which can survive death). In an article on preplanning in The Director, the term “loved one” was used reciprocally. Clients, in planning their funerals, were asked to consider what their “loved ones” would want after they (the client) had died (Hilbrick, 2000: 34). Thus, “loved one” makes no direct reference to the

physical viability of the object of the love.

“Person” (or a specific subject). An ad for Inman shipping contains a photo of the Eiffel tower and the text: “Uncle Harry: ‘I’ll visit Paris if it’s the last thing I do!’ It was.” Below, the text continues: “Unfortunately for Uncle Harry, seeing the Eiffel Tower was a heart-stopping experience. Fortunately for his family, for one low price, Inman Shipping Worldwide was there to handle all the details of getting Uncle Harry back home.” In this ad, “uncle Harry” remains “uncle Harry,” and does not lose his unique individuality. Even though, in articles on shipping, the preferred term for Uncle Harry would be “human remains.”

Included in this category are terms such as “person who has died” and “loved person who has died.” Such terms show up in discussions of aftercare and bereavement. They refer not so much to the body which lies at the funeral home, but to the life which is missed (Wolfelt, 2001).³

Certain dead individuals are more likely to be referred to as persons, or at least with some identity intact. For example, infants and toddlers are less likely to be referred to as “bodies” or “deceased” or as “remains.” In Canadian Funeral Director (2001a: 30), a worker recalls having to “look after the dis-interment and re-interment of a child that had died in 1830's [sic] and was

³ Indeed, there may be some value to taking the term "person who died" and creating a shortform, such as PWD. This would be in the spirit of those who helped to change terms such as "AIDS victim" to PWA (Person With AIDS).

buried in a random plot.” Even though the child had been dead for over 170 years, there is still reference to a “child that had died” not a “child’s body” or “the remains of a child.” A second category of individuals who tend to maintain their subjectivity in death is that of police officers who die while on duty. In one description of a police funeral, the officer who died is referred to by his title and name, “Sr. Constable McFadden was dressed in his formal uniform and his casket was draped with an Ontario flag bearing his stetson and exemplary service medal” (Mardling, 2001: 33). In discussion of another police funeral, there is reference to “Constable Eve,” and on five occasions to “Marg” (the Constable’s first name).

Dead. This term does appear, but not as often as some of the previous ones. Occasionally it is used as an adjective to modify “body” as in “dead body.”

Case. This term is similar to that of “remains,” as it is often used in the context of embalming problems and cremation issues, and the reference is not so much to a particular individual but to a certain type of “problem.” For example, in The Director, when referring to the technical issue of embalming an obese person, they use the term “case.” This refers to certain types of dead bodies in general, but not to a specific individual.

Corpse. This term makes a quite limited appearance in modern journals of Funeral Services. A story on funeral practices of the past used the term “corpse,” but it was within quotes from historical documents. It is not a term

used today in the magazine without such quotes (Drill, 2001: 55). A Canadian Funeral Director article discusses the possibility of a pandemic in the near future, and gives some tips to funeral directors, referring to “corpses” not being infectious. And the term “corpse” appears in one article titled “The Gospel Account of the Death and Burial of Jesus.” In the article, there is reference (twice) to “the corpse of Jesus” (Van Beck, 2001).

Victim. This term is used rarely, and in only specialized contexts. For example, in an article on an Air Force mortuary, there is reference to disaster “victims” (Ruggeri, 2001). The term is used several times in an article on roadside memorials for people who have died as a result of automobile accidents (often due to the actions of drunk drivers) (Sampson, 2001). It is also used in a reference to people who died in a railroad accident (Parsons, 2001: 46), and to people who have died from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (Ranier, 2001: 66). Thus, the term often refers to the method by which someone died. Finally, there is the use of “victim” in reference to “suicide victim” (Simone, 2001). Thus, the method of death becomes a part of the “master identity” of the person who has died.

Themes in the Representation of the Dead

Building on the content analysis of the previous section, this section introduces five central themes within these Funeral Services periodicals. These themes relate to general ways in which bodies were represented in the periodicals.

The Vulnerable Body: the need for protection

One of the enduring themes in the industry periodicals is the theme of preservation, that the body of the person who has died has a need for protection. Of course, a cynic might quickly point out that, especially for those companies who make and sell grave vaults, this is simply a marketing strategy. In such advertising, adequate protection for the body is interpreted as a measure of affection. For example, an advertisement for a casket/vault combination for children contains the text: “The measure of a parent’s love for their child cannot be measured. But what can be measured is how to ease their sorrow when that child is lost” (Wilbert Funeral Services, 2001).

The Precious Body: bodies as centrepiece

When funeral directors and consumers alike begin viewing deceased loved ones as inconveniences, to be “dealt with” in the most efficient, least time-consuming manner possible, lumped in with repairing the BMW and hauling out the trash, heaven help us all. Maybe we will end up getting exactly what we deserve (Raymond, 2000).

There are critics who maintain a dim view of the embalmed body as the centrepiece of the American funeral. One of the most widely-quoted of these was Jessica Mitford, whose popularized writings seemed to characterize the outpouring of emotion around funerals, and especially the purchase of any item to assist grieving, as being both useless and oppressive (Mitford, 1963). Ariès (1975), writing in a more academic style, argued that the restoration of the body was a way to downplay the fact that a death had occurred, and he linked it to Western society's inability to acknowledge mortality. In a similar spirit, Davies (1996) sees an avoidance of death in the practice of embalming the body. There is a process of distancing the living from the dead in both the US and the UK; while the purpose is the same, the process is different in the two countries: "with the Americans choosing to *deny* death, decay and dissolution through the disguise of embalming, while the British *avoid* them by means of cremation" (Davies, 1996: 60).

However, these views are clearly not held by those in funeral services. "I heard for years how 'funerals are for the living,' and while it may be true, the star of the show is still the deceased" (Defort, 2001). Indeed, the appearance of the deceased is a "kingpin issue" because if the family are not happy with the appearance, then they will find fault with everything else. As one funeral director noted: "the 'main party' is not ready until they look 'A&W' (Alive and Well) ... When you think about it, everything else we do plays to that one

issue” (McCormick, 2001c: 105). The “main party” is a reference to the person who died. One of the “moments of truth” in funeral services is the moment when the family/friends first view the body of the deceased after its preparation (Wolfelt, 2001: 17).

The Dignified Body: the need for respect

Reverent care for the dead is one of the things that makes us human (Peterson, 2001a: 23).

A third theme in the representation of bodies in the Funeral Services publications relates to the need to respect the body of the deceased.⁴ A column which made reference to three incidences of embalming in the Old Testament asserted that the original intent of the practice is: “to reverently care for the dead, regardless of the materials at hand” (Van Beck, 2000: 26). This respect for the body of the person who died extends throughout the funeralization process. In the Funeral Ethics Association’s “Manual of Professional Practice,” under a section on professional conduct titled “Respect for the deceased,” the Association states:

⁴ For some, the body deserves respect due to its being made in the image of God. As a statement on the funeral from the United Church of Canada noted: "The body, which has been the temple of the spirit through life in this world, is worthy of respect, and should be so treated after death ... Elaborate and costly devices to restore a life-like appearance to the body have no place in Christian practice" (United Church of Canada, 1950: 6-7). (In this view, embalming can obscure the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead.)

In the preparation of the deceased, a good general rule to follow is to show the same care and consideration that would be given to a member of the embalmer's or funeral director's own family. The body entrusted to the care of the funeral firm represents the cherished remains of a person who, in life, held the love and esteem of a family and friends (Funeral Ethics Association, 2000: 31).

Klicker (2001) suggests that there is a range of behaviours which are not appropriate (or ethical) in the embalming room, for example swearing, smoking, listening to music, watching TV, telling jokes and even laughing. When bodies are shipped, they are to be clothed (otherwise this would show a sign of disrespect). During embalming, the genital area of the body is generally covered with a small cloth (cf., Klicker, 2001). At one time, in a number of states there were laws "requiring that a woman be in attendance when a female's remains are embalmed" (Bowman, 1959: 75). In terms of the handling of the body, early advice from undertakers suggested that "the body should be laid in a comfortable position in the casket" (Puckle, 1990: 230). Comfortable for whom, we might ask?

Furthermore, there is a great deal of respect, dignity and maintenance of decorum in funeral ceremony, as illustrated by the types of cars that funeral directors are implored to purchase in the Funeral Services literature. The models have sleek lines, comfortable interiors, and numerous signifiers of class and privilege. But are they also signifiers of respect and dignity? If so, then how is it that wealth comes to stand for dignity and respect? For example, an ad for Cadillac states:

Dignity without compromise. Virtually every life enriches us all. And when we honor that life, it should be with the highest dignity and respect. This is why Cadillac DeVille has held such a prominent role in the funeral profession for so long. And why the technology and amenities of DeVille 2000 will continue that tradition into the new millennium. With renewed dignity, poise and reverence for those who deserve the best (Cadillac Professional Vehicles, 2000).

However, there is some tension within funeral services in defining what is appropriate dignity. In an interview, one funeral director asserted that: "two hours of visitation plus a funeral and committal service is ample time to validate a life and provide dignity and closure to it" (McCormick, 2001c: 104). This statement would (I expect) be challenged by other members of Funeral Services.

Deep comfort: the reassuring body

Viewing the body is the first confirmation of death. This confrontation serves a necessary purpose in rudely awakening the griever to the finality of the loss. Viewing the body allows the griever to solidify pleasant memories of the deceased's physical wholeness, particularly in cases of bodily disfigurement due to accident or violence (Canine, 1999: 105).

You must express your grief at the death of a loved one. The eyes of the dead must be gently closed and the eyes of the living must be gently opened (Jan Brugler, cited in McCormick, 2001b: 73).

One of the standard litanies about the deceased, within the Funeral Services literature, is the importance that mourners **see** the body. A note on the death of an industry leader who set a high standard for body preparation states:

“Years before a long list of ‘grief psychologists’ existed, Edward Johnson truly knew that his work as an embalmer and restorative practitioner helped survivors of loss to take the first steps toward healing” (McCormick, 2001b: 73). In a profile of the Kreamer Funeral Home in PA, the owner provides some advice on the importance of proper embalming technique, arguing that “How the deceased looks at a visitation is often a source of comfort to the family... They may have seen the person lying in the hospital with tubes, or looking emaciated after fighting cancer for six months. A proper memory picture gives the family a feeling of relief, of peace” (cited in McCormick, 2001a: 61). In a similar argument (and it is sometimes remarkable how standard the rhetoric within funeral services is, despite the number of different speakers and authors), another funeral director notes: “For them [the family] to get one last opportunity to see mom or dad without a nursing home setting, or without esophageal tubes - and have mom or dad look presentable, it makes the grieving process easier for them” (cited in McCormick, 2000: 86).

When a person dies in a tragic manner, the work of the embalmer may also take on an important dimension of redressing the indignity of the death. Thomas Lynch, in one of his short stories, refers to the work of a colleague, Wesley Rice, who once spent a day and night piecing together the parts of a schoolgirl who had been killed, in an attempt to give the body back to the family - to recover her identity. It would not bring her back, but it would remove the sad evidence of the form of her death. Lynch writes:

Most embalmers, faced with what Wesley Rice was faced with after he'd opened the pouch from the morgue, would have simply said "closed casket," treated the remains enough to control the odor, zipped the pouch, and gone home for cocktails. It would have been easier. The pay was the same. Instead, he started working. Eighteen hours later the girl's mother, who had pleaded to see her saw her. She was dead, to be sure, and damaged; but her face was hers again, not the madman's version. The hair was hers, not his. The body was hers, not his. Wesley Rice had not raised her from the dead nor hidden the hard facts, but he had retrieved her death from the one who had killed her... Wesley had given them the body back (Lynch, 1997: 84).

Personalization and the Unique Body: "Just a song before I go"

"They make a casket. We make a casket mean more," from an ad for Batesville caskets.

The focus on "personalization" these days indicates a trend within our consumer culture, whereby things/symbols speak for us. In the case of funerals, the deceased, the body, the remains, cannot speak. And so it speaks through the family's choice of casket, the memorial plaques and pictures, and the burial vault. When the person is silent, the merchandise steps in. Funeral products can help to confirm a deceased person's identity (for example, if she/he was a veteran). Caskets, photographic displays and grave vaults can all be ordered to confirm an identity (including caskets with one's University seal on them).⁵ In some ways, the products come to stand in for the dead. This often occurs in the industry literature. The signifier is the casket, and the

⁵ This use of funeral products as a source of memory and meaning is not new, as the Victorian funerals had a number of such forms of ostentation.

signified is the person who died. In a way, this is a process of de-personalization, as the subjectivity of the individual is replaced by the representation of an object.

What are the effects of relying on merchandise to tell people's stories?

McDougald writes about his experience in wandering through the exhibits at the annual conference of the National Funeral Directors Association. He wrote: "I could not help but feel overwhelmed by the products available and their personalization options. At the same time, I felt amazed at how few offerings there were for creating meaningful services. Is our product knowledge the driving force of our wisdom?... Are we letting the manufacturers of funeral products tell us what is meaningful?" (McDougald, 2001: 52).

Many years ago, Puckle asked: "What is there to be said for or against embalming? From the point of view of the trade it has no doubt very much to commend it, for you can sell your richest, most beautiful casket and obtain in addition a liberal fee for embalming" (Puckle, 1990: 231). Originally written in 1926, Puckle already understood the economic value of embalming and the fussing over the person who has died. In an article on the need for people to spend more time in their embalming, McDaniel (2000) writes: "if you are an embalmer, it just makes perfect sense to do the very best you possibly can. Why? Well, one reason is job security. If you perform your job well, more people will select a viewing, which means more profit for the company and therefore job security."

However, as the previous section noted, there can be clear therapeutic benefits to the work of the embalmer. In the midst of a stinging critique of the Canadian funeral industry, Coriolis (1967) notes that the ability of the embalmer to reverse the ravages of disease on a body is “the only genuine and certain achievement of the funeral business that I feel I can endorse without hypocrisy” (Coriolis, 1967: 119). He states: “the comfort which is drawn by a family from once more seeing a loved one at peace and free of the strictures of pain is immeasurable” (Coriolis, 1967: 119). This respect is made more profound as it comes in a book which is generally quite critical of the motives and behaviours of most of the funeral operators of that time (the 1960s) who the author (a funeral director himself) had worked with. Indeed, the author points out, earlier in the book, that embalming is usually seen within Funeral Services as “the basis for the sale of profitable merchandise” (1967: 38), and so he well understands the conflict of interest which occurs in the funeral director’s promotion of embalming technology. An embalmed body requires merchandise in order to be viewed, such as a casket, flowers, ancillary products such as picture boards, and so on, all of which come at a fee. But despite this, Coriolis argues that the body, restored to its former identity, regains its previous subjectivity in order to give family and friends one last chance to remember.

Conclusions: The body as both memory picture and marketing

opportunity

As this paper has shown, not only are there a number of terms which are used for the dead in Funeral Services publications, but the deceased are also represented in particular ways. One of the subtexts of the representations is that the respectful preparation and presentation of the dead will have therapeutic benefits for the bereaved. The last opportunity to see the deceased (known as the “memory picture” within Funeral Services) is said to be a critical moment – one over which funeral professionals have a great deal of control. However, one of the sources of criticism of Funeral Services comes from the use of this critical moment to boost marketing opportunities. The balancing of memory pictures and marketing opportunities is a crucial challenge for the individual worker in Funeral Services. The profession as a whole will be judged by how it responds to the tensions between these two functions.

As noted above, in terms of visuals, the dead are generally absent from Funeral Services publications, even though it is the body which is the central feature of the traditional funeral. It might be that the body is absent because the funeral is not really about the deceased, but about the family who remain. They are the ones, after all, who are able to spread a positive word-of-mouth regarding the quality of the service provided. Professional literature thus focusses on this aspect of the industry, and how to appeal to the new consumers with new ideas of ritual and value; to compete in what is called the “experience economy” (Wolfelt, 2000: 25). Beyond these pieces of advice,

Funeral Services literature focusses a great deal on mergers, new products and services, pricing structures, management tips, the reporting of meetings of funeral associations, and social and regulatory aspects of funeral services.

There are times when the material on products clashes with the advice on how to deal with clients. Take the example of a homeopathic “remedy” for grief, called “Grief Formula.” It is announced with a one-page article, written by a “master herbalist,” who has an interest in the product. The identical article appears in both the June 2001 edition (p. 25) and the October 2001 edition (p. 32) of Canadian Funeral Director. In both cases, it is in a section titled “Innovative Products.” As for the product itself, the author of the advertorial states: “The homeopathic remedies that create the Grief Formula are reported to have brought calming and comfort to those who have experienced serious and dramatic circumstances such as loss of a loved one, severe upset, divorce and other trauma which could lead to a numbed and dazed state of mind” (Hammoud, 2001). What can we make of such a “remedy” for grief, allowed to advertise in a funeral publication, covering an occupation which is allegedly becoming more sensitive and savvy regarding grief and bereavement? In this case, death becomes a marketing opportunity.

To conclude, the criticisms in this paper are not focussed on those who work diligently with grieving families every day. Their sensitivity is well-established; they work in a difficult environment, often without adequate recognition for their service. Of that there is no question. But like all occupations, there is a

wide variation in the standards of behaviour across the practitioners. The critical observations are more related to the Funeral Services industry itself, to the myriad of producers, sellers, consultants and so on who make their living in the “death care” field, and whose success is reliant upon the extent to which they can present their own product or service as one of the “essential ingredients” for effective grieving. This is a part of a rather extended historical process which Howarth (1997) refers to as the “commercialisation of death.” This study has found that Funeral Services publications are complex sites of meaning, containing both editorial content with genuine concern for the assistance of the bereaved, as well as advertising material which focusses on the purchase of ancillary products to allegedly facilitate this grieving.

The need to recognize the death of a person is clear. As the playwright Arthur Miller wrote in Death of a Salesman, in reference to the play’s protagonist, “Attention must be paid... He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog!” However, the implication that this attention to the dead is somehow made more respectful and profound by the purchase of this year’s crop of mortuary-related products should be treated as necessarily suspect. Maybe some products will help, but that is not self-evident. This is, rather, a symptom of our consumer society, of the belief that feelings are best expressed through purchasing behaviours. In such a society, it is no surprise that the dead have become, for some, a marketing opportunity.

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