

# Creating Rituals

## Surrounding the Rite of Cremation

BY DAVID R. PENEPENT, PH.D.

*To be successful, funeral directors must adapt to consumers' lack of understanding of death rituals and create a repertoire of rituals surrounding cremation to facilitate the grieving process.*

Since the dawn of human existence, there have been three main means of final disposition of human remains: burial, entombment and cremation. Neanderthals, for example, would place remains in an abandoned cave and seal it so no animals could get in and desecrate the remains; this was the first record of entombment. Some Neanderthals would dig a hole and place their loved ones in it, which is known as interment. Others would put the body on top of a fire, thus cremating the remains. Little has changed in the meth-

ods of disposition of human remains since the Neanderthals except for the sophistication by which the remains are treated and cared for by the living.

Many funeral directors view cremation as an unprofitable activity, when in reality, it can be quite profitable. Thus, those who complain that cremation is destroying their business need to abandon old paradigms and understand the reasons why cremation has not been profitable in the past.

Cremation is a symptom; the real problem is the lack of rituals and ceremonies within the industry that honor the dead when using cremation as a means of final disposition. Throughout many civilizations, communities used cremation as part of their death rituals. Cremation in American culture is an underdeveloped means of final disposition void of rituals and rites that connect the death event to a person's own grieving experience. This article will outline how the cremation problem has been exacerbated because of the funeral director's inability to implement a paradigm shift that accommodates cremation with rituals and rites that provide a meaningful and memorable farewell to the deceased.

### *Old Paradigms and Changing Funeral Services*

There will always be a small segment of the population that wants no rituals connected to the cremation process. Prior to the 1990s, 85% of all deaths involved funerals with traditional religious services followed by burials. Consumers who chose cremation were usually without a religious affiliation and did not want any connection to ceremonies because they failed to identify with the patterns, customs and rituals that connected the death rites to the consumer's belief system.

All religions answer the fundamental question of what happens to a person after the body stops functioning by establishing a theological framework based on the afterlife. This framework is entrenched in folkways, mores, laws and taboos that pull a social unit together not only for identification purposes but also as a foundational core to help the bereaved engage in the grieving process. In addition to addressing the complexity of the death event, there is a part of the bereavement process that identifies with each individual's own mortality.

Death is a rite of passage. For most people, when death occurs, the physical body ceases to function but the spiritual component continues on into the afterlife. Each religious organization has a funeral rite or solemn ceremony to honor this rite of passage into the afterlife. Rituals, on the other hand, are the actual solemn acts or prescribed actions that are performed in accordance to the religious traditions. For example, in the Jewish burial rite, part of the ritual is to stop seven times on the way to the grave. This ritual represents the mourners' unwillingness to end the services and separate from their deceased loved one.

Every religion or social group forms a set of rituals surrounding spiritual beliefs of the afterlife following the death experience. When the majority of society went to church on a regular basis, the job of the funeral director was somewhat easy. They were responsible for transporting the body from the place of death to the funeral home for the necessary preparation for the funeral rituals. Funeral directing was simpler during this period of time and very profitable. The funeral director's role, for the most part, was nothing more than acting as a livery service – transporting the body from the place of death to the funeral home to the place of worship and finally the grave. The clergy was responsible for helping the bereaved connect their grieving experience to the death

event within the context of their religious beliefs. This protocol worked when 85% of society worshiped on a regular basis. The funeral director during this time period understood that consumers who chose cremation usually did not have a religious affiliation or theological framework of an afterlife that promoted interment.

Since the 1990s, however, consumers' funeral needs have changed drastically, in part due to most of an entire generation missing religious services. Today, less than 30% of funeral consumers attend church on a regular basis. Steadily over the past 10 years, cremation has increased significantly and the desire to bury the dead has sharply decreased. In fact, I will speculate that the burial rate will eventually be equal to the church attendance rate in any given community.

One problem with today's funeral consumers is they have no conceptual or theological framework for understanding the question of what happens to a person after death. Thus, they view the body as any other thing that has expended its life cycle and needs to be disposed of by the simplest means possible.

In addition, funeral directors who continue to be of the mindset of the "transporter of human remains" are the cause of the problem within the industry. The reason is that they do not have any ritual options to provide to consumers that mark the significance of a meaningful life that has passed and is now creating a void in people's lives. Progressive funeral directors who are thriving with cremation have within their cremation options a set of rituals or ceremonies connecting the death event to the consumer's own grieving experience. Unchurched consumers today do not understand how ceremonies or rituals facilitate the grieving process, and directors who do not take the time to explain the importance of engaging in the rite of cremation as active participants are nothing more than overpaid transporters. Thus, the funeral director who will be in business in the near future needs to adopt or assume this central role of the keeper (or caregiver) of the rituals surrounding death and final disposition of the human remains.

For funeral directors to be successful, they must adapt to the consumer's lack of understanding of death rituals. They need to create a repertoire of rituals surrounding cremation that will facilitate the grieving process. To do so, mortuary science programs and continuing education classes must start extensively training directors on how to take the death event and help consumers connect to their own grieving experience within the context of cremation as a means of final disposition. In essence, the new paradigm shift for funeral directors will be all-inclusive, wherein the successful director will embrace cremation as an opportunity to present several ritual options to consumers.

The issue with cremation not being profitable is a direct result of not being able to provide consumers with such options that ceremoniously memorialize the life accomplishments of the dead. These options will facilitate the grieving process in the bereaved and embrace cremation as part of that process. The funeral director who complains about cremation not being profitable is stuck in the old paradigm of transporting hu-

man remains rather than providing the family with the ritual option necessary to engage in grieving.

### **Creating the Ritual**

As stated, a majority of today's consumers are unchurched. Therefore, any religious connection would be counterproductive when trying to establish rituals to which the consumer can connect. A flaw in the way funeral directors present rituals surrounding caring for the dead is to frame the rituals within the notion of a "celebration." This is a misunderstanding of what the consumer needs to engage in to cope with the loss. People celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, bar mitzvahs and other joyous occasions. On the other hand, the

death event is not a joyous occasion but rather the passing of a human life that had meaning. Thus, the ritual surrounding cremation needs to focus on the life accomplishments of the deceased and how that person's absence creates a void in others' lives.

The consumer who enters the arrangement with the notion of just wanting a direct cremation with no service or visitation is also denying others the opportunity to grieve the loss of a person in a public venue. Therefore, when presenting the options surrounding cremation, the funeral director should always pose the following question to the consumer who just wants direct cremation:

*Consumer:* "We just want a simple cremation with no visitation."

*Funeral director:* "Are you willing to engage in 100 sets of calling hours over the next year?"

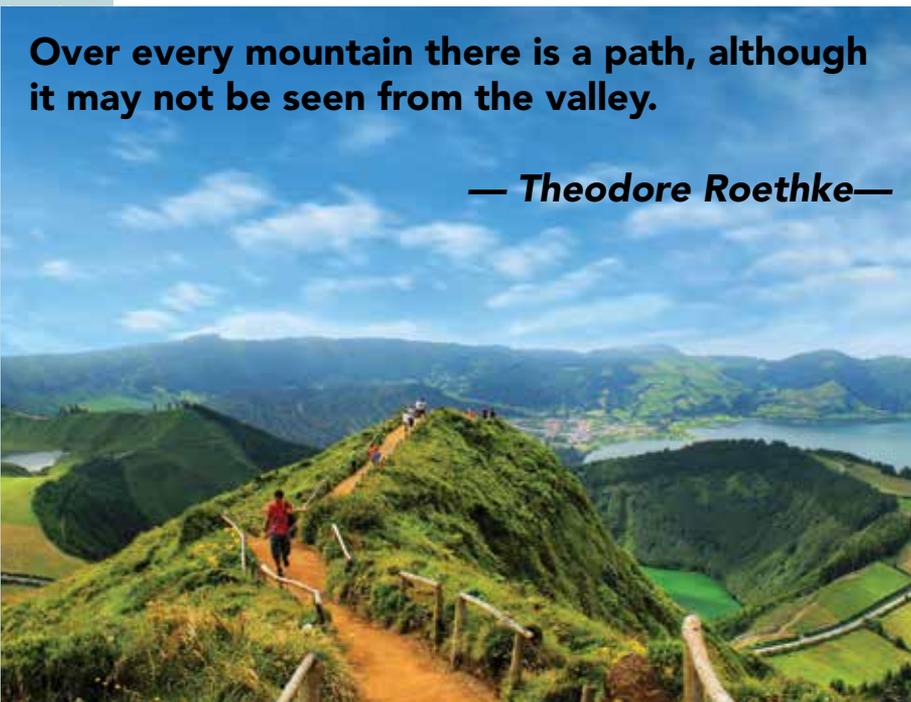
*Perplexed consumer:* "What do you mean?"

*Funeral director should respond:* "By not having any visitation or funeral service, people who knew your loved one will question how you are doing. Each time you answer that question, you will be engaging in a form of a visitation and starting the grieving process all over again."

Visitation and funeral services are for the living, and these events are designed to bring people together to mark the loss of a significant life. The gathering of people commences the grieving process within the sense of community, and by mourning that loss with friends and family, true grief work begins within that social setting. When I was in mortuary school, a wise professor once said to me, "You either pay the funeral director or you pay the therapist, but either way, you pay the exact amount of money." It's not about the cost the funeral director charges but rather the process of helping people heal from their loss. Having said that, the consumer needs to find value in the services that are provided or they will complain about the cost of the services rendered. Complaints about the cost of funerals can be directly associated with not providing meaningful services that identified the life accomplishments of the dead and paid attention to the consumer's bereavement needs. The funeral director needs to make the spiritual and emotional connections part of this process by gathering people together to engage in activities that have meaning

**Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley.**

**— Theodore Roethke —**



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and significance to the human remains and the bereaved's psychological state.

The challenge for the director is to engage the consumer in the final disposition process. When the body should be taken to the crematory, the family should be invited to follow the hearse in procession. Otherwise, cremation is nothing more than the transportation of the body to the crematory. Part of the old paradigm, this process is devoid of engaging the consumer in the procedures of caring for those human remains by using transportation as a vehicle for connecting the death to the place of rest.

In my experience, the consumers' view of the cremation process changes when they are part of the procession to the crematory. Once at the crematory, the family should be asked to say some parting words if they wish. Or the funeral director should ask if they would like him or her to say some parting words. In my experience, half of the people who accompany their loved ones to the crematory will say words of goodbye. The other half request that the funeral director say some parting words, followed by either the family kissing the cremation container or leaving a flower on top of it as part of the goodbye ritual. Either way, they are a part of the process of final disposition. The old paradigm of transporter to the crematory leaves a sense of wonder in the consumer's mind. This is like having a church service and the funeral director taking the body to the grave without the family.

Another issue with cremation is what to do with the cremated remains. A large percentage of people who choose cremation take the cremated remains home and either place them on a shelf, in a closet, under a bed or in a place where their loved one is forgotten. A growing problem in the funeral industry are families that refuse to pick up cremated remains from the funeral home, thus leaving unclaimed remains as the funeral director's problem.

In either situation, the cremated remains are not treated with respect or dignity and closure, so the death event is void of ritual. The funeral director must provide options surrounding the final disposition of the cremated remains in a sacred place. One way to facilitate that and engage the bereaved in the grieving process is by utilizing an urn ark, which requires urn bearers to transport the urn to its final resting place. Funeral directors I have interviewed have concluded that the ark is a required tool that draws people's focus toward the cremated remains in the urn, just as the casket draws people's attention to the dead. An urn ark treats the cremated remains as the sacred fundamental elements of the human body and necessitates that something need be done with them to show reverence to the deceased.

With the increase in cremation rates, there has also been a decrease in the use of cemeteries. As a result, this is placing cemeteries in a financial position in which they will not be able to sustain longevity of operations into the future. The urn ark is one way of promoting the use of cemeteries within a community as part of the cremation ritual. After a memorial service at the funeral home, by using the urn ark, the cremated remains can be treated with the same respect and dignity as the casketed human body; it is a tangible tool that

facilitates the ritual of carrying the dead to the grave. After a few burials using this device, consumers will automatically request it for services because of the dignity it brings to the dead.

Creating the ritual to the grave requires the bereaved to participate in the process, which, while difficult at times, is therapeutic and a catharsis for repressed emotions. In my practice, I even went as far as adapting some of the Jewish rites of burial into the cremation burial rite. After carrying the urn to the grave and saying the words of committal, I have the family place the urn in the ground and offer them the opportunity to bury their loved one by passing the shovel around to the mourners. Burying the dead (or the cremated remains) is the responsibility of the next of kin; the funeral director only facilitates the process by organizing the people to move through various stages until they can say their final goodbyes to their loved one.

While scattering cremated remains has been frowned upon in the funeral industry in the past, it needs to be looked at as part of a cremation ritual of returning the basic elements of human existence to Mother Earth. An example of this would be to scatter a farmer's cremated remains on the field where he made his living and now is returned to the soil he has tilled. Giving up the old paradigm just because the ritual does not have meaning to the funeral director's ideology of how to dispose of the cremated remains does not mean that it does not have meaning to the bereaved. The next of kin

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needs to be creative in creating rituals that have meaning. The funeral director facilitates the creation of these rituals by drawing from various sacred committal traditions used to bury the dead.

### **Revised Educational Training**

Finally, the educational process needs to be revised. Mortuary science schools throughout the country are training future funeral directors the same way they have been training them since the 1960s and 70s. But future directors need to be trained as celebrants and hospitality specialists. Millennials, while they have many technological qualities, are not as socially developed as previous generations. Cyber technology engages a different part of the communication process and lacks the human interpersonal interaction necessary for grief work. There is an emptiness in expressing human emotion with meaning in the cyber world. Healing and supporting the bereaved in their time of need does not translate well in cyberspace.

Thus, one reason young directors may be leaving the profession as quickly as they come in is due to consumer demands for a human response to the death event. Some young funeral directors may not know how to engage in this type of human experience. Teaching the next generation of directors customer service must be part of a mortuary science curriculum. In addition, more emphasis needs to be given to event planning, creating humanistic services (that is, services that are sacred but not religious) for consumers and celebrant training. The human capital skill set for future funeral directors must meet the wishes of the unchurched consumer through customer service and event planning, which requires the American Board of Funeral Service Education

to implement new curricula to meet this growing consumer need.

Cremation is not the problem in funeral service today. The problem is the missing formal cremation rituals consumers need to bury their dead and engage in the grieving process. Funeral directors with a high cremation rate need to attend continuing education classes on how to be a celebrant and facilitate creation rituals for the consumer. The reason consumers choose direct cremation without services is the lack of a cremation rite repertoire of different humanistic rituals that have meaning and value for the consumer.

The funeral director of tomorrow needs to become more engaged in the process of helping people understand the grieving process within the context of cremation. Those directors who still have the regressive mindset of being nothing more than a transporter of human remains will ultimately allow consumers' direct cremation mentality to dictate their funeral services out of business.

The funeral director must provide the consumer with many ritual options surrounding the rite of cremation. The whole point of rituals surrounding cremation is to provide the family with the opportunity to say goodbye in a collective manner that honors the life accomplishments of the dead within the context of community and facilitates the grieving process for the bereaved. ☰

*David R. Penepent, Ph.D., CFSP, is director of funeral services administration at SUNY Canton in Canton, New York. He is also CEO of Advanced Funeral Services Educational Programs. He can be contacted at [penepentd@canton.edu](mailto:penepentd@canton.edu).*

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