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## **“Traditions and Perceptions”**

### **A Perspective on Funeral Service from a Devout Catholic of Eighty Years**

By Robert L. Pierce

Funeral service is changing. It is changing a lot. The funeral customs of our parents will be archaic to our future generations.

My story began with a call from my mother who admits to about sixty of her eighty three years. She has called to discuss her and my father’s funeral prearrangements (and of course her bowling average.) She begins with the statement, “Your father and I don’t attend Catholic funerals anymore?” She has been a devout Catholic her entire life. I remember the statement as sounding a little surreal at the time.

She went on to explain that Catholic services in her local parishes did not recognize the value or the contribution of the deceased person. From her perspective, Catholic services are too wrapped up in death and afterlife, things that she is comfortable handling with private prayer and meditation. She believes that the services fail to recognize that there are family and friends left behind who have their own needs that are not being met by the parish’s “impersonal” approach to the funeral service. My parents live in an aging retirement area and they attend funerals often.

There is more to this story. My mother went on to explain that they had made their prearrangements (after a long and arduous period of exploring their alternatives) and had decided on cremation and that she had made arrangements with her priest for a small ceremony for family and friends in the church’s chapel.

This article is not about Catholic services and it is not about my mother and father. It is about the changes that funeral service is going through. My parents are not alone in demanding relevance from a funeral. Her entire area, thousands of retirees, feels the way she does. They have decided that the funeral has to recognize the needs of family and friends, and recognize the decedent as a unique and special person, or they will not attend them.

If the funeral does not present the deceased as a special and unique person, the next service in the group of family and friends is a little more likely to be a disposal.

The interesting fact to me is that I have been in funeral service for twenty five years now and I have never gotten this perspective with this degree of clarity. I viewed the changes that the funeral industry is going through as having been a product of the baby boomer generation, not our parents.

I may have been too close to the industry. Sometimes it is difficult to see the forest because of the trees. Maybe my perceptions were affected by my belief in the relevance of the funeral ceremony. In any event, it was a shock to me to hear that there is a militant of octogenarians who are actively avoiding funeral services that they consider to be unresponsive to the needs of the family and friends of the deceased.

I can go to my own experiences, however, to explore the relevance of funeral customs. I have attended two services for friends in the recent past and one out of respect for a friend. Each was very different. Each represented a very different experience and opportunity to grieve and to pay my respects.

I have written about one of the funerals in a prior article. The funeral was highly personal and highly interactive, involving family and friends in the service. The funeral home displayed a history of pictures and a collection that had been special to the deceased. It was a military funeral and involved the "twenty one gun" salute at the funeral home, something that I had not seen before but which I considered very effective. I believe that it was more effective than when the military honors are performed at the graveside. The funeral was truly a celebration of a life lived. It was a highly emotional experience, one which I shall remember for the rest of my life. It is, to my mind, what everyone would choose for their own funeral.

My second experience was particularly relevant for me because it was a close friend. The funeral did not seem to have a feeling of "unique personalization." It felt too much like a lot of other funerals. I felt that the funeral did not do justice to a person who was very special to me.

The third funeral was for Aunt Polly. Before I begin, I have to set the stage some. I had never met Aunt Polly before the day of her funeral. I attended out of respect for her family.

In truth, funeral is a misnomer. The ceremony was a celebration of Aunt Polly's life. The funeral was held shortly after the celebration ceremony in the local church. The celebration was a very special event. It was a nice mixture of faith, family stories, anecdotes, reflection and humor. It was a great send-off for a great lady. While I never met Aunt Polly, Aunt Polly will always be Aunt Polly to me.

The importance of the celebration to the family and friends was truly evident. Family and friends still had tears in their eyes after the ceremony, but it was obvious to me that the laughter and tears had changed the mood of the group. People continued to tell Aunt Polly stories in the lobby of the funeral home and into the parking lot. The ceremony had done its part for the family. It had done its part to start the healing process. It was a success in every respect.

Aunt Polly's was the type of ceremony that makes people appreciate their funeral director and decide to go back when the need arises. It was the type of service that is the funeral director's best defense against cremation, and price shopping for that matter.

Of interest here, I know that my mother would have loved Aunt Polly's funeral whether or not it had been Catholic. Her group of militant seniors is not fighting Catholic funerals. They are fighting funerals which fail to respect and celebrate the life of the deceased. They are fighting funerals without humor or relevance. It is both that simple and that complex. They, and others, will ultimately come to the conclusion that no funeral is better than one which does not recognize the uniqueness of their loved one and entire families and ultimately communities will be lost to the ceremony-less disposal.

The aggressive testing of paradigms is an important aspect of business management. The traditions and standards of a business are important but it is also important to recognize that the world around us keeps changing and that we have to keep up with those changes. Paradigms must be subjected to critical scrutiny on a regular basis and changes made as they become appropriate. This applies to every aspect of the business including the manner in which service are delivered to our families.

Even if you are on the cutting edge in terms of delivery of service today, you will not be tomorrow unless you continue to keep your finger on the pulse and continue to look for ways to get better.

People in funeral service have to listen carefully if the funeral service is to remain a part of our culture. But, listening alone is not enough. Families rarely know what they want from a funeral service. They don't know how to answer a post service questionnaire. Their responses will almost always be unresponsive and unenlightened (at least partly because the questionnaires fail to ask the relevant questions.) Down deep, all families want the same thing. They want a service that will show the world exactly why their Daddy was special. If we don't give it to them, they will find an alternative to the funeral. And that alternative is the ceremony-less disposal.

The recent post service survey by Federated highlights the fallacy of the traditional post service survey. It asks the typical non-relevant questions about personnel, vehicles and the family's over-all satisfaction with the service; innocuous questions that are almost guaranteed to boost the ego of the funeral director and mask the important issues. They are particularly useless in the face of the changing customs of our families. Questions of greater relevance might reasonably include the following: Did the service highlight the attributes of your loved one that were most important to you, your family and your friends? Or, in simpler terms, do you feel that the service showed your family and friends how special your Daddy was? Do you feel that the funeral director made every attempt to understand your family and its special needs? Do you feel that the ceremony that you received was "highly personal" to you? Do you feel that there is anything else that might have been done to make the service more personal to you and your family? Do you feel that the ceremony contributed to your healing process? Do you feel that the funeral director took a genuine interest in you? Did you receive a post service call from the funeral director? Were you offered assistance to help you cope with your grief? Did the funeral home go the extra mile for you? Enough, you get the idea. If you are inclined to do a post service survey, make it help you cope with the changes that the industry is facing. We don't need an ego stroke. We need to know if we are truly meeting the (unstated) needs of our families. The traditional post service survey doesn't add a thing to our knowledge. In fact, it only serves to hide the real issues that we have to face.

There is one instance in which a corporately owned location has rather dramatically increased its burials and market share and, further, decreased its cremations by building a reputation for highly personalized services. The changes happened in a small community where it is the only corporately owned firm, the funeral director is not local to the community, and in the face of the bankruptcy of its owner.

A highly personalized funeral service is a funeral home's most effective marketing tool. It is, along with an effective prearrangement program, the best defense against creeping cremation rates.

Looking back from the future, we will say that funeral customs changed and that the changes of customs caused the loss of profit of our funeral businesses. To a certain extent at least some of us, will have contributed to the changing of funeral customs by failing to recognize and adapt to the changing needs of our families.