THE PROFESSIONAL INTERFAITH BEREAVEMENT CHAPLAIN: AN ESSENTIAL ASSET TO THE MORTUARY SERVICES PROVIDER AND TO THE CONSUMER

A straight–from–the–hip discussion of the state of affairs, solutions and recommendations by an experienced provider of professional interfaith bereavement services.

ABSTRACT. This article presents an uncosmetized impression of the deterioration in quality of death services, and based on firsthand observations makes practical recommendations for improving the services provided to and requested by the bereaved and supportive of mourners. This article makes recommendations to the consumer as well as to the mortuary services provider, that include among other things: sensitivity to the spiritual needs of the mourner, addressing those needs with appropriate sensitivity, providing for those needs through the services of a competent professional bereavement chaplain. This article highlights not only the human-spirit aspects of dignified and personalized funeral and memorial services but also points out the considerable economies to be realized by both the consumer and the service provider by enlisting the support of an on-call professional interfaith bereavement chaplain. With the holistic interdisciplinary team approach advocated in this article, the insidious deterioration in care and support services can be deterred if not prevented by the mortuary services provider partnered with the on-call professional interfaith bereavement chaplain, and the necessary grief work, healing and transformation effectively nurtured.

While this article focuses in specific terms on providers and consumers of mortuary services, its principles and applications, and recommendations can be extended and generalized to any of the helping professions.

While this article attempts to address a number of points, which are high in priority to both the consumer and service provider, many points must necessarily remain unmentioned. With that in mind, we do encourage feedback and comment from our readers, and we invite you to provide your thoughts either by private e-mail to compassionate.care.associates@gmail.com or by using the comment feature on this blog.

Keywords: Funeral, memorial, mortuary services, funeral director, funeral home, grief, mourning, chaplain, pastoral care, spiritual care, officiant, helping profession

“Death is psychologically as important as birth. Shrinking away from it is both unhealthy and abnormal ... because it robs the second half of life of its meaning and purpose.”

Ernest Becker

The Funeral Director And The Funeral Home Staff Are In A Helping Profession: It’s Time You Realized That.

The helping professions — including medicine, nursing, psychology, chaplaincy, etc. — all advocate the importance of a holistic approach to the services they provide. The intimate interactions and synergies of the
mind, body, spirit triad are widely acknowledged not only in self-help literature, but in professional publications and scientific research. Mortuary services is a helping profession of the highest degree, though few morticians or funeral directors are appreciated for the significant role they play in the rites of passage and transformation involved in the dying process, death and post-mortem grief and mourning periods.

Competent and compassionate funeral directors and funeral home staff practice an ancient and important ministry in the services they provide to the living, over and above the skills they implement in their reverent care to the dead. Holistic funeral directing, however, is a collaborative, multidisciplinary service, which goes beyond the competencies of any one funeral home staff member. Moreover, any attempt by any one funeral home staffer to cross the boundaries of professional competence or to cross the line of competence perceived by the consumer — for example, should a member of the funeral home staff attempt to officiate at a funeral rite or ritual — may be interpreted as an arrogance, even an outrage by some mourners. Why run such a risk when it can be easily and cost-efficiently averted? Furthermore, any funeral home or mortuary services provider who does not provide the opportunity for competent spiritual or religious support services is not providing full service support to its customers.

The Funeral Director And His Or Her Staff Has Mutated To That Of Disposal Specialist

Once the work of priests and specialists in religious ritual and tradition, the role of the 21st century funeral director and his or her staff has somehow mutated to that of disposal specialist, in many cases merely called to “remove” the inconvenient remains and providing a legal and sanitized way of accelerating their disappearance so that others can get back to their routine activities, whatever they may be. There are a number of cultural and economic reasons why this has happened so insidiously, almost unnoticeably right under the noses of a culture already steeped in denial and banal distractions but the bottom line is that it is here and must be dealt with. Yes here but not necessarily to stay.

While this unfortunate development is due in part to the direction our culture has taken in recent decades and to the strain on mortuary services providers in meeting the demands of an increasing population and largely distorted priorities, it is also due in part to laziness and indifference both on the part of the mortuary services trade and the ignorance of the general population; and increasing avoidance or denial of the human needs in bereavement at the journey’s inevitable end for all living creatures: death.
Many funeral homes have become used car lots — with the gurneys carrying the bodies of deceased loved ones occupying the slots — with the proverbial used car salesperson to “help” the stranded consumer get what she or he needs. Some mortuary services providers have become factory service providers, literally churning out cheap, no-frills funerals or even “direct“ (whether interment or cremation) disposal services to consumers who have no idea that they are grieving or have to grieve, and the psychological and moral damage becomes all too obvious only after the bill has long been paid. The psychological and moral effects of this regrettable development in the mortuary services profession-turned-industry are devastating, and their long-term effects become components of a catastrophic decline in a people, in a community, in a culture.

We No Longer Have The Appreciation Of The Intimacy With Life’s Stages Such As The Closeness And Appreciation Of Death That The Victorians Shared

It seems that many of the Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981, the “lost generation”), Generation Y (1977-1994, the millenials), and what appears to be the truly lost generation, Generation Z (1995-2012) have become hopelessly addicted to impersonal and asocial media (Are you listening Facebook and Twitter?), and are addicted to the pornography of violence and death through the entertainment media. These addictions are having a profound effect on every aspect of the body, mind, spirit triad. And you can blame it on the baby boomers (1946 – 1961). But you knew that already (Enter righteous shame and guilt.).

This western, especially the mainstream American culture has lost its reverence for the natural rites of passage that distinguish us human beings from other living things, and has led to synthetic rites of passage that are superficial, artificial, transient, self-centered, lots of bells and whistles but still smoke and mirrors. We no longer have the benefit of living in a reality, truth-centered world but have a world of ratings and fictions. Today’s American culture has lost touch with its soul — the people have become soul–less. They no longer have the appreciation of the human unconscious or the intimacy with and appreciation of life’s stages of past generations such as the closeness and appreciation of death that the Victorians shared — note, for example, the era of post-mortem memorial photography, even propping up a corpse for a photo– op (figure below) — and life’s milestones and mysteries like sexual communion and death have been denuded of their mystery and have become mere entertainment commodities. The 20th century ushered in the notions of “grief on a timetable” and “bereavement leave”; on the one hand psychology and psychiatry tell us grief resolves on its own time over time, it can’t be accelerated, but on the other hand we have human resources personnel and policies telling us we need to get over it in three days and get back to work.
Whether you choose to believe it or not, our culture is in a cataclysmic, catastrophic deadman’s spin into oblivion that was prophesied by insightful thinkers early in the 20th century: back in 1973 Richard Fleischer directed a prophetic movie entitled “Soylent Green”, even before that we have Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” (written in 1933, released as a film in 1998), and in 1948 George Orwell’s “1984” (film versions released in 1986, and 1988); some prophets saw the decline decades ago but even today the majority is blind to the deterioration in the human spirit. The conspiracy theorists will propose that there’s a diabolical plan being implemented; I would rather say that our culture has gradually lost the ability to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, decent and indecent. While that loss may have at some point been individual enough individuals have been infected to make it a national cultural phenomenon, even a hallmark of the culture.

Churches And Clergy Are Not Much Better And Fall Far Short Of The Barest Minimum Of Ministry To The Bereaved

While our culture would rather deny death it’s due reality until it’s right under their noses, our mortuary sciences curricula train students to pass tests and fail to “form” funeral directors, that is, to shape the student into a fully competent professional able to direct the rituals of being a funeral director — This is, in fact, a point recognized by almost every veteran funeral director when he or she tries to recruit competent residents for the required pre-licensure training in residence at an operating funeral home.
Christian churches and clergy — with few exceptions, mostly non-mainstream, ethnic traditions, of course — are not much better when it comes to teaching the realities of life and ultimately of death, and fall far short of the barest minimum of ministry to the bereaved; most of the cookie-cutter, rushed prayer services and graveside services are more of an embarrassment than a comfort, and even the liturgies in the churches are impersonal, rushed, and yes, cookie-cutter. This has provided a favorable environment for the funeral corporations and the factory funeral homes — who now don’t even bother proposing any form of pastoral or spiritual care involvement in the services — with all of their sundry up-front and behind the scenes abuses. Irreverent treatment of bodies once they reach the company morgues, even before the prep room abuses; impersonal scripted services; scandalous upselling; impersonal and uninterested “clergy” visits, and the list could go on ad nauseam. For these and other, more subtle reasons, there is a growing necessity and a niche for the on-call professional bereavement chaplain as a go-to chaplain at funeral homes and other mortuary services providers.

Sensitively Executed Memorial Or Funeral Service Should Be Even More Important Because Each And Every Mourner Carries Home The Healthy Effects When They Leave The Funeral Home Or Graveside

My study bookshelves groan under the weight of books on the subject of dying, death, surviving, grief, mourning, funeral rites; my digital collection is bursting with lectures and talks on cultural sensitivity, coping strategies, rites and rituals, psychology and religious diversity, etc.; my e-mailbox is well supplied with updates on the funeral industry, interfaith pastoral care, chaplaincy, death and dying, etc. My calendar is full of continuing thanatology education and training events throughout the year. So I have to ask the question Why? Why, if dying and death is as natural as eating and drinking, is it so effectively denied? Why, if holistic care is so important to the helping professions, including mortuary services, is it so ignored or only half-heartedly included as a service along with the removal, preparation, embalming, cosmetology, the casket, flowers, visitation time, etc.? The cosmetic aspects of the services provided by the funeral home are indeed important even from the pastoral/spiritual point of view but they evaporate into vague memory once the crematory retort door closes or the casket is lowered into the ground. Why?, if the spiritual and the meaning-making, the closure is so important in the bereavement situation, the grieving, the mourning, isn’t it given its due consideration and emphasis in the planning work? After all, if the mortuary services aspects provided by the funeral home staff are so eminently important to healthy reintegration of the bereaved, the pastoral, spiritual, meaning-making, transformational aspects provided by the bereavement chaplain during a well-planned, personalized, and sensitively executed memorial or funeral service should be even more important to all concerned because each and every mourner assimilates the healthy effects of the service when they leave the funeral home or graveside, they later revisit the experience of the service and the words of the readings and the homily or eulogy, they
continue to live the meaning of the life celebrated, and they more effectively and more healthfully grieve and mourn their loss.

**Spiritual Religious Concerns Are High On The List Of Priorities Of The Bereaved**

The medical, nursing, psychological and social science professional literature has for decades emphasized the importance of spiritual and religious support in crisis situations. So it’s abundantly clear to me that spiritual religious concerns must be placed high on the list of priorities of the bereaved so why don’t mortuary services providers, funeral directors take the initiative to offer these very important survivor products to the bereaved with the same enthusiasm and depth that they upsell the casket or urn, or when they promote embalming? Well, I am well aware of the various underlying reasons for all of this and although greed may be included in those reasons, it’s not always funeral home greed or business model that is solely responsible. It’s sometimes funeral home staff ignorance, funeral home priorities to sell products, the discomfort of funeral home staff when dealing with spirituality and religion unless clearly brought up by the bereaved, or the funeral staff simply don’t care to be bothered with arranging spiritual or religious care for the bereaved. It’s also true that the bereaved don’t have a clue that pastoral care services are available outside of the church setting, especially if they don’t worship regularly or are non-practicing. Some family arrangers don’t have a clue about the deceased’s spirituality or beliefs. But with very, very few exceptions they want prayer, they want some spiritual component. And when they get it they’re renewed.

The question, after all, of how much training does the mortuary sciences student gets in spiritual and pastoral care, or the psychology of grief and mourning, still persists. The answer: Not a lot, if any. But that’s no excuse for any supervising funeral director worth his or her salt to avoid training his or her resident to at least skillfully advocate spiritual or religious funeral or memorial service support to consumers who will clearly benefit from such support. Apart from the benefit to the bereaved, it’s only offering full and complete mortuary services, and it certainly makes the funeral home and it’s staff look good; it creates the impression of compassion, of caring beyond the contract.

**Regret The Poor Performance Of Clergy And Their Impersonal And Rushed Approach To The Spiritual Needs Of The Bereaved**

Churches and clergy are just as guilty as the insensitive funeral director. In fact, many a sensitive funeral director will confidentially regret the poor performance of clergy and their impersonal and rushed approach to the spiritual needs of the bereaved, the grieving and mourning. Clergy frequently may feel they have better things to do or may simply be suffering compassion fatigue or burnout but they need the check so they appear,
do or say something they feel is profound and mysterious, offer condolences and, in less than 15 minutes, are out the door. We’ve all seen it and it’s an embarrassment to us in the pastoral care profession. *Our recommendation to funeral directors is to prevent the damage done by such fast-food clergy approaches and hire a competent on-call professional interfaith bereavement chaplain. It’s better for the mourners, for you, and it keeps the failings of institutionalized religion out of your funeral home.*

**Spiritual Care Must Be A Part Of The Physical Care; It’s More Durable… It Lasts Lifetimes**

We seriously question the wisdom — if indeed wisdom has any part in the practice — of purchasing an outlandishly expensive vault and a costly casket, and going to the expense of embalming remains that will be viewed these days for about three (3!) hours during the conventional visitation, all of which will deteriorate in a couple of years and on top all that, questioning the mere $150–300 expense of a competent professional interfaith bereavement chaplain, who can provide a decent, dignified, personalized funeral (commendation and committal rites in the presence of the body or remains) or memorial service (where the body or remains are not present), which will last lifetimes. Yes, *lifetimes*, because each and every griever and mourner will grieve individually and will take home his or her own meaning from the service, and that meaning will last his or her lifetime. That’s why it’s so important that spiritual care be a part of the physical care; it’s more durable and affects a great many individuals each in a personally healthy and beneficial and special way. It paves the way for growth spiritual, moral, and psychological. That’s a good thing.

**In Mortuary Practice No One Gives Much Thought To The Living, The Survivors, Life To Be Lived**

Let’s be blunt: the dead are dead and usually stay that way. What we do for the dead is, in fact, to benefit the living. If you can’t accept that you’re wasting your time reading this article because, if I were to summarize this article in two sentences it would be: The dead are dead and usually stay that way. What we do for the dead is, in fact, to benefit the living. You may recall having heard that somewhere else.

In today’s cultural setting, we cannot and should not expect the bereaved to face the death of a loved one, burdened with the confusion and other associated emotions of acute grief, and then come in for the arrangement conference with their heads screwed on right, asking the right questions, making the right decisions, just like clockwork. One of the most important decisions they’ll make in their lifetimes is being made at a time we grief counselors preach against making any major decisions. And those decisions are made in a strange place, usually with strangers, with a certain amount of suspicion, in an atmosphere of urgency. All this is being done without the presence, benefit or comfort of an uninterested representative of pastoral, spiritual, moral authority. Facts: Someone has died, the remains have to be removed...
and prepared, someone has to do the paperwork and arrange for final disposition, “disposal”, of the remains. No one gives much thought to the living, the survivors, life to be lived. After all, funeral directors are in the mortuary not survivor services business. Right? WRONG! Nothing could be more wrong!

The death of a loved one is a multifaceted event that extends into every aspect of the personal, societal, spiritual, psychological realms of a human being. That’s why humankind has always viewed death with awe, mystery, fascination, terror. Next to the Divine, it’s the only real *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – a combination of awestruck fear and enthralling fascination. That’s why since immemorial humankind has linked death with every sort of taboo, superstition, good and evil, myriad rituals, and whatnot. It’s because of the mystery associated with death by the living that religion itself, at least in part, has grown up out of the mystery of death. Death is the reason for mortuary services and is the reason why the bereaved seek out mortuary services, including the support of religious and spiritual service providers.

So why is it given such short shrift in the lives of the living? Because it’s an unpleasant wake-up call to the living. That’s why death has to be cosmetized by mortuary services providers. That’s why it has to be appropriately reframed by the professional bereavement chaplain in a personalized way that speaks meaningfully to the bereaved. To speak the meaning of meaning – making requires empathy, authenticity, compassion, humility and a non-judgmental approach. In addition, it requires extensive study and continuing education in a variety of fields and across cultures and faith and belief systems, and it requires experience both life and professional.. In short, it requires a specialist and that specialist is the professional interfaith bereavement chaplain. Fanfare.

**A True Professional Knows The Trade, Anticipates The Client’s Needs, Recognizes Knows His Or Her Personal And Professional Boundaries**

As a professional bereavement chaplain, I have had the opportunity to work with some very disreputable service providers that include nursing home, hospitals, and yes, funeral homes — thankfully rarely. But the vast majority of service providers with whom I work are some of the most incredibly empathetic and caring men and women you’ll ever meet, who are genuinely interested in their clients and who are authentically sensitive to the real needs of the bereaved, including their spiritual and religious needs, even if the bereaved don’t know it themselves. A true professional knows the trade, anticipates the client’s needs, recognizes knows his or her personal and professional boundaries, and knows when to refer to another competent professional. In other words, the funeral director provides the goods and services for which she or he is competent to provide, and refers the rest — spiritual, pastoral, religious, psychological — to a collaborating professional provider.

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Do you do that? Do your staff do that? Is that your company policy? If you don’t know you should find out. If it isn’t your policy and practice, maybe it should be!

We must always bear in mind that in the bereaved’s heightened emotional state and the complex interplay of myriad, sometimes conflicting and paradoxical emotions, perceptions can be more acute and heightened. Bear also in mind that with acutely heightened perceptions, you can identify a charlatan or an amateur a mile away. The bereaved can do this expertly. They’ll notice the subtlest mistake in cosmetics. They’ll notice the wave in the hair going the wrong way. They’ll notice the phony familiarity with the deceased or the family. They’ll remember it.

So professionals have boundaries to keep them out of unfamiliar territory, to keep them out of shark-infested waters. If we don’t have boundaries we find out really quickly how small the world really is, and how fast word of mouth travels.

Most People Are Guilty Of The Arch-Sin Of Fear Or Ignorance, Each Of Which Is A Form Of Laziness

Why do most funeral homes appear to be satisfied with outside cookie-cutter spiritual/religious services at one of the most difficult times in the human journey: the death of a loved one and the glaring confrontation with one’s own mortality. There is hardly a cost-economy involved in such superficial bereavement support services because they do not address the essential existential issues, but simply appeal to infantile piety and “faith”, if even they accomplish that much. Why? Because we allow it and because regardless of how big-mouthed and self-confident our culture paints itself, most people are still cowering infants and nothing will humble them more than an existential crisis. That’s why they don’t question a physician’s assessment or a clergyperson’s prayers. Most people are guilty of the arch-sin of fear, which is a form of laziness. Others are ignorant, another form of laziness. Laziness is the original sin.

The mortuary services provider must overcome the inertia, the entropy and take the time and energy to address the spiritual needs of the consumer, and once identified and the consumer persuaded that she or he, and the other mourners would benefit from a spiritual service, then to proceed to obtain the consumer’s authorization and contact the professional interfaith bereavement chaplain, who will take over from that point on.

This sin of laziness is not the sole prerogative of the service provider; it’s even more scandalous when it’s the consumer’s laziness. It’s inhuman to think that one does not grieve or that one would not benefit from spiritual
support when facing a death. And the trite and incredible claim that the deceased did not want any type of service is absurd; what human being would want not to be remembered?

Yes, laziness is the original sin we hear so much about. More on this subject on request.

**Costs Can Be Minimized If The Funeral Home Has An On-Call Officiant/Chaplain**

Every business must be conscious of costs and the age-old adage that time is money applies without exception. Since movement involves time and resources, movement, too, is money. Inanimate things, including the dead, do not move themselves; accordingly, moving equipment and human movers must be involved to convey the inanimate, the dead, from one point to another, whether it’s the removal from home or morgue to the funeral home, or from the funeral home to a sacred space like a church, and further movement to the gravesite or crematorium and later to the cemetery.

That having been said, given the possibility of keeping the majority of services right in the funeral home and minimizing movements to other locations would seem like a real opportunity to conserve resources, wouldn’t it? Take as an example, the typical 3-hour visitation time at the funeral home. Usually during the evening before the funeral or the morning of the funeral family and mourners will receive visitors paying their respects. After the visitation the body will usually be moved either to the gravesite or to the crematorium. But in many cases, the body is taken from the funeral home, transported over a planned route in procession to a church or other sacred space, where a liturgical service is celebrated, and then from the church to the gravesite or to the crematorium. The time, personnel, physical resources involved in each of these movements is considerable and quite costly. But there is a viable and reasonable alternative: celebrating the funeral or memorial services right in the funeral home chapel.

Anyone even remotely involved in a funeral will know that the funeral home’s overheads in terms of personal and support services involved in most off-site religious or spiritual rituals are quite high when we consider the time and personnel involved, the liabilities, the mileage, equipment costs involved in transporting the deceased from the funeral home to the church and from there to the cemetery or crematorium. These costs can be minimized if the funeral home has an on-call officiant/chaplain, who specializes in bereavement care, memorial services and funeral rituals, and
preferably trained or knowledgeable in interfaith rites and interreligious diversity. The ideal officiant/chaplain would have a professional degree (at least an MA plus liturgical and pastoral training) as well as documented regular participation in continuing professional education (CPE) activities (attendance at conferences, seminars, courses, etc.).

When we consider the wear and tear on the already exhausted mourners, keeping the services in the funeral home chapel would seem the most reasonable and compassionate thing to do. And for those families who almost insist that the services be held in their church or other sacred space, a review of the added costs to do that will certainly persuade them to reconsider, and to keep the service at the funeral home. Most faith traditions have no requirement that the funerary memorial service in the church be with the body present, and it would be infinitely more convenient and less burdensome if the family were to have a memorial liturgy at a later date, if they feel strongly that their faith tradition requires it.

The On-Call Or P.R.N. Officiant/Chaplain Forms A Therapeutic And Pastoral Alliance With The Family

An on-call or p.r.n. chaplain offers clearly optimum alternatives to fast-food clergy and the cookie-cutter vigil or prayer service, and the extraordinary costs and overheads borne by the family and the funeral home, when there is a church service and from the church further logistical overheads to transport the remains and the mourners to the cemetery or crematorium. The on-call or p.r.n. officiant/chaplain, familiar with the mortuary services business and the client funeral home and its staff, layout, facilities, culture, and with the family through intensive pre-planning interview and coordination eliminates many of the incidental costs and expenses, while providing a superior, personalized, meaningful and memorable celebration of the life of the deceased and pastoral support to the mourners. In the process of accompanying the family, the on-call or p.r.n. officiant/chaplain forms a therapeutic and pastoral alliance with the family, especially the lead family member contact in the case, and the alliance formed paves the way for a special relationship that includes the physical amenities of the funeral home as well as the funeral home staff actively participating in the service alongside family members. The family is encouraged to participate in a special, meaningful way, to the extent that they feel comfortable, alongside funeral home staff, who are actively included in the service, with the officiant/chaplain assuming the role of liturgical leader and master of ceremonies. The funeral service is, after
all, about the deceased and the family, against the background of a faith or belief tradition, with the support of the officiant/chaplain and the staff and amenities of the funeral home.

The Functionary-Spectator Model Is Not Only Antiquated And Obsolete, It’s Downright Unhealthy

An essential element is the organization of the memorial or funeral service based on a liturgical model, in which the officiant/chaplain encourages and supports maximum participation of the mourners and the funeral home staff; this organization provides relationship building between the mourners and the funeral home staff, provides an opportunity for maximum participation by mourners at a level that this comfortable for them; the experience of participation in the liturgical and ritual actions establishes them as part of the ritual and the service, and that participation brings them closer to the reality of the death and hence closer to healthier grieving and mourning. The alternative is reducing the funeral home staff to mere behind-the-scenes preparers and door-openers and the mourners to mere spectators of a play they do not fully understand — and one has to wonder whether perhaps that’s the way traditional church-clergy would like to keep it. Such a functionary-spectator model is not only antiquated and obsolete, it’s downright unhealthy.

The Family Is Assured Of A Service Tailored To The Family’s Culture, Beliefs, Practices, Composition, And Specific expectations

This non-judgmental communications or NJC-model also frees up the funeral home staff to take care of activities that usually have to be set aside until after the actual service. With the professional officiant/chaplain in charge of designing, coordinating, executing, and supervising the memorial or funeral service, the family is assured of a service tailored to the family’s culture, beliefs, practices, composition, and specific expectations, while being personalized to highlight the life of the deceased in hues and nuances colored by the family’s personal impressions, interpretations, and sharing at the time of the pre-service interviews.

Of course, there has to be a segue of sorts between the planning of the broader funerary product, and that segue is provided by the funeral director when she or he broaches the subject of spiritual and religious service elements. It is at this point that the funeral director previews the funeral home’s suggestions and the
involvement of a specialist interfaith bereavement chaplain. If the family is on the same page, the funeral director asks permission to forward the relevant information to the chaplain, who will then contact the family for the background interview. In preparation for this contact, the lead funeral director, of course, explains to the family that the chaplain will be calling in order to chat about the deceased and the family. The funeral home then contacts me and provides the basic information gleaned at the family conference and included in the obituary, and any observations or historical information together with family contact information, and I do the rest. Of course, the lead funeral director is kept informed of the substance of any contacts with the family and she or he is provided with any materials exchanged between me and the family.

**More Often Than Not The Family Will Work Hard To Provide Any Support They Can**

It has been my experience that families usually express considerable enthusiasm at being involved in the planning of the memorial or funeral service, and are more than willing to participate in meaningful rituals, readings, and other appropriate elements of the service. It has been the very rare occasion when a family expressly declines any participation and explicitly requests that I perform all activities in the service; that is not a teaching moment and I avoid unnecessary prying, accepting that the family’s wishes must be graciously and non-judgmentally appreciated and honored. But, as I mentioned above, more often than not the family will work hard to provide any support they can, and I work equally hard to ensure that it is included in an appropriate way at an appropriate point in the service.

**They Appreciate The Fact That Someone Knows That They Still Hurt**

Follow-up is always desirable to ensure that all loose ends are secured and all questions are clearly answered. I usually hold a pre-service meeting with key family members and any readers, presenters just before the service starts, usually one-half hour before the actual service. This is a great icebreaker and it’s sometimes the first face-to-face I have with the family. Without exception, regardless of the family culture or traditions, it’s always a great moment for the family and for me; sometimes very touching. Speaking of follow-up, it is my practice to follow-up with the family at 30 days and 1 year after the service. This has proved to be a very awesome experience for families who have been all but forgotten only days after the service, and they appreciate the fact that someone knows that they still hurt and can assure them that it’s really quite normal and quite acceptable to still be feeling pain and loss.
The Chaplain, In Virtue Of His Or Her Education, Training, Experience, Vocation Has A Certain Authority

I’d like to note at this point that every profession involved in these rites of passage, whether a birth, a marriage, the dying process, the death rituals, has a role and that role has certain mystical authorities and specific boundaries that should not be violated. What this means in more concrete terms is that the funeral staff have certain prerogatives and privileges that are constrained by traditional, cultural and regulatory boundaries, within which the funeral home staff operate. Chaplains and other clergy have like prerogatives and privileges as well as a certain inviolable moral and spiritual authority that tends almost invariably to establish a sort of alliance with the family that transcends any earthly interests or agendas (this is likely not the case with denominational clergy or chaplains). In other words, the chaplain, in virtue of his or her education, training, experience, vocation has a certain authority that other professionals involved in bereavement situations do not possess. The bereaved tend to be more open, less inhibited, more trusting, and certainly more authentic with the chaplain because he does not pose a risk or threat to them. A chaplain is specifically trained to be authentic, empathetic, non-judgmental, and a deep listener. Of course, the professional chaplain has advanced academic standing and is well-versed in his or her tradition or, if he or he specializes in interfaith chaplaincy, in any number of different faith and belief systems.

The Lines Between Faiths And Belief Systems Are Quite Blurred At Times

The interfaith chaplain is particularly desirable today because the lines between faiths and belief systems are quite blurred at times or the family may include quite divergent cultures and faith traditions as opposed to the situation in past generations, wherein the faith and cultural mix was more homogeneous than mixed. I have experienced remarkably spiritual people who have no clear idea what their religious beliefs are or even if they have any. An experienced interfaith chaplain, experienced in ritual action and symbolism, liturgical leadership, and officiation, can and will design a service that respects all present and offends none, while framing the dominant faith or belief tradition of the majority. This applies equally to ritual actions, readings, music selections, and even to the chaplain’s attire.

To return to the pre-service family interview, this interview is an essential element not only of the service planning but also serves to identify spiritual themes and beliefs, even though the family may not espouse a specific faith tradition or institutional religion. The chaplain, trained in listening techniques and interviewing, will be able to ascertain the family’s spiritual situation and through skilled inquiry, elicit the information necessary to address the family’s spirituality without excessive prying. These skills are particularly fruitful
because the chaplain's conversation partner gradually comes to realize that the chaplain understands and the barriers start to crumble. This is the beginning of the spiritual or therapeutic alliance.

**The Professional Bereavement Chaplain Will Know How To Incorporate The Bizarre With The Traditional**

Versatility and flexibility are *sine qua non* of the professional interfaith chaplain. Yes! families do and will want to include everything but the kitchen sink in the service and the chaplain will try to accommodate them, while preserving the sense, meaning and dignity of the service, and gently declining some requests with a sensitive explanation. For example: Aunt Lilian will want to solo (actually croak) a hymn. Cousin Kim has written a poem she wants to read. Jimmy wants gramps’ favorite beagle’s ashes to be next to gramps’ urn. Uncle George wants to place a six-pack of Heinekin in the box with gramma. Corey wants to play a *Guns’n Roses* number that Ricky loved. Alice wants to have a framed photo of Sgt. Schultz (of *Hogan’s Heros*) on mom’s casket. Am I kidding? Not at all. These are all taken from actual services. And Yes!, they were included in the service at the appropriate point and worked beautifully both in terms of organization, timing, and family satisfaction. The professional bereavement chaplain will know how to incorporate the bizarre with the traditional and make it work. That’s what we do.

We must always keep in mind that a family member wants to include something in the ceremony because that something has value and meaning to that person. We cannot simply dismiss the request as if it were meaningless but we must explore the request and discern its meaning. While we may be reluctant to allow something bizarre to be included in the service, if we explore the meaning of the request, it is very likely that we can find an alternative that is more appropriate and acceptable to everyone. This is where listening skills are invaluable.

**It’s A Vocation, Not A Job.**

The professional interfaith bereavement chaplain is a blend of pastor, spiritual guide, schmoozer, scriptwriter, screenplay writer, producer, director, musicologist, scriptural scholar, liturgist, therapist, mediator, crisis manager, logistics officer, graphic designer, public speaker, homilist, humorist, listener, conversationalist, master of ceremonies, and co-mourner, just to name a few of my most common roles. I have to be all of this and yet maintain dignity of demeanor, softness of manner, humility, authority. It’s a vocation, not a job.

**CONCLUSION**

The professional interfaith bereavement chaplain is an important but frequently overlooked professional support person available to the funeral home as well as to mourners. As a professional member of the funeral home team the on-call or p.r.n. chaplain assumes the responsibility for the funeral and memorial service design,
organization, coordination, execution, and follow-up, freeing the funeral home staff to concern itself with other important matters. As a highly trained, empathetic, authentic, facilitator and support person, the professional interfaith chaplain provides essential and necessary support to the bereaved and mourners, and forms a *de facto* therapeutic alliance with them, facilitating the grief work necessary to the healing and transformation process.

**The on-call or p.r.n. chaplain virtually eliminates personnel, equipment and logistics overheads**

On the more mundane side, the professional interfaith bereavement chaplain represents a cost-saving model for both the mortuary services provider and for the consumer of mortuary services. The on-call or p.r.n. chaplain virtually eliminates personnel, equipment and logistics overheads by being available for effective liturgical, spiritual, religious or humanistic services on site at the funeral home or mortuary services facility, practically eliminating the need for organizing and coordinating resources for complicated and costly movements of staff, equipment, remains, and mourners. The funeral liturgical service, the memorial service or other rites are done right at the funeral home. The chaplain processes then with the cortège directly to the cemetery or crematorium for the graveside, cremation, or columbarium rites.

**The Funeral Home Staff Should Bear In Mind The Importance Of Spiritual And Religious Or Pastoral Care Support**

In the context of the 21st century death and bereavement culture, the professional interfaith chaplain plays an enormously important role both to the funeral home or mortuary services provider and to the bereaved and mourners. Wherever possible, the funeral home staff should bear in mind the importance of spiritual and religious or pastoral care support to the bereaved and should impress the importance of such support to families when making funeral arrangements. Even if the bereaved do not list a religious or faith preference, even if they do not belong to or actively participate with a faith or belief community, they may have a significant religious commitment without even realizing it, and will benefit from the meaning-making and closure effects of a well-designed funeral or memorial service. It would be a disservice if funeral home staff and mortuary service providers were to ignore this important element of mortuary services.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Discuss The Benefits Of A Spiritual, Religious Or Humanistic Funeral Or Memorial Service With The Bereaved**

*To funeral homes and mortuary services providers*: Discuss the benefits of a spiritual, religious or humanistic funeral or memorial service with the bereaved at the time of making pre-arrangements or at family conference when making acute arrangements.
Alternatively, involve the on-call chaplain at some point in the arrangements conference with the family after first clearing this with the family, of course. It may be worthwhile to make the chaplain available after the arrangements conference should the family wish to pray or discuss spiritual questions with him.

I would like to emphasize that the fact that a funeral home actually has the insight to have a chaplain available speaks volumes about the funeral home’s appreciation of and respect for the family’s faith and belief traditions, and that the funeral home recognizes the importance of spiritual care in providing a full-service mortuary product.

**The Interfaith Bereavement Chaplain Will Be Compassionately Present For You**

You have lost a loved one and you are grieving. If you can accept fact, you must also accept the fact that you will benefit from the experience of a funeral or memorial service.

*So, my message to the bereaved and those making funeral or memorial arrangements*: Openly mention and freely discuss with the funeral director what his/her operation has to offer you in terms of spiritual and religious support. Ask for details concerning personalized funeral and memorial services. Take advantage of the healthy psychological and spiritual effects of a well-designed funeral or memorial services and the therapeutic alliance with your professional interfaith chaplain. Directly request chaplain services, especially if you have a difficult time dealing with the death or if there is family dissonance. The interfaith bereavement chaplain will be compassionately present for you and will accompany you and your loved ones along this rough road, and can make all the difference in creating the holy space for forgiveness and reconciliation, peace and hope.

**The Interfaith Chaplain Be Non-Judgmental And Tolerant Of The Family’s Unique Systems**

**Questions to ask**: It’s important to ask the right questions when considering an officiant/chaplain. Here are just a few we’d recommend: What are the chaplain’s credentials? Is the interfaith chaplain experienced in bereavement support? Does the interfaith chaplain come with references? Will the interfaith chaplain be non-judgmental and tolerant of the family’s unique systems? Can the interfaith chaplain avoid proselytizing? Is the interfaith chaplain a leader-organizer? Does the interfaith chaplain subscribe to a code of ethics? Will the chaplain suspend his own beliefs, his own tradition’s doctrines and dogma, and concentrate on the family’s preferences and needs? Can the chaplain avoid high theology and personalize the service, aligning it with the family’s unique characteristics, addressing the salient aspects of the deceased and making meaning for the survivors? Does the interfaith chaplain have the skills to provide spiritual and organizational guidance to the bereaved, while respecting the organizational culture and resources of the mortuary services provider? Is the interfaith chaplain dignified and reverent in demeanor, authentic in character and persuasive in message?

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Empirical observation supports the medical, psychiatric, psychological, pastoral care literature and the growing consensus that spiritual care, whether religious or non-religious, plays a significant role in the health and wellbeing of all sufferers, including the bereaved. Spiritual care supports the mourner in myriad ways both in the acute grief period into the grief work and mourning stages and well beyond. Spiritual care as offered by the professional interfaith bereavement chaplain represents a significant added value to the funeral home’s product offerings and further represents substantial tangible and intangible benefits to the insightful funeral services manager and his or her establishment.

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