



# When Traditional Isn't the Tradition Anymore

BY DANIEL M. ISARD

Never in my 35 years in this profession have I shied away from a fight, and it'll be no different when addressing the subject matter here.

I was recently in Singapore, and upon our arrival, there were Christmas trees, Christmas music and Christmas decorations everywhere. That may not seem unusual to us, but it seems to make little sense in a country that is 42.5% Buddhist, 14.9% Muslim, 8.5% Taoist, 4% Hindu, 14.8% atheist and only 14.6% Christian or Catholic. For these 5.7 million people, Christmas is a nontraditional holiday (not a holy day). And while this casual observation by a nation of nonbelievers must be disconcerting to people who believe Christmas is one of the two holiest days of the year, the Singaporeans have simply taken the traditional from the tradi-

tion. For them, decorating for Christmas is something to do to light up their businesses and common areas.

As the profession deals with changes in funeral service, we must either embrace those changes or fight them. We cannot continue to accept the passive-aggressive attitude we have had. We cannot hold on forever to the traditions of this business.

Many years ago, I met with a former NFDA president, who was 72 at the time. In the first five minutes, he declared, "I embalmed my first body when I was 15 years old!" Doing the math quickly, I replied, "You must have seen many changes in this business over the past 57 years!" He replied, "Yep, and I've been against all of them!"

My questions in response were, "Why are you against these changes? What were these changes challenging?" And suddenly, we had something to unite over since at the root of these changes, the challenge was profit. I knew something about profit, so I knew we had to help his firm find the profit in the nontraditional application of his professional abilities.

It's natural for this to occur, and I always explain the math of this change in my seminars. Over about a 120-year period, we have seen a change in the death age of Americans. In 1900, 25% of deaths were people under 25. They were children whose lives would never be actualized. They left behind parents and sometimes children and grandparents. During that same period, 65% of all deaths were people 25 to 65, those in their working years. They died during their prime and left behind children and young spouses. Only about 10% of all people who died in 1900 were older than 65.

Now consider the present, in which 80% of all deaths occur after age 65. These are people who have lived a complete life. We, as one profession, don't even call these funerals so much anymore. We call them services of remembrance or celebrations of life.

For thousands of years, people who have done the job you do all had one thing in common – they got the dead to the afterlife. In modern-day parlance, we say, "A good funeral gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be." The difference, of course, is the change from a 100% focus on the deceased to now a 50% focus on the living/survivors.

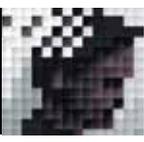
Today, the profession is at the forefront of many challenges that require decisions to either adapt or reject. Keeping your job and ministry alive is key. Using an evolutionary concept, you must focus on adapting, migrating or dying.

When we think about serving those unaffiliated with or who don't believe in a formal religion (in some communities, that's up to 32%), we need to employ people who can write and lead nonsectarian services, what we now call celebrants. You can become one.

I had a client who confessed to me that rather than becoming a celebrant so he could serve families that didn't want a church service, he took it upon himself to provide an oil blessing on the deceased. I thought this reprehensible and explained that if anyone reported the practice, he could be

drummed out of the profession. But he felt his belief in God was more important than the deceased's wishes or a family's decisions. This is a very narrow-minded way of thinking.

Using another example, it's great that most funeral homes have a chapel, but some families don't want a chapel or any place shaped like a church. The funeral home of the future must deal with this issue by having multiple ways of hosting a convocation, or a coming together. Hosting a site where many people can come together and pay their respects to the dead and the survivors is a tradition employed worldwide for thousands of years. However, what this event site looks like – the artwork, the lighting, whether food and beverages are offered – is a critical point.



**Baby boomers don't want to hear, "That's the way your family always did it." And they don't want institutions, such as churches, to limit their options.**

I remember hearing about the funeral of Jessica Mitford, author of *The American Way of Death*. When she died in 1996, it was told that her funeral cost almost \$10,000! She was supposed to have spent the money for her cremation service, but the bulk was alleged to have been spent on the cruise and luncheon that provided for her ashes to be disposed of at sea. Seems she wasn't so much against the funeral; I think she was against the body prep that was so common in the 1960s, when she wrote her infamous tell-all.

The funeral director of tomorrow must bifurcate the needs of getting the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be. In the case of a casketed body, there are limited places where a convocation can be held because there is a very heavy and awkward item to move safely.

But I challenge you to think of 25 places within 25 miles of your funeral home where a cremation service could take place. Moving an urn is easy. The convocation can take place at an indoor or outdoor site, and there are many different options, including hotel meeting rooms, where top-quality food can be served. These nontraditional venues will be the start of a new tradition unless you can out-hustle them. Families come to you first, so your business and your space must be as easy to work with as these public facilities.

We all heard many reasons for why arrangements had to be handled in the funeral home, but all boiled down to the comfort of the funeral director and the firm's showroom. Today, any firm can present its entire showroom display on a laptop, making funeral directors available to go to the client's home, if the family will be more comfortable there.

While we're at it, could a funeral take place in a home? Today, remembering our redefined "funeral," perhaps funeral professionals should be more focused on getting the living where they need to be. The convocation is now the important part of the funeral. The survivors must feel they received value for their time and money spent.

Even chat rooms are now dispensing advice to mourners and those contemplating making arrangements via the col-

loquial death cafe. Consumers must understand, however, that these are people not known to the consumer who's asking the questions, and the respondent's qualifications are either unknown or, if stated, unconfirmed. It's all so anonymous. Yet here you are, an integral part of the community; you must teach families about all the integrated critical decisions that go into planning a funeral.

Funeral service used to be a male bastion, but I have often said, "Men don't think logically. If they did, we would be riding horses sidesaddle!" In general, women make much better arrangers than do men. Women tend to listen better, ask probing questions, empathize and can reach out and touch a person (either gender) without making them feel awkward.

I have analyzed in more than 500 funeral homes that have staff of both genders and have found that the average revenue per call is usually higher from female staff than male staff. I've also found that consumers recall more female funeral directors by name 30 days after the funeral. While it might not be fair, it is a blessing that today almost 30% of all people graduating and passing the National Board Exam are women. The pink collar is going to be a great blessing to the future success of this business.

These challenges are being brought about because almost 90% of calls today are baby boomers, a demographic group that is different from any group in our society to date. They have shown that the key to serving them is personalization. They don't want to hear, "That's the way your family always did this." They don't want institutions, such as churches, to limit their options. These people fought the traditions of previous generations. They took over college campuses, brought down a president and rebelled against the largest institutions. The men burned their draft cards and the women burned their bras, so is it any surprise that when reinventing the idea of how to handle death they are burning their bodies?

What are you going to take away after having spent the time to read this article? Maybe out with the old and in with the new? Maybe we need a new tradition? Maybe we need a new definition of what you do for a living? Maybe a new scorecard to judge the efficacy of your ministry?

Ideally, we must stand up for the needs of mourners. Do you want to be the funeral home hanging on to the ways of the past or the firm promoting the ways of the future? ☰

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