

Viewpoint

By Daniel M. Isard

A Modest Proposal the evolution of our profession

TOPIC

Over the course of the past three decades I have written hundreds of articles for this profession. This will be the one most subject to ridicule and disdain from this profession. I will tell you that reading this article is going to upset many of you. I am not going to apologize for this modest proposal. Like most change, you may not like it, but let me be the first to raise this concept.

In case you were not an English literature major, the title of this article was intentionally chosen. In 1729 Jonathan Swift, the author of “Gulliver’s Travels,” wrote a satirical essay of the same name I have chosen. It was during the time of the Irish potato famine. Swift’s modest proposal was that the Irish eat their children. While the concept is abhorrent, it was dark humor. I am not proposing funeral directors eat their young, but I am going to present a most shocking proposal that could be utilized in marketing cremation services. While Swift used his proposal to benefit sarcasm, I am using mine to promote capitalism.

I want the reader to know that I understand the personal calling of an individual to want to be a funeral director, and I don’t want to reduce the standing of credibility and integrity of this profession. I believe

that funeral directors and funeral businesses must evolve to serve the needs of the community to provide for their dead in the ways that are important to their belief systems. I do not believe that funeral homes should dictate to consumers about how or what to do but rather encourage creativity to meet the survivor’s goals. The needs of the deceased are relatively easy to provide for. With that in mind, let me state my point.

In this essay I am going to give examples of matters by showing prices. Please accept that I am using general numbers, and any prices I use on funeral services are not an effort to fix prices but merely used as an example.

I had an epiphany that caused this article to come about. I flew into Tampa International Airport to attend a conference where I was

speaking. The sponsor asked that I use Super Shuttle to get to the site. If you don’t know, Super Shuttle is a communal cab service. It is value oriented, and there are some inconveniences for the price savings. I was sharing a van with others who at that moment wanted to go from the airport to hotels in the same area I was going. In return for my willingness to wait about 10 minutes for others to queue up, as well as the willingness to share the vehicle and make some stops for others, Super Shuttle would charge me about 33 percent of what a private cab would charge.

I had choices when I arrived at Tampa International Airport. I could get a private Town Car for about \$125, use a private cab for \$75 or share a cab via this Super Shuttle for \$25. In marketing parlance these were options given to me. Based upon my choice I could have “good” (Super Shuttle), “better” (private cab) or “best” (private Town Car) options. Like any marketing stair step, the price inflated as you went along. For the willingness to have the journey take one hour instead of 30 minutes, the option of being in a multiperson vehicle rather than a



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private cab, and the difference of an abused van rather than a luxury vehicle, I saved about \$100. How does this apply to funeral service? It applies to a proposal that this profession should consider in the next phase of cremation service offerings.

The Epiphany

My epiphany was not the choice of vehicle, but it was part of it. While in the Tampa area, I was in a van with six other people and during the ride we told each other what we did to make the time pass. I of course said I was a consultant to the funeral profession. Suddenly I had five other people, all professionals traveling on business, start to tell me they are going to be cremated. When we passed a billboard that said “Complete Cremation \$495,” everyone laughed at the coincidence. One person in row three asked me, “Why in the Tampa area can a cremation be anywhere from \$3,000 on the high end to \$495 on the cheap end?” I tried to explain it was much like a cab ride. You could spend \$125 to get to your hotel with a luxury vehicle and driver or \$25 for a common vehicle with a communal driver. One wise guy sitting in the middle of the three people in row four said, “So, a private cremation is more than a communal cremation?” Before the end of the laughter I had my laptop out and started writing. This person gave me my modest proposal.

If you study the math of Super Shuttle it is cheaper and more profitable than running a private Town Car. Six people at \$25 apiece equal the same revenue, but you are using a \$30,000 converted panel van instead of a \$60,000 Town Car. The driver is going to make six tips of about \$5 each, as opposed to the Town Car driver who gets about \$20 for his or her efforts. The Super Shuttle business model makes more money than the Town Car or Yellow Cab business model.

I have told my family that when I

die I want to be buried. I am not a cremation consumer. I have heard people talk about the reasons they would choose cremation. I have heard arguments of religious leaders accepting, endorsing or condemning cremation. In fact I was traveling across the country to give a 90-minute discussion on the concept of cremation marketing and pricing. Suddenly, due to the guy in row four I have reached the conclusion that there needs to be a modest proposal to offer a new form of cremation. I am not talking about alkaline hydrolysis.

First of all, it will be interesting to live long enough to see what happens with alkaline hydrolysis. I find it interesting that this profession still cannot price cremation effectively and now we have a machine that costs 400 percent more than a retort and we are offering the service for about the same price as a cremation. Does this make sense? It is like letting me rent a Ferrari for the same price as a Ford Fusion. Via alkaline hydrolysis, we are investing more money and using more manpower but we are offering it for the same price. Nope, I am not impressed with that business model. However, alkaline hydrolysis is not my modest proposal.

My modest proposal is this: This profession should offer a newer, cheaper service by allowing for a “Super Shuttle” cremation – two bodies cremated at the same time in the same retort chamber. This is a communal cremation. I know that we can create in most retorts a dividing point in brick or other physical divide to cremate two bodies at one time. You can of course offer this at a reduced price. If it is \$495 for a private low-end cremation in the Tampa market, it could be \$300 or thereabouts to offer a communal cremation. Do you think that some consumers would want this?

I am proposing this profession, its leaders and executive directors work to change the laws of their states to offer consumers the chance to have

communal cremations. Why not? Is it because we are all suddenly accepting the Gladstone quote as our personal mantra? Gladstone, you might remember, said, “Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.” So, if you are having a communal cremation, how does that violate this quote?

It cannot be abhorrent due to the chance of incidental commingling of cremated remains. There is already incidental commingling of cremated remains when you do the cremations one at a time.

The companies that will definitely dismiss this idea are both manufacturers and many operators. To the manufacturers, you can’t dismiss the idea because it is bad for your business of selling new retorts. To the operators, many people of this profession dismissed cremation as a consumer choice for years (and many privately still do) but that does not suddenly make this proposal unsavory.

Some consumers don’t care if their loved one is cremated communally and to them, they should be given the option of doing so. They would save money and the operators would make more money. Who would lose?

Frankly, I have seen value-oriented cremation businesses. Some are very well run, and some are abominable. Some cater to price, but have no profit. The typical funeral home that doesn’t have its own retort makes decisions on what retort to use, in some cases, based upon price. So, why shouldn’t consumers? The problem is that some poor business people just throw out a number and have no idea what their overhead is. Therefore they have to cut corners. As one said to the judge, “I am not a bad person, just a bad businessman.” I think the solution is communal, just like the cabs. •