

Memorialization

By Daniel M. Isard

Remembering Life

The funeral and cemetery profession has survived somehow, often in spite of itself. I think that memorialization is a perfect example of this fact. Allow me to point out that both the funeral and cemetery sides of our profession have not provided the long-term service that memorialization needs, to the detriment of the emergent services.

Can we establish a time period that the funeral home maintains a vested interest in the relationship it has with the consumer? I think there is no doubt that the three- or four-day period from the time of death until the time of interment or cremation is a given. I have long thought that this period is too short as we serve the family when dad dies but then do nothing for the next 10 years, waiting patiently to serve them again when mom dies.

Aftercare is the service that should fill this void. However, the typical funeral home still refers to the phrase “my families,” meaning that they expect to have those families call upon them when any death occurs due to the heritage relationship the firm has in place. So, we can sum this thought up by agreeing the period is at least three to four days, and if you employ aftercare the period goes to 10 years. I would say that an effective form of memorialization takes that relationship well beyond the 10th year.

While cemeterians are nodding their heads in disdain upon reading the above, you are no different. You sell the interment right at some point, either in advance or at need, and then wait patiently for the next interment within the executed sales contract. Of course, during this time of waiting your staff serves that family – except

that the staff are not the ones wearing ties and jackets but rather those wearing steel-toed shoes and uniforms. Our modern-day cemeteries have adopted the “memorial park” visage, meaning no upright markers. We went to the memorial park concept for many reasons but among them is the ability to maintain the area in a more efficient and less expensive fashion. So, to save money we have done away with the upright marker and the limited creativity that this token afforded, which is the ability to make someone’s memory be visual and special. My brothers and sisters of the cemetery have found ways to stop providing active service to the surviving family.

Each of the two components of this profession assumes that the sale of the marker is the required memorial that will pacify the family of the deceased. Today’s markers are for the most part little enhanced from those carvings of the Greeks or Egyptians of 2,500 years ago. Those markers then and these markers now are the only way this profession knows to provide the memorial – and that is a shame with all the tools that we have today.

Death-Care Mantra

I must attempt to introduce a concept about life and death to a profession that serves 2.5 million families a year. It is so obvious to me

and others that I am surprised that this great and noble profession has not grasped it and made it their mantra. The

mantra of this profession, for both the unified chant of funeral directors and cemeterians should be: “Human beings are not as concerned with how long they live but how long the memory of their life will live.”

Why else do we name charities after ourselves or create them in the name of our loved ones? How many college and high school stadiums and buildings are named after the benefactors? We name sections of highways after those that died performing heroic acts. These memorials honor the name. Alfred Nobel, the inventor of nitroglycerine, was said to fear that he was going to be remembered for creating an instrument of war. This concerned him so that he created prizes for humanitarian acts of research and peace. His name has lived on for more than a century since his death and will most likely live on for at least another century.

For the mere mortal, the best this profession can offer for the perpetual memorial is to carve 10 words on a rock or inscribe a few words in bronze? No, I beseech you to learn to do better. If in fact this is the ultimate memorial, which can cost as much as a casket (or more), then there is no wonder why people are finding new ways to memorialize and save the money on a funeral or casketed interment. We see people creating roadside memorials of an informal

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fashion by placing crosses and flowers by the roadway. We see some paying the road association for the “sponsorship” or portions of highways for temporary periods. We see people dedicating social network pages to post pictures and creating online memorials for free. These methods are done without the need of a funeral home or cemetery.

A funeral plan is not consistent but it is typically:

- 1) Decides on the type of service and disposition
- 2) Chooses the casket
- 3) Chooses the vault
- 4) Chooses the place of interment
- 5) Chooses the marker

Maybe cemeterians move the place of interment to the top of the list, but I would be so bold to assert that the choice of marker is the last decision a person makes for themselves via prearrangement or for another via at need. Yet, the service is a period of a few hours. The casket is used indefinitely but is only visible for a limited time. The vault is rarely seen by most funeral attendees. The marker may be seen by the family for generations, yet it is the last decision. Typically, when the marker is chosen it is done when the financial resources of the survivors are at their end, so we encourage people to pick the marker that they can afford. Then we are surprised when families balk at the funeral. Of course they balk at a funeral, because we have done such a limited service to them to memorialize their deceased loved one.

Life Awareness

There was a 20-year period where we saw many young deaths due to AIDS. One way we would see these stricken souls exert themselves knowing they were going to die was to plan their funerals. These people often would build their own

memorials, sometimes alone and sometimes in a community fashion. We would all get to see the AIDS quilts that were making their rounds not only as an awareness of the disease but more an awareness of the lives of the contributors.

These young men and women planned their memorials because they wanted to be remembered. Many of them died before their best contributions could be counted into productivity. They wanted to make certain their story was recorded and remembered.

We have seen some celebrities who knew they were dying so they recorded public service announcements to be aired after their death. They wanted to be remembered for more than their acting or singing. They wanted to positively influence society by being an educator.

How many people die and don't want a public funeral, maybe just a direct interment? Whatever that number is in 2010, we can all be assured that number will be larger in 2020! How many people tell you, “Oh, I just want to be cremated,” dismissing the purpose of a community gathering to collectively mourn a person's passing? We all know that cremation is rising, and direct cremation is increasing as well. What many of these people are saying is that they have given up and don't expect they are going to be remembered long term. We can correct that by focusing on productive and meaningful memorialization.

The message I want to impart is not about guilt and disrespect. I want you to take away from this article a new vision. The preneed and at-need arranging party can and should focus upon the memorial first. I strongly believe that if we focus on helping people create their memorial first, the funeral and the interment will be assured.

Using Technology

We have the technology to preserve the voice, image and stories of people before they die. We can allow generations yet unborn to hear the words, voice and image of generations long since passed, if we elect to preserve them. We are now agog with the use of video memorials, but why are we not preserving these in more ways than we are? I see many funeral homes using the video memorial and then burning them onto DVDs and giving them to families. One client I asked uploads them to a computer and places the computer in the funeral home's lobby. This allows families that come for a visitation to view these memorials. My client called me complaining that this was a terrible thing to do because too many people want to use it! I told him to set up a second computer a short distance away. Between you and me, I still think he thinks this was a dumb idea. If he is reading this, he should call me to hear me memorialize my apology.

Cemeteries are abdicating the video memorial to the funeral home. There are just as many ways for cemeteries to use these via on-site kiosks and online. The cemetery should see their calling as a portal for memorialization and not just as the steward for the body or cremated remains. We tend to think that only celebrities or public officials can be memorialized, but we all have a great story within us.

Let us not convene meetings to talk about how to sell better caskets or larger tombstones. Let us come together as a joint profession to talk about the creative technology that we can employ to encourage families to work to preserve the memories of their loved ones, which will produce more elaborate funeral gatherings and preserve our relationship with future consumers. It is not too late. ❖