

Cremation Read 'Em and Weep?

No, this is not another cremation article that purports to explain the importance of cremation consumers.

This is a simple wake-up article. The dialogue is over. There is a new sheriff in town, and he does not always carry a casket in his holster. Cremation is here to stay. Get over it and stop sniveling.

The question I get from reporters most often is, "Why is cremation increasing so fast?" They are asking the wrong question. The right question is, "How did casketing stay as the mainstream decision for so long?" I will tell you in five simple points.

1. Religion

Casket choices are driven in part by religion. Look around, beyond your world. Look at Europe. The cremation rate of Protestant countries in Europe is much higher than in the United States. Look at the Catholic countries in Europe and Central America, and you still see high burial rates. The Catholic religion places a high emphasis on casketing.

I remember giving a seminar with Curtis Rostad in Massachusetts on

the day of John F. Kennedy's cremation burial at sea. Rostad began the seminar 30 minutes late as many were watching the events on TV. Rostad asked the 50 funeral directors at the seminar whether this would change the cremation rate of Massachusetts (which at the time was about 12 percent). They unanimously raised their hands to vote that it would not. One director declared, "Oh, that's just the Kennedys!" With the current rate in Massachusetts today at nearly 35 percent, I would dare say that the collective minds in that room were wrong.

The United States is besieged from all cultures. If we look at Asian cultures, all of them use cremation to honor their dead. We see cremation as the cornerstone of the belief system for Buddhists, Hindu, Hmong and other Asian religions.

I was privileged to be part of a dialogue with some senior members of the Church of Latter Day Saints in the early 1990s. This church was

growing very fast in Southeast Asia. However, it found that when death occurred, the community held firm on cremation.

The LDS church, along with Jews, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox religions, was pretty adamant that cremation was not to be used. The LDS leadership found the only thing it could do to appease its community in Asia and keep its growth was to go silent on the practice. At that time, Utah had about a 10 percent cremation rate. Today some LDS towns are at 50 percent or more. Silence of the church for Asia was silence for the United States.

2. Education

When I wrote my book on cremation, I studied the states that had the highest cremation rates. At that same time, I recalled something that Hawley Lincoln told me in the mid-1980s. Hawley was a funeral home owner and NFDA leader who was pretty outspoken. His funeral home, located in New Haven, Connecticut, is in the backyard of one of the finest colleges of our country. He told me, "The length of the driveway of a person's home is inversely proportionate to the amount of their funeral bill!"

I learned early on that cremation was not about stupidity but about education. The more educated someone is, the more he or she tends not to rely just upon an adherence to traditions and rituals. These people are educated and make decisions for themselves. It really has nothing to do with religion and everything to do with a person's will to make their own decisions.

Looking through data provided by the Cremation Association of North America and other sources, I found that towns with residents who have a higher level of education and often have a college or university in their presence tend to have higher cremation rates than the surrounding area. The area of Raleigh-Durham in North Carolina has a cremation rate almost

200 percent higher than Wake Forest (which is no longer the home of Wake Forest University, which is now located in Winston-Salem). These two areas are just 16 miles apart, have the same press coverage and other outside influences – but these towns could not be more dissimilar.

3. Income

In researching my book I also looked at income. I found that towns that have residents with higher income have higher cremation rates. Look at a state with a high cremation rate such as California. The farming communities, with a higher percentage of low-income residents, are buying casketed funerals at higher rates than cities just a few miles away.

I constantly hear from funeral home owners, managers and directors that cremation is a choice driven by the economy. Yet, none of the surveys I do for funeral homes or focus groups I conduct has indicated that. If anything, it is the opposite. Our country is witnessing a larger divide between the “haves” and “have-nots-as-much.” The latter group is gaining in members, as real income (meaning income adjusted for inflation) is declining. Some of this is predictable as we have more retired people than ever before and their income needs are sensitive to interest earnings that are well-below the historical average. Our population is growing each year, and those over age 65 are increasing in number and as a percentage of our population. The population of Americans over age 65 has increased from 12.5 percent (out of a total population of 300 million) in 2000, to an estimated 16.3 percent (out of a total population estimated at 315 million) in 2020, and to 20.4 percent (out of what is expected to be more than a total population of 340 million) in 2040.

We have all witnessed blue-collar consumers buying more elaborate funerals than white-collar consumers. Now you understand why.

4. Peer Pressure

Peer pressure influences behavior. That was my excuse when I cut seventh grade, and it still affects my behavior today. Often, peer pressure causes behavior to conform. The peers will ostracize the outlying behavior. This caused cremation to be a choice of such a small number for more than 125 years in this country. However, now the peers are changing their behavior, and it is due to those bullies we call baby boomers!

Baby boomers are reinventing life and death in the same way they changed society in the 1960s and 1970s. Boomers and the peers they are influencing are not adhering to organized religion’s thoughts. If a priest says that you can only have one eulogist, then boomers are telling the priest to stay home. The use of celebrants to marry someone and to preside at a convocation due to death is growing in huge numbers.

It used to be:

- Only celebrities had video memorials.
- All funerals were led by clergy.
- Funerals ended at a cemetery.
- Food was banned from funeral homes.
- Only guys in the Navy and convicts had tattoos.

Boomers are scattering their cremated remains everywhere. Those that do not scatter them may bring them home to bury. Others will add pictures and make a glass-front niche the final resting place. We think that boomers who choose cremations are looking for cheap solutions, but they are looking for creative solutions. Boomers are the ones telling you to eat dessert first because life is uncertain.

5. Licensure of Funeral Directors

I dare say that funeral directors are part of the problem as well. Imagine I take a survey of a thousand 40-year-olds about their acceptance of cremation practices. What percentage do you think are pro-cremation?

Now, give me a thousand 40-year-old licensed funeral directors. If I ask this group if they are pro-cremation, is that amount going to be higher or lower than the general population? I suspect it will be lower than the general population. That is the problem.

We are doing everything to hold onto a profession that does not exist any longer. In 23 of 50 states you need to have a license to embalm in order to make a funeral arrangement. Would it surprise you to learn that more than two-thirds of those 23 states have a cremation rate that is nearly 50 percent or more? Why should I have a license to embalm when embalming is probably not going to be used in that event? I am not castigating embalmers. I am saying that the skills and personality profile that generally make a person a skilled embalmer are not the same as the skills needed to successfully plan a social event.

Recently, I was interviewed by a national magazine on the concept that there is segregation in funeral homes. I disagreed with the reporter. I said that families choose a funeral home because they perceive the funeral home to know their customs and traditions. If anything, families are prejudiced – not funeral homes. This is a problem with cremation. Cremation consumers want to find someone that is not going to judge them or think less of them for their decision. They want someone to show the community that they are pro-cremation, not merely tolerant or, at best, accommodating.

We must rethink this business. With almost 79 percent of all deaths occurring after someone reaches age 65, we are not in the crying business. We are in the business of bringing people together. Let us bring them together without judging and provide for all consumers, regardless of their decision on burial or cremation. The recompense will be yours to reap if you can do this. •