

“DEATH BECOMES THEM”

A FUNERAL HOME

ETHNOGRAPHY

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By

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Abstract:

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Religious Studies, Anthropology and Sociology, this dissertation poses the question: How is religious meaning constructed in the face of death in contemporary North America, given that commercial establishments, non-denominational funeral chapels, have become the primary context for the performance of death rituals dealing with death, the dead and the bereaved?

The dissertation is based on an extended period of ethnographic research at the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas, Ontario, a corporately owned non-denominational funeral home which serves a very diverse, but predominantly urban religious population. I concentrate on the funeral professionals as well as clergy and the bereaved in their contribution to the cultural construction and social organization of death in contemporary North America.

While there is an extensive body of social science literature on death and funerary practices in non-Western contexts, there is very little systematic academic research on death and funeral practices in contemporary North America, in particular, in Canadian settings. My dissertation furthers the discussion started in studies by Emke (2001) and Small (1997) which focus on funeral practices in Newfoundland as well as studies by Bradbury (1999), Davies (2002), Howarth (1996) and Walter (1990, 1994, 1996, 1998) elsewhere in the Anglophone West by focusing on funeral practises in an urban Canadian setting.

This dissertation demonstrates that funeral directors perform a complicated role as mediators and ritual specialists balancing multiple domains of spirituality, emotion, personal taste, institutionalized religion, ethnicity and commerce. Furthermore, I argue that funeral directors mediate between the living and the dead, between life and death, and between this world and the afterlife, as it is conceived of by their clients.

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## **Section I - Setting the Scene**

### **Chapter One**

#### **Introduction**

Contemporary Western society has frequently been charged with denying death, attempting to isolate it from the community by shunning its sight, smells and finality. We struggle to avoid the ugliness of disease and old age, preferring to surround ourselves with the ideals of youth and vitality. Whether mankind has ever in previous eras accepted death and managed to “tame” it as historian Philippe Ariès suggests is a matter of great discussion (Hockey 1996, Huntington and Metcalf 1991, Sudnow 1967, Walter 1995). Whether death is accepted or denied, what is certain is that death as a part of the life cycle has always caused human communities to pause, give thought and find ways to repair the loss of one of their members (Durkheim 1912, Malinowski 1948, Freud 1958). Much anthropological attention has been devoted to the study of death and funeral rituals cross culturally as well as historically. Key scholarly literature has focused on funeral ritual and the ritual experts who are caretakers of the dead in non-Western societies spanning a wide range of cultures (Bloch and Parry 1982, Huntington and Metcalf 1991). An even greater volume of work has been contributed by thanatologists such as Kübler-Ross (1969), who work with the dying, and grief therapists such as Lynne Anne Despelder (2000), who work with the bereaved. With a few notable exceptions (Bradbury 1999,

Howarth 1996, Walter 1995) there has been much less scholarly attention paid to funeral ritual and funerary specialists in anglophone Western society. Almost no literature exists concerning the history of the funeral industry, funeral ritual or how meaning is constructed in the face of death in urban Canadian settings. My research focuses on the role of funeral service professionals and their contributions to the cultural construction and social organization of death in contemporary North America in their relationship with the clergy and bereaved.

## **Evolution of the Funeral Industry in Canada**

Our views about death are influenced by our social group membership, religious affiliation, the health care system, the legal system and most recently, the funeral industry. In order to understand the funeral industry today, it is essential that we look back at how it has evolved. Over time, funeral rituals have changed as a result of social and cultural changes. Many of these changes have impacted upon what has become the funeral industry.

The death rate among early Canadian settlers from malnutrition and disease was very high. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, life expectancy was low and the death rate high particularly among children, post-partum women and male traders (Northcott and Wilson 2001:14-30). Death, which had been familiar and common in the early periods of colonization, became unfamiliar, hidden and expected only in old age as urban centers developed and health care improved in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In contemporary times, the

dying process has a much longer trajectory, and death typically results from old age or chronic health problems (Northcott 2001:53).

Early funerals in the colonies which became known as Canada were simple affairs in which the body of the deceased was lowered into the grave, attended often only by family members. In the colonies death began to take on a new meaning as Christian beliefs were introduced to a primarily native population by church missionaries. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, more extensive social and religious ceremonies became associated with funerals as the number of European immigrants increased, bringing with them their cultural values about life and death (Northcott 2001:24)<sup>1</sup>. The death of a member of the community caused a rent in the social fabric of family as well as the larger social group which was forced to compensate socially and economically for the loss. Community members, often including the midwife, would wash, dress and prepare the body for burial. The local cabinet maker would build the coffin. The body was often laid out for several days in the family home where it was customary for the bereaved to keep a vigil over the body until the time of the burial. The local priest or minister might come to the house to offer prayers for the deceased. Funeral services began in the church and were followed by the committal of the body in the grave which was often located in the adjacent church yard. Following the burial, the bereaved and neighbors returned to the house of the deceased where food and drink were shared in an air of festivity (Northcott 2001:24).

Funeral undertaking as we know it today came into existence in North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that time various trades people were involved, providing

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of the American funeral industry, see Habenstein 1960, Laderman 1999, 2002

material goods such as the casket for the funeral. Initially bodies were embalmed at home, most often in the bathtub, with the family assisting in the process. It was common for cabinet makers to expand their businesses to include other services related to the funeral such as providing carriages and the funeral hearse for rent as well as personal services at the graveside (Laderman 2003, Northcott 2001). As embalming became more sophisticated and complex, specialized facilities with new technology developed where the corpse could be prepared for viewing and burial. Over time, the undertaker began to emerge as the one person in the community who was solely involved with the disposal of the dead. Embalming in Canada grew at a much slower pace than in the United States where it became popular during the Civil War as a means of returning dead soldiers to their loved ones and following the death of President Lincoln when his embalmed body toured by train from Washington, D.C to his hometown of Springfield, Illinois for burial (Huntington and Metcalf 1991, Laderman 2003).

As people began their migration from farms to cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century they became distanced from the agrarian ways of life and death and with this distance their willingness to participate in the preparation of a corpse for burial diminished. Instead, families called the undertaker to embalm, wash and dress the body. The growing acceptance of embalming and increasingly sophisticated techniques contributed to the ascendancy of the undertaker as the professional specialist in the care and handling of the dead (Laderman 2003, Northcott 2001).

The funeral industry has undergone rapid change since its inception at the turn of the twentieth century. Throughout North America funeral directors have emerged as

professionals in response to the growing need of the community for specialists who could interact compassionately with the bereaved and tend to the requirements of dealing with the dead (Habenstein 1977, Laderman 1999, 2003). Ariès suggests that funeral directors stepped into the role held previously by the clergy and community members such as midwives who presided over both the entrance and exit from the world of the living (1981, Verdier 1976). Upon closer examination, we shall see that the contemporary image of the funeral director remains consistent with this historical role (Moller 1994:84).

Despite the professional status of funeral directors and their provision of caring and compassionate services to the public, they are typically regarded in a very different manner than other “helping” professionals such as doctors or the police. Frequently when people think about funeral directors, the negative associations of working with and around the dead take precedence over the services rendered for the living. Working with the dead carries a social stigma and the work of the funeral director is often labeled as distasteful or “dirty work” (Goffman 1963). Nonetheless, it is essential work for which most people are happy to engage someone else to perform on their behalf. According to sociologist Tony Walter, the preparation of the body and funeral ritual is an “affirmation of human dignity” and a “statement of the humanity of the one who has died” (Walter 1994:180).

In contemporary Canada, the funeral home is the socially constructed setting where the living and the dead can meet. It is the place where death cannot be denied although it can be transformed or even hidden. Carefully designed by funeral professionals to meet the needs of the bereaved, the funeral home replaces the family

parlor where in earlier historical periods, the dead were laid out for the wake prior to the funeral and burial.

## **The Modern Funeral**

Funerals provide a legal and culturally sanctioned way of disposing of the dead while at the same time reinforcing systems of support for the bereaved relatives (Habenstein 1962, Moller 1996, Walter 1996). Funerals reflect the social life of a specific time, place and culture. Whereas once almost all North American funerals concluded with the burial of the casket, today many people choose cremation as an alternative<sup>2</sup> ( see Appendix III). Cremation in the Western world is a secular and hidden method of disposing of the corpse which may occur either before or after the funeral ritual has taken place. Cremation allows the bereaved increased flexibility in the disposal of the body, as the ashes may be transported to any location, at any time which is convenient for the bereaved. In 2005, the Green Burial Council was formed in the United States to assist North American funeral homes in providing new techniques for preparing and presenting the body without formaldehyde based embalming fluids. The Green Burial Council also provides information about cemeteries which can accommodate “green consumers” (American Funeral Director 2008:20). Resomation, a process which

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<sup>2</sup> The number of deaths resulting in cremation varies widely across Canada. According to statistics provided by CANA, in 2005, British Columbia recorded 79%, in contrast to Ontario which recorded 47% and New Brunswick , 35% . Furthermore, since 1990, there has been a steady increase from 32.5% to 56% in 2004. For information on cremation rates in the United States, Canada and Great Britain see [www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org).



involves dissolving the body in a hot pressurized steel chamber before the remaining bones are pulverized, is considered to be an even more environmentally friendly method of corpse disposal than cremation while offering the same conveniences as cremation (American Funeral Director 2008:44).

In an increasingly secular society which places minimal emphasis on the fate of the soul, the role of the clergy in death rites appears to have become increasingly marginalized. During funeral services, the clergy articulate views which are in keeping with contemporary bereavement literature by focusing on the bereaved rather than the soul of the deceased (Bradbury 1999, Hockey 1993, Northcott 2001). The new funeral draws upon a wide variety of scripts both religious and secular, offering alternative prayers, music, readings and messages to those provided by official religious institutions.

While the role of the funeral director has not changed greatly with time, the same cannot be said about funerals and the role of the clergy. The modern funeral has evolved from the simple and solemn graveside committal of the body in a churchyard grave to a much more complex and lavish ritual performance held more often in the funeral home chapel than in a church. The care of the body and the organization of contemporary funeral proceedings have shifted from community or family members to funeral professionals, often strangers who are responsible for the care of the dead and the direction of the proceedings. Today, the bereaved must make numerous decisions which include whether to embalm, where to hold the funeral, how and when to dispose of the corpse as well as who will act as pallbearers and whether to place an obituary notice in the newspaper.

The importance of death as an event which is recognized by the community has decreased and the funeral over time has come to assume a more secular meaning. With few exceptions, the solemnity of the traditional funeral has disappeared and instead the visitation and the funeral have assumed the character of a less formal social event. The modern funeral reflects Canadian culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which community solidarity has been replaced by individualism and professional specialization and in which religious meaning has been challenged by secularism. Despite geographic distances and the emphasis on the self, however, funeral ritual continues to be our response to death. The funeral or memorial service continues to bring individuals together and allows them to find support and comfort in the “collective strength” of their community (Durkheim 1965:423).

No longer a ritual secured in a stable pattern of tradition and community, the modern funeral remains a response to death upon which many mourners continue to rely as means of taming the reality of death. The visitation and the funeral or memorial service provides the bereaved with a social framework which allows individual expression of emotion as well as the construction of individually derived meanings (Moller 1996:92). In this way, funeral rituals work as a coping mechanism which may help re-establish social order for the bereaved. Furthermore, Pine suggests that funeral expenditure can be considered a ritualistic way to express grief over the loss of a loved one, remarking that “the act of buying, receiving and paying for funerals represents a secular and economic ritual of payment formerly performed by more religious customs and ceremonies”(Pine 1966:432).

## **Breaking In and Staying In the Field**

My dissertation is based on an extended period of ethnographic research at the Marlatt Funeral Home and Cremation Center in Dundas, Ontario and shorter periods of fieldwork at affiliated funeral homes. Research in this field requires a familiarity with the funeral home and with activities that initially appear to be extra-ordinary (Becker and Green 1969).

The funeral industry deals with sensitive and very personal matters which affect the living and the dead. It is an industry which has, from time to time, been assailed by criticism from journalists and the general public as well as the occasional “insider”. The result is that the industry has become suspicious of allowing “outsiders” such as ethnographers to come “inside” to observe and record industry activities.

Breaking into the funeral industry was much more difficult than I had expected. I had hoped that my background as a member of the *chaverah kaddisha* which facilitates Jewish funerals would enable me to gain access to non-denominational funeral homes as a participant observer. The funeral homes that I chose to investigate were full service funeral homes where the body is embalmed and prepared on site according to the arrangements made by either the deceased or their family. Not all the funeral homes that I approached with a view to fieldwork were corporately owned establishments. There remain a small number of independent funeral homes in the Hamilton region. The number of calls per year varied among the funeral homes that I approached. Some of the independent funeral homes were busier than the corporately owned homes. Ultimately, I based my criteria on the differences between community and cosmopolitan funeral homes

as outlined by Vanderlyne Pine. Community funeral homes are those with the following criteria: they serve a localized area or specific community, follow a personal service model of funeral director-client relations and receive approximately 100-135 calls per year. Directors at community funeral homes share the counseling of families and funeral home maintenance. They are not specialized in one area but are competent in all areas of funeral planning and execution. Moreover, licensed directors at this type of establishment work together on most funerals. Their participation in the local community is considered necessary and the funeral home is considered as a valuable asset to the community. Finally, staff share the belief that personal contact with clients is important and that reputation is a funeral home's most important asset (Pine 1975: 60). The disadvantage of doing fieldwork in a cosmopolitan funeral home, which serves a larger metropolitan area and is a complex organization with a hierarchical division of labor, is that the ethnographer would not be able to follow a single funeral director through the process of making arrangements with a family, continuing through the visitation and funeral, to the committal.

After having met with five managers in various corporate funeral homes and two owners of "family" or independently operated funeral homes, I still had not secured a place to do my fieldwork. It was a very disappointing response from the funeral industry. I began to wonder whether the industry is indeed hiding something from the public as Jessica Mitford's 1963 book had suggested. At the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas, I was surprised to discover a much more positive attitude and some interest in my research proposal. The funeral director I met with initially joked that he might be letting "Jessica

Mitford reincarnated” into his funeral home. For the first time, I was informed that the decision to have an in-house researcher lay not in the hands of the Managing Director but in a corporate office in Toronto. Until approval was given by the corporate office, I was told that I could spend time at the funeral home to observe but not engage in any type of official research. Within a week, the Marlatt Funeral Home had received permission for me to join its staff in the role of participant observer, taking on the work of a funeral director’s assistant, a position for which I would be trained over the first few weeks. Although families would not be aware that I was doing research, the managing Funeral Director suggested that he would inform the clergy of my project as a means of opening other doors.

My time in the field was spent in the role of a funeral director’s assistant, balancing my position as insider and outsider, participant and observer. In this role I was able to be present while families were making arrangements, during embalming, dressing and casketing and at aftercare meetings. As well, I was present during preparations for the funeral service and for the committal at the cemetery or at the crematorium. My research was qualitative in nature and consisted of participant observation fieldwork, casual conversations and formal interviews. Through statistical records for 400 calls at Marlatt’s Funeral Home in Dundas, I tracked variables such as age, gender, and religious affiliation of the deceased; whether or not embalming was performed; whether or not the funeral was pre-arranged or “at need”; the type of funeral service and committal and funeral costs. This data reflects contemporary attitudes toward death and the way in which religious meaning is constructed in the face of death.

## Research Questions

According to historian Philippe Ariès, funeral directors have taken over roles previously performed by the clergy, community members such as midwives who also washed and laid out the deceased and more recently professional grief counselors (Ariès 1981:598; Verdier 1976). I argue that the roles of the funeral director and the clergy are not mutually exclusive but rather that in contemporary Canadian society, these professionals work together for the benefit of the bereaved and the dead.

In addition, I suggest that funeral directors perform a complicated role as mediators and ritual specialists balancing multiple domains of spirituality, emotion, personal taste, institutionalized religion, ethnicity and commerce. According to the Random House Dictionary, the word *mediate* means to “act as an intermediary between parties, reconcile; to bring about agreement or accord, act as an intermediary between parties by compromise, reconciliation, removal of misunderstanding; to occupy an intermediate place or position”<sup>3</sup>. Following this definition, I argue that funeral directors occupy an intermediate position between the living and the dead, between life and death, and between this world and the afterlife as it is conceived of by their clients. Moreover, funeral directors seek to reconcile or resolve these contradictions, like the mediators or mediating structures outlined in Lévi-Strauss’ (1963) structural analysis of myth. My use of the term “mediator” therefore differs from that of Tony Walter who suggests that funeral directors are mediators in the sense of creating a narrative about the deceased, or

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<sup>3</sup> Random House Unabridged Dictionary. 1993. Stuart Berg Flexner (editor). Toronto: Random House Inc.

acting as an intervening agent by which something is expressed or conveyed about the deceased<sup>4</sup>.

Jessica Mitford (1963) maintains that funeral directors are profiteers who exploit the emotionally vulnerable bereaved. Drawing on anecdotal evidence as well as her own investigations, Mitford charges the funeral industry with deception and commercialism. At the same time, she raises questions concerning the psychological, social and religious value of embalming as a part of North American death rituals. Whereas Mitford is highly critical of embalming, Hallam, Hockey and Howarth (1999) adopt a more positive perspective of the practice. Following their lead, I argue that the work of the funeral director re-sacralizes or culturalizes the body of the deceased through the process of embalming, transforming the corpse from something which is decaying and polluted into a guest who has an appropriate place among the living. Paradoxically however, embalming and other funerary practices both “tame” death and yet simultaneously contribute to the “hidden” character of death in North America. Through embalming and casketing, the corpse becomes something other than a decaying body. It is changed into something artificial or man-made which is, at least temporarily, beyond decay. In this way, embalming and the work of the funeral director serve to hide the more graphic physiological facts of death from the bereaved.

Currently, the role of the funeral director has become more delineated and regulated than ever before. In contrast, funeral ritual has become progressively less structured by religious institutions and more open to creative interpretation by the

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Walter. 2005. “Mediator Deathwork” in *Death Studies*, 29: 383-412.

bereaved (Davies 2002, Garces-Foley 2003, Laderman 2003, Walter 1998). Today, funeral ritual must be understood to include both the standard official church liturgies as well as unofficial ritual innovations made by the bereaved. Frequently, people feel they have more opportunity to innovative with funeral ritual if they choose cremation over burial because they are not constrained by time owing to the need to dispose of the body. The choices made by the consumers of funeral services are not as simple as Mitford suggests. Funeral directors are not duping or misleading the bereaved to spend more money. My ethnographic research shows a much more complex picture in which the bereaved have agency. Furthermore, my statistical research indicates that the products and services chosen by grieving relatives for funerals “at need” and those selected for funerals which have been pre-arranged and pre-paid are very similar with respect to degree of elaboration and cost. I argue that funeral directors are not pressuring the bereaved to spend more money on funerary goods and services to assuage their guilty conscience or to express their love for the deceased. Rather I suggest that choices made in funerary consumption are motivated by personal desire to fulfill cultural ideals of what is right and meaningful. Creativity in ritual may be limited by the “comfort factor” or what is familiar to the bereaved, who do not necessarily want something new and different. Funeral directors make suggestions to assist bereaved family members using models they think will work from prior experience. Funeral directors act as mediators between the traditional liturgies of official religious institutions and the popular spirituality of the bereaved which often includes demands for ritual elements such as music and poetry from outside the domain of institutional religion.



My ethnography provides a more nuanced perspective on funeral directors and North American funeral ritual by building on and extending the existing literature (Bradbury (1999) Howarth (1996) and Pine (1975) Walter (1994, 1996, 1998) and by focusing on funeral practices in an urban Canadian setting. I suggest that funeral directors, in contrast to both the overly negative depiction by Mitford and Laderman's somewhat apologetic portrayal, perform a complicated role as mediators. I argue that these ritual specialists negotiate the fields of spirituality, emotion, personal taste, institutionalized religion, ethnicity and commerce. Moreover, funeral directors in contemporary North America also mediate between life and death, the living and the dead, and between this world and the afterlife, as it is understood by their clientele.

## Chapter 2

### Survey of Literature

Death is both a physiological state and a socially constructed event. It is part of a social system of expectations, beliefs, rules and symbols that influence the dying and the bereaved. By removing a person from the social scene, death inevitably entails social readjustment which forces us to construct and develop ways to contain the impact. Death impacts, as Durkheim (1995)[1912] observed, on the individual as well as the community. It affects families and personal relationships and challenges the social solidarity of the group. Early research by Hertz (1960)[1907] postulates that the ideas and practices occasioned by death can be classified under three headings depending on whether they concern the deceased's body, his or her soul, or the bereaved. As a result, a range of tasks from arranging to acknowledge the death to disposing of the body are a part of the rituals of mourning. It is important to distinguish between bereavement, grief and mourning. Bereavement is an objective fact which indicates a change in social status as a result of the death of a person who is a family member or close friend (Kastenbaum 1977:350). Grief is the response to bereavement and can affect many aspects of life. It includes how the bereaved feels, thinks, eats and sleeps. Grief may include a wide range of emotions and emotional responses which vary from one individual to another. The bereaved may suffer problems with attention, concentration and memory. According to thanatologist Robert Kastenbaum, it is the emotional side of grief which causes the most

distress for the bereaved (Kastenbaum 1977: 352). In contrast to bereavement which is a universal response to a loss, mourning is influenced by a society's customs and rituals and may vary from one culture to another (Kastenbaum 1977: 354). The term mourning often refers to the outward expression of grief in rituals such as funerals which are public expressions of grief. According to British sociologist Tony Walter (1990), a funeral has several aspects which must be considered: the physical disposal of the body, as well as social, spiritual, psychological and economic aspects. These key categories outlined by Hertz and Walter have influenced the choice of literature for this survey.

## **Symbolism and the Dead: Death Rituals in Anthropology and Sociology**

Early anthropologists such as Tyler and Frazer held that beliefs about death helped explain the origin and nature of religion. In contrast, Durkheim (1995) viewed religion as providing society with a sense of cohesion. The focus of his research shifted from the individual to the group and how individuals become integrated into community life. Durkheim's investigation of collectively held beliefs led him to explore how "collective representations" unite individuals and yet allow them to maintain their separate identities within society.

Death is an event which presents challenges concerning existence to the group as well as individuals. Durkheim observes that by rupturing social bonds, death threatens social solidarity and the rituals of mourning serve to reconstitute society. Malinowski (1948:32, 43) argues that we rely upon the community to create rituals which will comfort the bereaved as they struggle to come to terms with death. Some mourning rituals

are intended to integrate the dead into society, while others symbolically keep the dead away and encourage the living to embrace life. In the Western world, since the Reformation it is the latter which we find most predominantly displayed in funerary rituals (Walter 1990:74).

Following Durkheim, Robert Hertz (1960) focuses on the way mortuary rites repair the fabric of a society damaged by death. Death alters the continuity of lineages and leads to social and moral confusion. Hertz observes that death goes beyond the physiological phenomenon to encompass a range of beliefs, emotions and activities. As he notes in many societies, death is not an instantaneous event but rather a long-term process which is considered complete only when the dissolution of the body occurs. According to Hertz, rather than destruction, death can be regarded as a transition in which the old body falls away and is replaced with a new, spiritual body (1960:48). Hertz suggests that by establishing a world of the dead, society is able to recreate itself as an invisible community (1960:79).

In Hertz's analysis, mortuary rituals help people to address problems of social order as well as problems at the personal level. Death is attributed a specific meaning within every culture. The act of mourning by the bereaved is linked to the beliefs the community holds concerning the nature of death. Without these acts, Hertz believes death would ravage not only the deceased but also the entire community (1960:78).

As noted above, Hertz suggests that practices associated with death can be classified according to how they pertain to the deceased's body, soul or the survivors (1960:29). Having isolated this tripartite nature of death, it becomes possible to see a

pattern of transition through which each element passes as well as the interplay between the three elements.

Despite working independently of one another, Hertz and Arnold van Gennep (1960)[1909] both arrive at the conclusion that death rituals allow a passage or transition from one social category to another (Hertz 1960:82, van Gennep 1960:148). van Gennep analyzes ceremonies which accompany life crises in relation to the dynamics of individual and group life. These “rites of passage” in which participants are moved from one social state, to another are characterized by separation, liminality and re-incorporation. Rites of separation are prominent in funeral rituals. At death, the deceased is separated from the community of the living, and remains in a liminal stage before being reborn as an ancestor, spirit or ghost. Funeral and mourning rituals move the deceased and the bereaved into and through a marginal period which transports the deceased to the community of the dead and the bereaved back to the community of the living.

Malinowski also observes that through funerary ritual the bereaved emerge changed (1948:44). During the mourning period, the bereaved and the dead constitute a special category, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead. During the mourning period, social life is suspended for the bereaved. In some instances, this transitional period for the living is the counterpart of the transitional period for the deceased and termination for both transitional phases occurs when the deceased is fully incorporated into the world of the dead (van Gennep 1960:147, Hertz 1960:82).

Huntington and Metcalf (1991) observe that the focus of funerary rituals is the gradual disentanglement of the living and the deceased (1991:72, 84). American

deathways comprise an extensive complex of socially prescribed practices which reflect how we understand and cope with death, grief and bereavement. During the liminal phase, the bereaved individuals and society are reintegrated without the lost member. The most extended and significant rite is the wake, which is social in context and expresses the loss to both individuals and the community. In contemporary North America the funeral has become fused with the wake as it is often held at the same location. In their discussion of American deathways, Huntington and Metcalf note that mourners do what is socially prescribed and seem to have little interest in creating new mourning rituals (1991:193, 200). Even those with no church affiliation frequently continue to demand a full religious service with clergy and congregation (1990:213).

British sociologist Tony Walter (1994), following Geoffrey Gorer (1955, 1965), observes that the social rules of mourning have fallen into decay and that the self rather than tradition has become the authority in the face of death (1994: 88). Nonetheless, coming to terms with death and bereavement continues to be affected by the definitions of others, including friends, work colleagues, counselors and books. In recent times, death has ceased to be perceived as a spiritual passage and has instead become considered a biological process overseen by medical professionals. The new process does not clearly specify the behavior and degree of loss for each family member nor is there any consensus as to what is the right way to mourn (Walter 1994: 159, Gorer 1965:64).

My research demonstrates that both traditional and newly created funeral rituals are rites of passage which allow both the deceased and bereaved to be reincorporated into their respective groups.

## **Social Aspects of Death**

The fears and hopes that people hold concerning death are learned from public symbols such as language and religious and funerary ritual. Every culture develops interpretations of death that are accepted or contested by its social actors. The ways in which a society deals with death reveal a great deal about that society (Field 1997).

In his text, *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) Philippe Ariès observes that cultural constructions of death have developed over time concluding with the modern era which is defined by the invisibility of death. Death has been removed from society by eliminating public ceremonies associated with it and making it a private event (Ariès 1981:575). Ariès believes that society has banished death, relegating it to the private sphere (1981:560). In contrast, sociologist, Clive Seale responds that death has not been denied but rather that it has been hidden away since many people in contemporary Western society experience a social death long before their physical death (1999:54). He observes that in the denial of death thesis there is a limited view of the place of ritual in social life (1998:55).

Death is often categorized in terms of a “good death” or a “bad death” (Walter 1996, Heinz 1999, Bradbury 2004). Mary Bradbury suggests that good deaths are created through discourse which culturally prescribes how we should view death (2004:142). In the modern Western world, the good death shows some control over the arbitrariness of dying. The good death is one which medically curbs the unpredictable and chaotic nature of death (2004:146, Becker 1973, Walter 1995, Heinz 1999). Bloch and Parry (1980)

suggest that denoting a death as “good” or “bad” may simply be a means of giving the bereaved a socially acceptable way of coming to terms with that death.

Ariès suggests that death during the early Middle Ages was “tame”. In this version of the good death, the dying participated in the planning of their death, were surrounded by family and approached death calmly. Tame death was characterized not only by its familiarity but also by its very public nature. The dying, surrounded by family and friends, after having made peace with the world, died in their own bed, at which time prayers for the repose of the soul would commence (1981: 24). Ariès would have us believe that in the past death was a familiar part of life, but as Clive Seale (1999) suggests, while death was familiar, it was likely neither tame nor was the fear of death decreased. Walter suggests that in the past, the scripts for the dying and their family were dictated more by tradition and religion than today (1996:193). Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the death of the individual (except in the case of young children) caused a tear in the fabric of the social group at large. In contrast, today in many instances the disappearance of an individual no longer affects the continuity of the community.

In his article, *Natural Death and the Noble Savage*, Walter argues against Ariès’ belief that death was something which was handled more appropriately in previous eras than in contemporary society (1995:238)<sup>5</sup>. In the past, death often came with little warning, leaving no time for family and friends to gather or for deathbed confessions. Once considered a natural occurrence, death has come to be understood as a failure by

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<sup>5</sup> For additional discussion of this topic, see Floersch and Longhoffer 1997: 243-260.



medicine and technology which must be brought under control or as Seale suggests hidden from view (Walter:1996:590, Floersch and Longhoffer 1997:250, Seale 1998).

The problem of death continues to plague us with questions and influence our conduct during life. How we respond to death and to the bereaved is culturally determined and socially shaped (Walter 1995, 1996, Heinz 1999, Seale 1998, Heilman 2001). In almost every culture the corpse is a symbolic system which must be ritually manipulated to provide a means for survivors to articulate their beliefs about society, life and death (Bradbury 2004). The body is where personhood, social existence and the soul interconnect prior to death. Davies (2002) suggests that the living body is a metaphor for society and can be used to express many aspects of society including boundaries and margins, the church and medical science. In contrast, the corpse has no relation to the living world except as a symbol of the person who has died. Bradbury believes that it is the highly ambiguous state of the corpse which is the key to understanding why the body is a powerful symbolic object in human society. The corpse is ambiguous, human in appearance but not in action (Bradbury 2004:120). As a result of this ambiguity, the corpse has the potential to shock and even horrify onlookers. Many rituals of death and much of the symbolism about the dead is concerned with transferring the danger associated with the corpse, both symbolic and real, to an outside object, which neutralizes it. By representing death as a social exchange, we attempt to give death a sense of meaning despite the pain of loss and grief. Bradbury argues that by manipulating the corpse through embalming, it takes on a new character which allows us to have a semblance of control over the ravages and chaos of death (2004:116, 128).

Hallam, Hockey and Howarth in their text *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity* (1999), suggest that “real death is carefully hidden in our society, transformed into fictionalized images” (1999:136). These images are desired by the people who consume them, the bereaved and their friends. In contemporary Western society, the body is no longer identified as the vehicle for the soul, but as the site of the self. The dead body is the signifier of the loss of self and the loss of individuality. For Hallam, Hockey and Howarth, the body which was sacred in life becomes profane in death (1999:26). If the deceased is to retain any semblance of individuality, the decay of death must be stopped, the body preserved and its human features redeemed. Funeral directors use techniques such as embalming to render the corpse as a source of pollution harmless. Reconstruction reattaches the signs of identity and individuality, transforming the dead body into a meaningful and recognizable being. The authors suggest that this restoration of order needs to be understood at the symbolic level; the work of the funeral director challenges the boundaries between life and death (1999:131). They suggest that through the work of the funeral director, the body of the deceased is transformed from profane to its formerly sacred state. By constructing a visual representation of the deceased, the funeral director is able to prolong the meaningful contact between the deceased and the bereaved in the social arena of the living.

Following Hallam, Hockey and Howarth, I argue throughout this thesis that the work of the funeral director is to re-sacralize the body and extend meaningful contact between the deceased and the bereaved in the social world of the living. I also argue that by recreating social identity in the deceased, and preventing direct encounters with the

physicality of death, that embalming and other funerary practices contribute to the “hidden” character of death in contemporary North America.

How we respond to our dead has changed over time (Ariès 1981, Gorer 1965, Huntington and Metcalf 1991). In the past, people knew what to do when a death occurred because they had an elaborate means of repairing the damage done to the social group (Seale 1999:54). Ariès argues that there has been a decline in mourning practices as well as the dignity of funerals. The dying became hidden in hospitals out of sight, where death was sanitized. Gorer’s (1965) study of British mourning during the 1960s substantiates his claim that mourning rituals have atrophied in modernity. Walter observes that a shift of authority has occurred from religious experts to medical experts who have medicalized death (1996:96). Walter believes that this shift has impacted on how we grieve and respond to our dead, practices which are now directed by experts in the field of death. In Ariès’ opinion, the community feels less and less involved in the death of one of its members because it no longer feels a sense of solidarity or collective life (1981:612). The problem for the bereaved, argues Gorer (1965), is that the disappearance of culturally prescribed mourning practices has left people at a loss rather than giving them more personal freedom. Nonetheless, people continue to draw on a stock of socially shared knowledge which determines the behavior expected following bereavement (Walter1996).

Some evidence indicates that the need for formal funerary ritual after death has decreased in contemporary society because grieving occurs in a variety of ways before death. Today, with the assistance of medicine and technology, it is possible for an

individual to die over a very long period of time. Seale's new model of grief suggests that a place for the dead may be found through the sharing of memories about the deceased. In his model, talk becomes a form of ritual in which a sense of order and continuity are established, leading the bereaved to accept their loss and reorienting them towards life (1998:200). According to Bradbury, we fail to see where our social customs such as sending flowers and making memorial donations as well as our death rituals are flourishing, believing that contemporary practices are empty and without ritual power (1999:198). My research shows that visitations and funerals operate as rituals which help transform the deceased and the bereaved, ultimately reassigning both a new status.

## **Spirituality and Death**

According to Catherine Bell, ritual activity is a part of our lives; it is a way of looking at and organizing the world (1997:267). van Gennep believed that rites should be understood in terms of how they function in their social setting. Rites of passage serve to transfer participants from one social state to another, at life cycle changes. Turner (1969) observes that in many cases ritual serves as a social drama through which the stresses of social life can be expressed and worked through. In Turner's view, rituals help affirm social order and liminality brings about a sense of *communitas* among group members. By bringing individuals together as a collective group, ritual serves to strengthen the bonds of the individual to his or her society.

Geertz (1973) describes religion as a cultural system of symbols that influence people's feelings and motivations. The symbols of religious belief and symbolic activities

of religious ritual, according to Geertz, constitute “a system of values that acts both as a model of the way things are and as a model of how they should be” (Geertz 1973:112, Bell 1997: 66). Ritual helps construct cultural meaning through an ongoing process of adaptation and renewal.

Explanations of death are often ingrained in the social fabric of a culture. Humanity seeks to control death through beliefs and rituals. In *Ritual, Perspective and Dimension*, Catherine Bell (1997) remarks that in American culture, rites of passage such as mortuary rites tend to be less highly organized and routinized than in small communities and subcultures. Ritual, which in some social /historical contexts is a matter of fixed and prescribed activities, has expanded in contemporary North America to become less clear cut, more tentative, experimental and open to individual use and interpretation. Although many people affiliate with religious institutions, they are now unlikely to be concerned, according to Bell, with doctrinal orthodoxy and are more concerned with issues of personal meaning and fulfillment (1997:180). Ritual practices of the group may not speak either to or about the individual.

Bell believes that in today’s pluralistic society, people have more choices about what to believe, how to act and where they should place their energy. This freedom of choice is often associated with the displacement of ritual, the emergence of lay authority over clerical authority, and the privatization of spirituality. Ritual has changed over time and new rituals have replaced traditional ones, thus adapting and remaining relevant to changing communities. According to Bell, ritual renews and creates a sense of community which is necessary to organize, express, define and defuse issues which might

otherwise pose a threat (1997:220). The invention of ritual is not new. Turner (1969) regards creativity as a universal process which allows change to take place in traditional rites as well as empowering people to invent new rites. Bell believes that there is a growing social legitimacy for many types of ritual improvisations which are becoming more visible in public and private rites (1997:225). Many of these new rituals focus on themes such as personal empowerment. Contemporary rites of passage often express themes of transformation and *communitas* among participants, and act as an effective way to confront social issues. Bell envisions a new paradigm according to which ritual acts as a medium of expression that is directed inward and that defines the community in terms of the self (1997: 241). This new paradigm allows for the expression of new ideals which were not possible in older forms of ritual practice. For Bell, religion is a universal and indispensable dimension of social life because it provides a medium through which social life is “shared, experienced, expressed and legitimated” (1997:25). She speculates that religion will continue to be important for purposes of social solidarity but that it will increasingly function in more secular terms (1997: 26).

In recent times institutional religion has undergone a major restructuring. In his text, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow (1988) observes that since the Second World War, religion has become an institution with limitations. The role of the ritual specialist reflects these changes within the broader social environment (1988:160).

One of the most noticeable trends in religion is the declining involvement in religious institutions. In contrast, there has been a sustained level of spirituality which

includes assumptions about life, prayers offered and time spent meditating. Wuthnow (1993) contends there has been a shift from spiritual production to spiritual consumption. Faith is no longer something which people inherit but rather something for which they strive. This new spirituality is reflected in religious liturgy which emphasizes looser social connections and diversity rather than rules and symbolic messages. Christianity in the twenty-first century is concerned with issues of personal identity and faith. As a moral community a church unites individuals in the collective practice of worship. Rituals and beliefs give meaning to those individuals practicing them. The growing sense of individualism in Euro-American society has led to the development of private spirituality instead of community spirituality. This process in turn threatens religion's role in sustaining a sense of community, a community of shared memory.

In his study of religion in Canada, Reginald Bibby (2002) observes that religious roles have become increasingly specialized and relate to matters of meaning, morality and mortality as well as to the performance of rites of passage (2002:9). Religion has become a potpourri in which individuals pick and choose among a variety of beliefs and practices which are reflected in the rituals and symbols of their rites of passage. According to the responses to Bibby's extensive survey, Canadians young and old continue to look to religion for rites of passage. Psychologically, emotionally and culturally people identify with the traditions of their childhood (2002:40). The majority of Canadians will pose the ultimate question about life after death at some point in their lifetime and turn to religion for answers to questions which cannot be directly answered by science (2002:235). More than 70% of Canadians, whether they are religious or not, believe in life after death

(2002:94, 128). Moreover, since 1980, there has been no decrease in the number of people who want funerals carried out for them by a religious group (2002:128). In Bibby's opinion, God has not disappeared from the lives of most Canadians and this is most obvious at life cycle events (2002:162).

Funeral rites reflect important cultural themes and the necessity of affirming life in the face of death. Through ritual, we create a space where we can transmit collective messages of continuity, order and predictability. When rituals work, they provide order and meaning for the moment and transform the actors, preparing them for their new social roles. In the past, religion gave meaning to life by framing death within a much broader picture of eternity and the rhetoric of salvation. Funeral rites were intended to assist the soul of the deceased to reach its destination (Davies 2002, Heinz 1999, Walter 1996). Today, the absence of an overarching religious framework shared by all sectors of society allows for the creation of new individualized rituals and symbolic events. Douglas Davies asserts that death rituals are an adaptive response which reassures people that they can express their grief in a safe and ordered context (2002:3). By affirming social bonds, the rituals of mourning reconstitute society. It is through funerary rituals and beliefs that people attempt to control death. These rituals are concerned with issues of identity and social continuity as much as with the practical issue of the disposal of a body which, in a state of decay, becomes offensive to the living (Durkheim 1912, Bloch and Parry 1980, Walter 1998). Davies (2002) regards mortuary rituals as an adaptive human response in which ritual language plays a crucial role. In his opinion, funerals symbolize society and the values and beliefs of the community. Davies remarks that what a society does with its



dead depends to some extent on beliefs concerning the afterlife as well as attitudes toward death. In contemporary European and North American society, there is a wide range of attitudes, beliefs and opinions which are not grounded in tradition or commitment to collective creeds. The new authority in death and dying, according to Davies, is “the authority of persons who negotiate with one another and are influenced by what they see, hear and read, not the authority of some anonymous individual” (2002: 233).

In *The Last Passage*, Heinz (1999) adopts another stance, arguing that individualism and the loss of the social world has incapacitated us because we have become isolated and without the resources to confront existential issues such as death. We have, he believes, lost our ability to ritualize which is a community activity. In Heinz’s opinion this leads us to repress death because we lack shared communities of meaning which will allow us to embrace it. In contrast, Davies believes that contemporary funeral rites provide a ritual arena for the bereaved to express themselves. Walter (1995) observes that the funeral has changed from a rite which the mourners performed for the dead into an occasion which allows the bereaved to reclaim memories through life centered rituals (1995:228). Davies however, contends that secular patterns of funerals have the potential to help the bereaved gain a sense of the significance of the life of the deceased as well as of life in the broader sense (2002:228).

Tony Walter, in *Funerals and How to Improve Them*, (1990) describes a traditional funeral as a rite of passage in which the task of the living is to assist the spiritual passage of the dead. Reformation doctrine taught that there was nothing the living could do for the deceased other than to commit the soul into the love of God and

thank God for the life which had been given (1990:97). As a result, Protestant funerals changed from rites which mourners performed for the dead into rites intended to bring comfort to the mourners. Walter believes that by stressing the individual rather than the group, we have removed one of the strongest defenses against mortality, since only the group remains immortal (1990:97). The task of the funeral in modern society is to help initiate mourners on their journey of grief work (Davies 2002: 132). Today, death rites are held only if the family requests and purchases them from professionals. Heinz believes that secularism has caused a “repression in the symbols that could mediate the sacred”, symbols which formerly acted as “bridges which generated social meaning”(1999:26). In Walter’s view, the problem facing mortuary rituals today is how to create a rite for the living rather than the dead. Funeral rituals move mourners into a liminal period and by means of the ritual they are transformed, changing their status and their relationships with a number of people (van Gennep 1960, Davies 2002, Walter 1996). Every funeral affirms the universality of death as well as the uniqueness of the deceased. As Walter points out, traditional religious liturgy expresses the universality of death but fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual’s death (1990:220). On the other hand, he notes that life-centered funerals validate the individuality of the deceased but often fail to embrace the values of the ongoing community. Many clergy are now attempting to bridge this gap by individualizing funerals within a broad Christian format in what Walter terms the “religious life centered funeral” (1990:230). Elements of these funerals blur the distinction between the religious and the secular.

In her paper *Funerals of the Unaffiliated*, Catherine Garces-Foley (2003) remarks that one third of Americans do not claim membership in a religious congregation but they continue to mark major life events with communal rituals at which religious professionals officiate. The unaffiliated have no prescribed ritual to follow and are free to pick and choose the elements they desire. Without a community of shared beliefs, Garces-Foley, believes “we are unable to create meaningful death rituals and the rituals which remain are ineffective and irrelevant having lost the capacity to evoke sacred symbols and myths to answer life’s deepest questions” (2003:290). Unaffiliated funerals continue to draw on common beliefs and utilize a standardized ritual structure which is more humanistic than theistic. The primary role of the unaffiliated service is healing of the mourners. Self expression has become a central and effective ritual in contemporary funerals. Garces-Foley concludes that “the shared belief affirmed in the modern funeral is a commitment to the cult of the individual”(2003:301). Funeral ritual continues to provide a means of confronting the reality of death for the bereaved as well as helping them to make the transition from mourning back into the world of the living.

## **Studies of the Funeral Industry**

Very little academic literature focusing specifically on the funeral industry in North America exists. Vanderlyne Pine (1975) uses a sociological approach which focuses on the work of the funeral director. Using an historical approach, Gary Laderman (1999, 2003) details the history of the funeral industry in relation to the social environment within which it exists. Although not academic, Jessica Mitford’s work

(1963,1998) on the funeral industry has influenced both popular and academic audiences. She is widely cited by sociologists, historians, and anthropologists working on death (cf. Ariès 1981:596, 597, 600; Huntington and Metcalf 1991:25-27). Because there is so little social scientific literature about the North American funeral industry, I engage with these few authors, especially Mitford, repeatedly.

In *Rest in Peace*, which details the history of the funeral industry in the United States, Gary Laderman (2003) observes that decreasing mortality rates, increasing longevity and the rise of the hospital system allowed the funeral industry to take root in America. The success of the funeral industry stemmed from the changing social conditions of modern life and modern death which saw funeral directors become the primary managers of the dead. The public viewing of the dead became a desired moment in which the bereaved were afforded one final look at their loved one. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the appearance of the body began to matter to the bereaved and Laderman suggests that an industry was formed around the embalming of the body (2003:8). Families began to entrust their dead to the funeral director in his home instead of their own. This reinforced the divide between the living and the dead. Funeral homes provided a place for the bereaved to be “at home” with their dead outside the family home. Despite the objections of religious leaders, viewing the body was an integral and longstanding tradition which brought order and meaning to the encounter with the dead. Embalming the dead served to make them more visually appealing to the bereaved (2003:22). Mitford (1963) contends that there is no evidence to support the funeral

industry's claim that public viewing of the deceased is therapeutic for the bereaved (1963:94).

The addition of funeral chapels to funeral homes in the first two decades of the twentieth century was an important innovation by the funeral industry because it allowed the bereaved to visit and conduct funeral rituals in one place. The chapel took on, according to Laderman, a cultural value for mourners who could experience communal ties, remember the dead and then take leave of the body (2003:26). The addition of music, most often an organ, sent a religious message about the sanctity of the chapel space. The bereaved and their guests found the chapel a safe, comforting, religious environment. Most importantly, the language used by funeral directors and the rituals they created to say goodbye to the dead contributed to the cultural and social meanings of death (2003:44).

In *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford (1963) focuses on issues such as the cost of funerals, the language of death, the purpose of embalming, the prescribed role of the funeral director and the bereaved, as well as changing fashions within the funeral industry and the allied services such as cemeteries and florists. According to Mitford, in 1963, the cost of a funeral was rising faster than the cost of living. It was Mitford's belief that the funeral industry is a seller's market and the bereaved, as buyers must beware, or at least be aware, prior to arranging a funeral. She claims that the cost of a funeral is the third most expensive purchase made in a lifetime and it is frequently made in a crisis situation which permits little or no time for comparison shopping. Moreover she argues, at the time of making funeral arrangements, it is difficult for the bereaved to assess the

goods and services they are purchasing. According to Laderman, however, Mitford misreads the cues about the meaning of death in America. She fails to take into account the psychological, emotional, religious and cultural dimensions which impact on American deathways (2003: xxii). Laderman suggests that funerals reflect the larger cultural realities which govern American lives. As he points out over the course of the twentieth century, science and technology served to undermine the role of religion in everyday life (2003:66). Modern America was becoming a culture which valued youth, consumer convenience and immediacy. The presence of the dead posed a threat to the new value system. Laderman observes that “in the midst of tremendous social and cultural change touching all areas of life, funeral industry leaders began to demonstrate a new attitude toward their role as America’s ritual specialists” (2003:147). As early as 1972, funeral industry leaders saw the need to change with the times and began to offer “have it your way” funerals with more personalized funeral services (2003:147). Individuals were now able to design their funerals to reflect personal choice, with full disclosure of the costs for goods and services provided by the funeral director. At the same time, the public discovered an expanded range of both goods and services available to meet their individual needs. Cremation and the immediate disposal of the dead began to challenge the traditional means of disposal, burial. The era of the standardized funeral was coming to an end (Laderman 2003:146).

Mitford portrays funeral directors as self serving profiteers who take advantage of the bereaved (1963:15). My ethnographic research shows a much more complex and rich picture of the relationship between the funeral director and the bereaved. As well, I show

that the choices made by consumers of funeral services are not as simple as Mitford suggests.

Contesting the funeral industry's claim that viewing the body is therapeutic for the bereaved, Mitford suggests that funeral directors and grief therapists are guiding the bereaved in their mourning. Mitford charges the funeral industry with "turning the funeral into a social function in which the deceased is the guest of honor" who must appear as alive and well as possible (1963:91).

When Mitford revisited the funeral industry in the early 1990s, the most significant change she observed was the emergence of monopolies and the decline of the family owned funeral home (1998:188).

In *Caretakers of the Dead: The American Funeral Director*, Vanderlyne Pine (1975), a funeral director and sociologist, focuses on the differences in the roles of funeral directors in companies with a personal service orientation compared to those with a bureaucratic orientation. Funeral directors in both models are professional, full time experts in their field who have received specialized training and have expertise and knowledge in death related matters. Pine discusses the role of the funeral director which revolves around numerous activities that may include professional, administrative and coordinating tasks. He suggests that the bereaved turn to the funeral director because he is among the few people in our society who knows what can, should and must be done following a death (1975:28). Most people remain unaware of the law as it affects the disposal of a body and rely on the funeral director for guidance.

Pine divides funeral homes into two classifications, community or cosmopolitan depending on the number of calls they receive per year, the size of the area served and organization of their staff. Funeral directors working in community funeral homes provide services for people who live in a localized or specific community, conducting approximately one hundred calls per year (1975:30). These funeral directors are active in local churches as well as civic and business organizations. They believe that community participation is a necessary and valuable aspect of their position in the community as well as a means of perpetuating business. Pine observes that community funeral directors demonstrate a conviction that personal contact with bereaved families as well as taking care of their deceased is important (1975:74). Client satisfaction is very important. In the community funeral home, the funeral director coordinates the activities of everyone involved in the funeral: deceased, bereaved, clergy, as well as the friends who have gathered to support the family. The funeral director and the bereaved form a team whose task it is to carry out the entire funeral process (Pine 1975:133). Community funeral home directors are not specialists in one area but are competent in all areas of the funeral home from planning to directing the funeral (Pine 1975:146).

I argue in the chapters that follow that Marlatt's corresponds to the community funeral home model even though it is corporately owned. In contrast, funeral directors working for cosmopolitan funeral homes are members of a complex organization which serves a large and anonymous population. These funeral homes conduct over three hundred calls per year. Funeral directors in this model are assigned specific activities which are geared to their expertise such as funeral arranging, embalming and finances.



Because their work is oriented to specific tasks, funeral directors in cosmopolitan funeral homes often appear efficient but impersonal to bereaved family members (Pine 1975:143). Laderman (2003) observes that the big difference between corporate funeral homes and family funeral homes is that the latter offer personalized service in contrast to the corporate homes which are like an assembly line for funerals (2003:189).

In contemporary North America, more people die in hospital or nursing homes than in their own home and almost all the dead are cared for by funeral professionals in funeral homes (Pine 1975:21, Northcott 2001:29, 51). The bereaved family makes arrangements with the funeral director for the funeral including the time, place and type of funeral service, casket, place of burial or cremation and in many instances the services of a clergy member. Walter identifies the aspects which are common for all funerals: physical, the disposal of the body; social, the need of the bereaved for support; spiritual, the relation of the mourners to the current state of the deceased; psychological, helping mourners grieve; and economic, who does what for whom, at what price (Walter 1992:80). In the past, funerals were dominated by the clergy, whereas today, funeral directors oversee their organization. Funeral professionals direct the entire proceedings because the family and community no longer know how to or have the desire to look after their dead (Laderman 2003, Pine 1975, Small 1976, Walter 1990). In this model, the funeral director acts as a professional advisor to the ignorant and needy client, who allows the funeral director to control the proceedings. Walter, following Mitford (1963,1998) would like to see funeral directors function as enablers whose aim is to help their clients, the bereaved, do as much as possible for themselves. In what Walter refers to as the

“consumer model”, the bereaved family makes the decisions concerning what they want the funeral director or clergy to do and instructs them accordingly. The consumer takes charge and reduces the funeral director to his original role as the “undertaker” (1990:149).

Funeral directors and clergy organize the marking of death in our society. Today, the funeral director’s role includes familiarizing the bereaved with customary funeral practices, including funerary ritual (Pine 1975:37). The roles of the funeral director and the clergy have become blurred, leading to possible conflicts. Authors such as Fulton (1961, 1988) and Bowman (1959) have suggested that a tension exists between funeral directors and clergy, particularly in the overlapping role of counseling the bereaved and determining the location of the funeral. Jessica Mitford identifies the conflict between the funeral directors and the clergy as being related to financial factors, in particular, the cost of funerals (Mitford 1963: 242). Others, including Kalish and Goldberg (1978) and Bradfield and Myers (1980) have found more positive evaluations of the relationship by clergy.

As funerals become more secularized, there has been a gradual de-emphasis in the role of the church in activities pertaining to death (Emke 2002:8). In many instances, the clergy is contacted only after the funeral arrangements have been made by the family with the funeral director. The role of the clergy has shifted to providing assistance to the family rather than care for the soul of the deceased. Emke (1999) remarks that the rise of the funeral profession has meant that clergy are not the only experts who can tend to the needs of the bereaved (1999:17). Members of the clergy see the role of the funeral director in planning the funeral as a background role to the actual funeral service (Emke

1999:9). Funeral directors regard the clergy as simply officiators for the actual funeral rites, with no broader function in terms of caring for the bereaved or planning the funeral process. This situation may not represent a radical break with the past. According to some historical sources, the church was never really an active player in the care of the dead. The dead were never housed in the church but rather at home and then taken to the church for committal of the soul (Ariès 1981:599) In the past, the community washed and dressed the body and organized the period between death and funeral and the time following the funeral. The clergy committed the soul of the dead and offered prayers for the living and dead. As the numbers of unaffiliated continue to rise, the role of the clergy continues to decline or to shift from concern with the soul of the deceased to helping the bereaved find closure through funeral rituals which are personalized to meet the needs of the mourners ( Emke 2003, Garces-Foley 2003, Walter 1996).

## **Cremation**

Throughout history people have chosen to dispose of their dead in many different ways. Until recently, in much of the Western world, the dead have been placed in caskets or coffins and lowered into the ground (Cronin 1996:58, Jupp 2006:3). Cremation is, therefore, a break from the traditional funeral followed by burial. In the twentieth century, cremation became an increasingly popular choice of disposal. Rates of cremation climbed from four percent in the early 1980s to twenty-five percent by 1999 in the United States (Prothero 2001). According to Cronin, in 1996 approximately one in five Americans were cremated and by 2010 the rate will be one in three (1996:11). This

transformation can be accounted for by changing death morés which question the tradition of spending thousands of dollars on the care and disposal of the corpse (Cronin 1996:11).

Traditionally the Christian churches played a major role in how death was understood in Europe and North America by providing rituals for the dying as well as funeral procedures. Although Christian scripture is silent on the subject of cremation, the Roman Catholic church opposed the practice until the period of the Vatican II reforms in the 1960's (Prothero 2002:167). The turning point in the Catholic Church was Vatican II (1962-65) which determined cremation was no longer a sin, although burial was strongly urged (Jupp 2006:164-5). I argue that, since people now typically consult the funeral director before the clergy, the churches are losing their role in the disposal of the dead. This development has allowed the bereaved to make new arrangements for disposing their dead as new beliefs concerning the afterlife to take hold.

Early cremationists also found opposition from the funeral industry to cremation as an alternative to burial, for economic rather than spiritual or moral reasons (Cronin 1996). The funeral industry had depended on having a body which would most often be embalmed and casketed prior to a visitation, which was then followed by a funeral. Families choosing direct cremation purchased a casket for cremation purposes only, most often made of cardboard or cheap plywood. According to Cronin almost eighty percent of all cremations in America are performed as a direct disposal, which means the body is sent to the crematorium from the funeral home prior to the performance of any funerary ritual by the bereaved (1996:14). Funeral directors argue that the funeral has social,

psychological and religious value. In contrast, cremation banishes the body from sight and from the last rites. Cremation however, has continued to gain in popularity at the expense of traditional burial. Prothero argues that funeral directors finally accepted cremation in the 1980s, adopting the attitude, “if you can’t beat them, join them” (2002:192). The death care industry began offering the choice of burial or cremation to bereaved families. Other options included purchasing urns and keepsakes of all sizes and shapes. Today, many funeral professionals treat cremation as an alternative option to burial for their clients and offer merchandise which is appropriate (Cronin 1996:44).

The exodus from the grave reflects changing death morés as well as the faith Westerners have placed in technology and science. In his book *From Dust to Ashes*, Peter C.Jupp remarks that the disposal of the dead has become a matter of convenience at the personal and societal level. Today, institutionalized death is followed by institutionalized disposal (2006:187). Cremation as an accepted alternative to burial has given families the opportunity to break with community traditions, choices, beliefs, attitudes and practices and to make personal choices which reflect their lifestyle and spirituality. Jupp, however, believes that the choice between burial and cremation has never really been a private choice but one which continues to be influenced by social processes. The traditional Roman Catholic funeral service focused on the body and resurrection in contrast to the Protestant funeral service whose message was that the body had come to an end but the soul lived on (Davies 1990, 2006). Prothero (2002:12) believes the shift is not from religious to non religious funerary rituals but toward ritual options which allow the family to take back control over death rites and customize them

in ways that are personally meaningful. Cremation provides a respectful way of disposing of the dead which fits with today's socially and geographically mobile society, in which many people often outlive their family and friends. According to Prothero, cremation won its popularity by riding the wave of consumerism, gaining ground not because it was cheaper but because it was simpler and ecologically friendly (2002:177). Moreover, cremation allows the baby boomer generation to create and embrace new rituals characterized by simplicity, spontaneity, informality, participation and personalization. These innovative ritual forms address and reflect contemporary mourners both spiritually and socially (Prothero 2002:205).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Funeral Directing In Dundas**

#### **The Town of Dundas**

Located on the western tip of Lake Ontario, 100 kilometers west of Toronto, the town of Dundas, was established in 1847. Dundas enjoyed economic prosperity through its access to the Lake Ontario via the Desjardins Canal. By the end of the nineteenth century, Dundas was replaced as the economic powerhouse of the region by the adjacent city of Hamilton which developed as an industrial center. With the establishment of McMaster University in West Hamilton in 1930, Dundas gradually became a bedroom community for faculty and students and by the 1990s for Toronto commuters. The main street retains the charm of the old town despite the recent suburban growth in the surrounding area.

According to the most recent census (2006) the Dundas and West Hamilton area is home to a predominately Caucasian middle class community of 24,702. Visible minorities, including Blacks, Asians and Native Canadians, account for less than three percent of the population. In terms of religious affiliation, the community is predominantly Protestant (forty-five percent); Catholics account for twenty-seven percent and other religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Bahai, combine to constitute six percent of the community. Approximately twenty percent of residents claim no religious

affiliation. Most Dundas residents are between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four (63.7%) with an equal number under fourteen and over sixty-five (18%).

## **History of the Marlatt Funeral Home**

The Marlatt Funeral Home and Cremation Center has been a fixture on the main street of Dundas since 1837 when Isaac Latshaw first opened his furniture and undertaking business. After his death in 1881, his son, Fred, operated the business until 1912 when it was sold to W.L. Brown who carried on only the undertaking part of the business. Four years later, he became partners with D.E. Knowles. Albert Brown (no relation to W.L Brown), who had been assisting Brown and Knowles for about ten years, commenced business for himself in 1924 at 45 King Street. Two years later he moved the business to a new location at 171 King Street. Although Albert Brown died in 1935, his wife and W.L. Brown carried on the undertaking business until Charles Mitson became the new owner and manager of the funeral home. Two years later, in 1937, Mitson built and moved the funeral home to its present location at 195 Dundas Street West. In 1959, The Albert J. Brown/ Charles Mitson Funeral Home was taken over by James Donald Marlatt (J.D.), who was also the owner of the J.B. Marlatt Funeral Home in Hamilton. The Dundas establishment was known as the Mitson-Marlatt Funeral Home until the time of Mitson's death in 1970. The Dundas Funeral Home then became known as the J.B. Marlatt Funeral Home (Amm 1990).



Early in 1985, Ray Loewen of the Loewen Group International, a corporate funeral service provider, located in Burnaby, British Columbia purchased the two J. B. Marlatt Funeral Homes ending five generations of Marlatt involvement in the undertaking business as well as the funeral home as a family business. In 2002, the funeral home was purchased by the Alderwoods Group, the second largest operator of funeral homes and cemeteries in North America. At that time the name was changed to the Marlatt Funeral Home and Cremation Center. As a part of the Alderwoods Corporation, the Marlatt Funeral Home provides funeral and memorial services and products on both an at-need and pre-need basis (Alderwoods Group:2003). Through its many funeral homes, Alderwoods is committed to being a community leader not only by providing high standards of personal care, but by encouraging staff to participate in local volunteer groups such as the Rotary Club. Values such as integrity, teamwork, communication, creativity and compassion are embedded in every aspect of the operation of the funeral home (Alderwoods Group: Leadership 2003). Employees associated with the funeral home actively participate and live in the community they serve. Despite corporate ownership, the Marlatt Funeral Home remains very much a “family” business in its approach to providing funeral service combining professional integrity and respect with compassion and creativity.

During the final months of my fieldwork, the Alderwoods Group of funeral homes was sold to Service Corporation International (S.C.I.), whose head office is located in Houston, Texas. The ethnography covers only the period of time during which the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas was owned and operated by the Alderwoods Group.

## **Touring the Marlatt Funeral Home**

Today, it is impossible to miss the imposing red brick house with its well groomed lawns and beautiful garden set back on the main street of Dundas among small businesses and stores. The establishment actually houses three centers: the funeral home itself, the adjacent chapel and the reception cottage. Cremations are done off site at several local independent crematoriums in Hamilton and Paris, Ontario.

The funeral home is divided into four main areas. On the ground floor, the funeral home and chapel are located. On the second floor, there is a private residence. In the past, the apartment has been occupied by the managing directors of the funeral home, including Bob and Andrew who lived there with their families. Currently Paul, a funeral director's assistant, and his wife reside in the apartment. Downstairs, the arrangement or Alderwoods' room as well as the office and the preparation or transfer room can be found.

Behind the large oak door, the main entrance hall is bright with natural light during the day and remains brightly lit for evening visitations. To the right of the main door is a small office which was used until recently as the "arrangement" room in which families met with the funeral director. Although in a potentially high traffic area during visitation hours, the office is set apart from the rooms where most of the activity and noise occurs. The room is tastefully decorated with pictures as well as framed certificates from the Lion's and Rotary Clubs. Several comfortable chairs are available for family members who might wish to use the office as a quiet place where they can retreat from the visitation room and the watchful eyes of guests. The room is brightly lit and airy, yet

it conveys a quiet and intimate atmosphere where a bereaved family can be cloistered on their own to compose their thoughts away from their guests, or to share information with the funeral director or clergy.

The foyer area displays a collection of ceramic plates decorated with drawings of local churches which have been donated by these churches over the last 25 years. Strategically placed chairs allow visitors an area ideal for quiet reflection or conversation away from the visitation rooms. On the wall is a large framed picture of the medals awarded to veterans of the wars in which Canada has participated. Below the picture, on a stand, a book has been placed which describes each medal with information about when and why it was awarded. The display pays tribute to the many war veterans who attend visitations and services at the funeral home. The medals board and book was made available to the funeral home through the efforts of Thomas Poolton, a funeral director at the Marlatt Funeral Home in Hamilton. Copies of the board have been presented to the local legions by the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas as one of their community service projects.

The foyer is also used to provide information for visitors. An information board identifying the funeral director on duty as well as personalized information about current visitations is conveniently placed on the wall outside the office in close proximity to the staff person attending the door, who is also available to answer questions. On a third wall is a framed affirmation of the importance of the funeral as a “celebration of a life well lived and a sociological statement that a death has occurred.” A second framed testimony titled “This is a Funeral Home” states:

This is a funeral home.

Lives are commemorated - deaths are recorded - families are re-united - memories are made tangible - and love is disguised. This is a funeral home. Communities accord respect, families bestow reverence, families seek solutions to their problems and our heritage is thereby enriched.

Testimonies of devotion, pride and remembrance are carved in memories to pay warm tribute to accomplishments and to life - and to death of a significant and loved person. The funeral home is a repository for family securities that are a sustaining source of comfort for the living.

A funeral home is a history of people - a perpetual record of yesterday  
And a sanctuary of peace and quiet today. A funeral home exists because  
every life is worth living and remembering - always.

To the left and directly ahead of the foyer are the two visitation rooms. These are large comfortable rooms that provide space for an intimate gathering of family and friends. Soft lighting and warm colored carpeting add to the ambience. Both rooms are tastefully decorated in the manner of a welcoming family living room. The room towards the back of the funeral home is the larger room of the two and for that reason is chosen most often by families. The casket is placed on the far side of the room opposite the entrance, which allows ample space for flowers and displays of family pictures mounted on the picture boards. The space around the casket is large enough to accommodate any other memorabilia the family may choose to bring and display. The second visitation room has the advantage of large windows covered by sheers and is bright with natural light during daytime visitations even on dreary days. The casket is placed at the far end of the room to allow for the flow of visitors. Maximizing the use of space in the visitation rooms is critical particularly when large numbers of guests need to be accommodated or when the family chooses to form a reception line. There are no religious symbols or

objects in either of the visitation rooms. During Roman Catholic visitations, a crucifix and memorial candles are brought into the room and positioned around the casket unless the family requests otherwise. A kneeling bench is also provided if required in front of the casket. At the entrance to the visitation rooms is a small desk upon which rests the visitor's register book, and personalized memorial cards containing information about the deceased and the time of the funeral or memorial service, as well as a prayer or poem chosen by the family that reflects the life of the deceased.

On the wall between the visitation rooms and the chapel hang the pictures and licenses of the funeral directors. As well, there is a framed copy of the Code of Ethical Practices of the Ontario Funeral Association which outlines the services and ethical conduct demanded of every funeral home as mandated by the Funeral Directors and Establishments Act. Numerous free pamphlets about death and grief which family and visitors might find useful have been strategically placed on a small table near the water cooler. Topics include how to arrange a funeral; how to help a friend cope with grief; how to explain death to a child; how to plan ahead for peace of mind and how to arrange a dignified cremation. A coloring book, "Bye Bye....I Love You" is offered to families of school aged children by the funeral home staff.

The large chapel offers another quiet place for reflection or prayer. A wall of mottled glass windows allows diffuse light to bathe the rows of wooden pews. The arched ceiling adds to the feeling of spaciousness. Although the space has been designed for use as a chapel, it does not contain any religious symbols, except a small cross on a plaque commemorating the life of J.B. Marlatt which has been placed on the wall by the street

entrance to the chapel. Picture boards, flowers and religious symbols can be brought into the chapel to personalize the service according to the wishes and the needs of each family and their religious denomination. The front of the chapel has been raised one step in order to elevate speakers above the level of either the casket or the table upon which the urn containing cremated ashes is placed. The “clergy” office is set off to one side of the chapel. The office provides another quiet place for family members to sit or spend time with the clergy, since it is spatially removed from visitors. The music room containing a sound system for playing music and recording services as well as a small organ is recessed into the wall of the chapel.

Downstairs beyond the chapel is a lounge where family members can relax and spend some time away from the visitation rooms. It is a comfortable room which is less formal in appearance than the rooms in the main part of the funeral home. What is immediately noticeable on entering the room is the large fish tank containing a variety of tropical fish at one end of the room. Against the opposite wall is a floor to ceiling bookshelf offering magazines, books on death and grief as well as numerous toys, crayons, colouring books and puzzles for children. The walls are decorated with plaques of local children’s sports teams which have been sponsored by the funeral home. Coffee, tea, and hot chocolate are available for the convenience of family members and their guests. The lounge is also used by staff for meetings and can be used for lunch or coffee breaks, although in practice it rarely serves that purpose.

In 2005, an Alderwoods arrangement room was added to the funeral home in the space which had previously been used as the casket and urn showroom. This spacious

new room is secluded from the rest of the funeral home although it is accessed by a common stairway linking the upstairs to the lounge and washrooms. The Alderwoods room allows family members to make funeral arrangements and pick out caskets and urns as well as vaults without leaving the main area of the funeral home. Prior to its completion, arrangements were most often made in the small office upstairs and families came downstairs to choose a casket or urn. The room is divided into four distinct areas: the arrangement table where the funeral director and the bereaved family can sit and talk; full size caskets; mounted casket corners and vaults, and a section of urns. The funeral home is required by the Funeral Home Act of Ontario to keep 12 full size caskets on site which encompass a range of styles and prices. The large round table with chairs provides a comfortable place for families to sit and discuss their choices with the funeral director. A round table was purposely chosen to provide a relaxed setting allowing for free and open discussion between the family and the funeral director rather than a desk where the family and funeral director would sit across from one another. The Alderwoods' room is also used for individuals wishing to pre-arrange their funeral or memorial service and for families who meet for "aftercare" several weeks after the funeral of a loved one has taken place.

Beyond a locked door lies the areas reserved for staff only – the business office, supply cupboards and the preparation or embalming room. Families have no access to this "backstage" area (Goffman: 1959). Staff can access this space from the front and back regions of the funeral home. This is the heart of the funeral home, from which the

basic operations of the funeral home are organized. It stands in stark contrast to the area of the funeral home used by families and visitors.

The downstairs office is filled with filing cabinets, computers, phones, fax machines, copiers, and office supplies. The office is intended for use by staff only and is far removed from the main flow of visitors or clients by virtue of its location, out of sight in the basement. Although it does connect to the lounge and the Alderwoods' room, it is accessible only to staff who enter through locked doors or from a rear building entrance. It is an organizational center from which obituaries are sent to newspapers, bookmarks and keepsakes are produced and aftercare packages are put together. This is where the plans crafted by families are turned into reality. The office is a private place where staff can meet briefly to share information about a family or funeral plans prior to or during visitations or to discuss a funeral away from the family and visitors. It is also a place where staff can share a joke or exchange personal news with one another.

Across the hall, behind locked doors, is the preparation room which is used for the casketing of the deceased whether or not embalming is performed. It is a brightly lit and well ventilated room which has an appearance like that of any medical procedure room. The room is spotlessly clean and a vague odor of embalming fluid and disinfectant lingers in the air. To one side of the room is a stainless steel gurney that perches over a large sink. Above the sink on a shelf is the embalming machine and the trocar which is used in embalming. Fluids for embalming, scalpels and scissors are kept in a cupboard adjacent to the embalming machine. The cosmetic products, including blush and lipstick sit on a small table at the head of the steel gurney. Two posters on the wall which proclaim the



fragility of life and the senselessness of death of young people caused by drug and alcohol abuse stand in stark contrast to the remaining bare tiled walls and the utilitarian nature of the room. They are a constant reminder to the funeral directors of the humanness of the corpse's laying on the table. In contrast to the visitation rooms and even the work office, the preparation room exudes a sense of coldness and sterility. It is a room with a single purpose: to prepare the dead for their final performance in the visitation rooms above.

A number of vehicles, stored in the garage behind the funeral home, are brought into service at different times and serve a variety of purposes. The "lead car" which is driven by the funeral director in charge of the service is also used as the official car when a director calls on a family at their home. The hearse or "coach" as it is referred to by funeral home staff is used for transporting a casketed body to the cemetery or crematorium. The "flower" van serves a dual purpose. It is the vehicle used for transporting flowers from the funeral home to the cemetery. As well, it is the vehicle of choice when a body is being picked up from a home, nursing home or hospital because it appears like an ordinary minivan and is not recognizable as a funeral home vehicle. In this van bodies can be discreetly moved from one location to another. The vehicle garage is equipped for car washing and basic vehicle maintenance which ensures the lead car and coach are spotless and shining when brought around to the front of the funeral home for a funeral. The garage also serves as storage space for the containers or caskets which are used for direct cremation as these are not kept on display in the funeral home because of their rough wood construction.

## **Establishing Boundaries Within the Funeral Home**

Within the funeral home there exist two distinct areas. The public area on the main floor consists of the visitation rooms, office and chapel, as well as the lounge and the Alderwood room on the lower level. The private area is accessible only by staff. The lounge is the only common area used by both staff and outsiders. Significantly the use of the room is mutually exclusive: it is used either by staff or by visitors but there is no mixing.

Following Goffman, these two areas of the funeral home can be seen as the front region where performances take place and the back region (1963:126). For every performance the stage must be set in order to create the correct mood into which the principle actors can be introduced. Setting and presentation are very important in the funeral home. The front stage is where the main action will occur. Here the deceased takes the star role as family members alternate between the roles of audience and performers. It is also the stage upon which the funeral director will give his performance for the family and their visitors.

The backstage area of the funeral home lacks most if not all of the comforts which are so important in the presentation of the front stage. The backstage, while out of sight of the audience, remains a very important area in terms of supporting the front region and staff performance. It is backstage where the staff must work at the more technical aspects of the funeral business such as embalming and the more business oriented aspects such as scheduling, financial accounting and ordering supplies. Performance in the back region is

more low key than in the front stage, as the audience behind the locked doors consists only of other staff members and the dead.

## **Meeting the Staff**

The Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas is one of two in the Hamilton area that are owned and operated by the Alderwoods Group Incorporated. Staff members at these two establishments, regardless of their title, see themselves as team members who share a common goal of assisting a family to repair the tear in its social fabric. At the funeral director level, the staff are professionals who have been trained to perform their work with a degree of competency that is maintained by their professional organization and regulated by provincial standards.

As regional manager, Andrew, oversees the general operation of the Alderwoods funeral homes in what is referred to as the southwest Ontario region. This area includes Windsor, Kitchener, Cambridge and the two Marlatt funeral homes in Hamilton and Dundas. Andrew is a licensed funeral director and has “come through the system” starting as a teenager when he cut grass at Marlatt’s in Dundas. Over the years he has held various positions including funeral director, managing director and now Regional Manager. In this position, Andrew provides leadership and support. He is responsible for all activities associated with “operations, sales, customers, staff, facilities and cash across the market” (Alderwoods Group Inc. 2003). His role also includes assisting with the recruitment and selection of new staff as well as the annual evaluation of staff for each funeral home. Andrew is not responsible for the day to day operations of the funeral

home, and although he maintains close contact with the managing directors of each facility, he does not interact with clients or families. Although his office is located in Cambridge, Andrew is readily available to meet with staff individually or as a group at any of the funeral homes. He often attends general staff as well in-service and training meetings. Throughout my research, I have found him to be exceptionally open to questions as well as discussion about funeral homes, funeral directors and the funeral industry.

The staff of the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas is divided into full and part-time funeral directors who are licensed by the Province of Ontario to make funeral arrangements and embalm. In addition, there is one part-time funeral director's assistant and several para-funeral staff including vehicle drivers and hairdressers. Over the period of my fieldwork, the position of the second funeral director was filled by three successive funeral directors, all of whom were recent graduates from the Funeral Service Program at Humber College, a postsecondary institution in Toronto. Owing to the volume and type of calls, Marlatt's is an excellent placement for recent graduates of the Funeral Service Program since it is a full service funeral home which arranges traditional funerals including embalming as well as a cremation centre specializing in memorial services. New directors are able to gain experience in all aspects of the business. Another advantage for the new directors is the availability of a part-time director who has more than 50 years of experience. None of the funeral directors working at Marlatt's during my research come from a family of funeral directors. They had made their choice to enter the industry based on summer work at a funeral home or cemetery, the experience of a death

in the family and observing funeral directors at work, or through a high school co-op experience. The general duty work load is divided between the two funeral directors. Only a licensed funeral director can sign the legal documents required by the Province of Ontario to allow for the final disposition of the deceased, death certificates required by financial and government institutions, and perform embalming. Depending on whether one or both funeral directors are working at the time a “call” comes most often determines which director will meet with the family. The funeral director that initially meets with the family is the director who will remain responsible to that family until the funeral has been completed. In this respect, this funeral director can be considered the primary caregiver for the bereaved. He may or may not be the director who will deal with the body of the deceased for embalming or casketing. The general maintenance of the funeral home’s appearance is shared by all staff members in the funeral home as there is no “cleaning” or maintenance staff.

Chris, the managing director of Marlatt’s, has been a licensed funeral director since 1988. He is married with a family and has been settled in his current position for 10 years. Prior to becoming the manager at Marlatt’s, Chris held several positions as a funeral director in the Hamilton region. As the location manager, Chris oversees the day to day functioning of the funeral home ensuring that client’s needs are met during the funeral process and through aftercare. The position requires him to function in the dual roles of funeral director dealing with families and manager of the revenues and expenses of the home. He is responsible for ensuring the funeral home has adequate staff coverage at all times and that his staff is well trained. Chris is demanding of himself and expects

excellence in those working with him. Training new directors can be challenging because they are really “learning on the job” and as such require a mentor like Chris, who is patient and able to instruct without taking over. In the years since Chris became manager, he has worked hard at maintaining the large network of contacts in the community which had been established by Bob, his predecessor. Chris is active in the Rotary Club as well as volunteering with the Boy Scout movement and representing Marlatt’s at many local festivals and events such as the Remembrance Day. His thoroughness and organizational skills as a funeral director are complemented by his compassion and understanding of bereaved families.

Bob, the only part-time funeral director at Marlatt’s, has been working in the industry for more than 50 years. Before retiring eight years ago, he filled the positions of funeral director and managing director at Marlatt’s. Although both Bob and his brother are funeral directors, they did not come from a family funeral business. Over the years, Bob has not only been a funeral director but has served as an examiner for the College of Funeral Directors which oversees licensing in Ontario. During his career, Bob has witnessed and been a part of an industry which has changed from predominately family owned funeral homes to corporate ownership. As well he has seen the shift from expensive traditional funeral services followed by burial to the more recent trend toward cremation with or without a memorial service. Bob is a wealth of information and practical experience which all staff members draw upon concerning any facet of the funeral home.

The funeral director fulfilling the second director's role at Marlatt's has changed three times during my fieldwork. As one young director mastered the skills of embalming and "taking out a funeral," another new director would step into the role and the training would begin again. Funeral director / embalmers provide service in all areas, helping families "achieve peace following the loss of a loved one" (Alderwoods Group Inc. 2003). They are the first and primary contact person with the bereaved family. As well, the funeral director is often the primary contact person with members of the clergy. For this reason it is important that funeral directors have a broad knowledge of religious customs, rituals and etiquette and are respectful in their attention to details. Good communication skills and the ability to work as a team member are important in any work situation, but they are imperative at the funeral home where the exchange of information, ideas, and concepts are the backbone of providing families with "seamless service" (Alderwoods Group Inc. 2003).

Adam was the first of the three successive funeral directors that I met during my fieldwork. He was 28 at the time, single and dating. Marlatt's was his first position following his internship year and graduation. He was unsure about the wisdom of his career choice and was interested in pursuing courses in other areas at the university or college level. In part this interest in further education is motivated by a desire to "get ahead" which is difficult to do in the funeral industry. Adam says that "the option of a career change at a later date is always an option, especially if I take outside interest courses." As a single man, he finds the pay scale acceptable but is quite open about his concerns about finances should he decide to marry and have a family. Adam remarked

that he wants “to be able to support a family and own a home, without my wife having to work.” Within the first six months of my fieldwork, Adam relocated to another Alderwoods funeral home located 75 kilometers west of Dundas in Kitchener.

Kyle replaced Adam as the second director at Marlatt’s. As with Adam, this was Kyle’s first position after graduation. He is a very likeable and self assured young man of 21. Kyle was first introduced to the work of the funeral director when his grandfather passed away several years ago. The funeral director working with the family suggested ways in Kyle could take part in the funeral proceedings. Kyle remembers being very impressed with the director’s insight and ability to organize the funeral and also his interest in making the experience as meaningful as possible for everyone in the family. Later Kyle decided to become a funeral service student and throughout his internship, the initial experience of his grandfather’s funeral helped guide him in relating to families.

Dave was the third and last young director to join the Marlatt (Dundas) Funeral Home team, having graduated from the Humber Funeral Service Program in June 2005. While there have been funeral directors and funeral home owners in Dave’s family, neither his father nor his mother are funeral directors. Like Adam and Kyle, he attended the Funeral Service Program directly from high school and then entered the industry.

Marlatt’s has one non licensed funeral director’s assistant who participates in the regular schedule. Paul came to Marlatt’s following his retirement from his own paint and wallpaper business. Having spent 40 years serving the Dundas community, Paul is a familiar face to many who come to the funeral home. He is a very pleasant and outgoing man in his early sixties. The role of the funeral director’s assistant is diverse, ranging



from washing vehicles to greeting the guests of the bereaved family at the front door to assisting with the care for the deceased including dressing and casketing.

The funeral home employs para-funeral staff who are part time employees called into service depending upon foreseen need prior to the time of the funeral. All of the part-time staff are retired from other occupations. Several are local businessmen who are well known in the community. One part-time driver is a former policeman who in the latter part of his career worked with the local schools on safety in the street programs. These staff members interact much less and for shorter periods of time with the bereaved family and their guests. They are a friendly and outgoing group of men who are able to fulfill a number of roles during the funeral that include the moving of the casket, placing the flowers on the grave and assisting the mourners and pallbearers with their vehicles. As well, they are often called upon to drive the limousine carrying the bereaved family to the funeral home and cemetery and the flower van.

All staff members are easily identified by their manner of dress regardless of their role in the funeral home. No distinction is made between the licensed funeral directors and the para-funeral staff. The men continue to wear the traditional stripped morning pants, vest, white shirt, tie and black jacket. Bob remembers a time when his funeral attire included a top hat and coat-tails, although this garb has now been eliminated from all but state funerals. All staff members are identified by company name tags.

Separate from the funeral home staff but vital to both the funeral directors and the families they serve is the pre-planner and after-care professional. In most instances this role is filled by an individual who is not a licensed funeral director, but who has been

trained by the company to meet with families. Ron performs both roles for Marlatt's in Dundas. He has extensive knowledge of the various funeral options available and their costs. The number of pre-arranged funerals has continued to grow since the mid 1990's. The aftercare program was established shortly after Alderwoods took over from the Loewen Group. Ron meets with families at their convenience several weeks after the funeral in order to review and assist them with government paperwork required for pensions as well as bank and credit card forms to close accounts. Often these meetings provide insightful feedback for the funeral directors concerning the family's feelings about the staff as well as the organizational aspects of the funeral. Ron does not provide grief counseling for family members but is able to direct them to private and publicly funded grief counselors located in the Hamilton Region.

### **Working at the Marlatt Funeral Home**

The funeral directors at the Marlatt Funeral Home are a part of the "new breed" of funeral directors that have been schooled both as technicians and as small business owners. The term funeral director or even funeral designer has come to replace the less popular terms of "mortician" and "undertaker" much in the same way as the term "coach" now replaces the word "hearse". While this may seem insignificant, Hughes (1958:43) suggests that the name chosen by a group to describe their work implies an audience which will measure the worth of the activity. In contrast to the past, funeral directors are now considered trained professionals rather than cabinet makers who also manufacture coffins. Funeral directors take pride in their newly elevated status and in the service they

perform for the public. Funeral homes are businesses which deal with highly charged emotional situations and at times, the funeral director may feel conflicted about the skills he offers in caring for the deceased and the family and the “products” including his services which he is selling to the public (private communication with funeral directors at Marlatt’s as well as other Alderwoods Funeral Homes). Nonetheless funeral directors believe that they offer an important and needed service that is not available outside the funeral business.

Public image is very important to funeral directors. Their choice of words, tone of voice and demeanor in public are central to creating and sustaining their image as caring and knowledgeable professionals. Andrew, the Regional Manager, interviews all candidates for the position of funeral director, assessing both their technical skills and their people skills. They are graded according to whether they are a new graduate, a funeral director with five or ten years of experience or whether they are applying for a management position. In 2003, Alderwoods instituted a personnel profile testing program as a means of identifying strengths and weaknesses at the entrance level for funeral directors. The Alderwoods Group, like the independent funeral home, places its emphasis on the continuing development of their public image. In smaller funeral homes, like Marlatt’s, it is essential that funeral directors be competent in the public and private spheres of the business. It is impossible for a funeral director at Marlatt’s to spend his entire career either embalming or working the front stage. The status of their work is important to them because the work a man does is “one of the most important parts of his social identity, of his self” (Hughes 1958:43). Despite the professional status of funeral

directors and their provision of compassionate services to the public, they continue to be regarded in a very different manner than other helping professionals such as police, health care workers or firefighters. For many people outside the funeral industry, the idea of dealing with the dead is repugnant and is perceived to constitute the major part of the funeral director's work. In fact, the time spent with the deceased is limited to several hours which are spent embalming, washing and dressing for a traditional funeral or the few minutes spent casketing prior to a direct cremation. In comparison, the funeral director spends many hours in the presence of the living family members. Despite the "professionalization" of funeral directors, a social stigma associated with this career persists in a society that is repulsed by death and their dead (Goffman 1963, Howarth 1996, Laderman 2002). During my research, there were several occasions when acquaintances in my social network expressed distaste concerning my fieldwork placement. Many funeral directors are particularly aware of the "uniform" they wear, which in their opinion identifies them as funeral directors and when meeting the public at social events away from the funeral home will not wear "funeral attire". A small number of funeral directors believe that wearing the "uniform" is a form of advertising and reminds people of the role in the community as a funeral director.

## **SECTION II**

# **THE ETHNOGRAPHY: EIGHT DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A FUNERAL HOME**

### **Prologue to the Ethnography**

With few exceptions, research concerning the funeral industry has been conducted by researchers located outside the industry, including investigative reporters such as Jessica Mitford (1963,1998), sociologists such as Tony Walter (1990) and historians such as Gary Laderman (1999, 2003). In North America, sociologist Vanderlyne Pine (1973) stands alone in providing a perspective from inside the industry. Recently, several sociologists have assumed the role of the ethnographer in England and Japan ( Howarth 1996, Bradbury 1996, Suzuki 2000) .

Ethnography is particularly well suited to understanding contemporary death customs and the role of the funeral director as a mediator. Participant observation in the funeral industry allowed me to gain an “emic” or insider’s perspective by taking part in the “daily activities, interactions, and events” which occur in a funeral home (Dewalt 1998:260). During my fieldwork, I actively engaged in almost all aspects of funeral service as a means of becoming familiar with the roles of the funeral director, bereaved and the clergy. Tedlock (1991:71) suggests that this sort of apprenticeship is a way of “undergoing an intensive enculturation” which allows the fieldworker to experience “ways of knowing and learning to see.” A difficulty with the ethnographic method lies in

the possibility of the researcher going “native” and being “seduced by group values and belief systems” which serve to prejudice the analysis of observations (Howarth 193:223, Dewalt 1998:262-3). To offset this difficulty, I relied on other methods of investigation, such as formal and informal interviews, collection of statistical information and questionnaires.

My ethnography depicts a period of one week in the funeral home but reflects three years of participation observation spent at the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas (September 2004 – September 2007) and short periods of time spent at its “sister” funeral homes in Hamilton and Cambridge. During that period more than three hundred families passed through the Marlatt Funeral Home, interacting with staff and members of the clergy while making numerous choices which reflected their personal taste, degree and type of spirituality and financial ability. The inclusion of an eighth day in this portrait of a week in the life of Marlatt’s allows me to present readers with a more complete representation of the very different needs of the families that utilize the Marlatt Funeral Home. The week which is portrayed in the ethnography is not a composite week made up of events at random from my period of fieldwork. All the events which are portrayed actually occurred in the eight day period, although the order of events may have been slightly changed. My access to the “back stage” of the funeral home allows me to examine the ritual work of the funeral directors and their relationship to the corpse which includes the reconstruction of the social persona through the process of embalming and dressing.

In the ethnography, I argue that funeral directors perform a complex role as mediators and ritual specialists balancing the areas of spirituality, emotion, personal taste, institutionalized religion, ethnicity and commerce. Furthermore, I argue that funeral directors intercede between the living and the dead, between life and death and between this world and the afterlife as it is conceived of by their clients. Whereas Jessica Mitford suggests that funeral professionals encourage the bereaved to spend excessive amounts of money, I will argue that the bereaved have agency in the choices which they are making about products and services. My research indicates that the choices made by grieving relatives and those selected for funerals which have been pre-arranged are very similar with respect to the degree of elaboration and cost. I argue that funeral directors are not pressuring the bereaved to spend more money to assuage their guilty conscience or to express their love for the deceased. Rather, I argue that the choices made by the bereaved are motivated by their personal desire to fulfill cultural ideals of what is appropriate and meaningful. Funeral directors make suggestions using models with which they are familiar and that prior experience leads them to believe will work, in order to assist the bereaved in making their choices. Later, during the visitation and funeral or memorial service, the funeral directors will facilitate these choices. Following Hallam, Hockey and Howarth (1999), I argue that the work of the funeral director re-sacralizes or culturalizes the body of the deceased through the process of embalming, transforming the corpse from something which is decaying and polluted into a guest who has an appropriate place among the living. Paradoxically, embalming and other funerary practices both “tame”

death and yet simultaneously contribute to the hidden character of death in North America.

According to Philippe Ariès, funeral directors have taken over the roles performed by the clergy and community members such as midwives who also washed and laid out the deceased (Aries 1981:598, Verdier 1976). I will argue that the roles of the funeral director and the clergy are not mutually exclusive but rather that in contemporary Canadian society, these professionals work together for the benefit of the bereaved and the dead. Relative to earlier periods in contemporary Canada, funeral ritual has become less structured by religious institutions and increasingly open to the creative interpretation by the bereaved. I will argue that as a result of numerous social and religious changes in contemporary Canada, funeral directors act as intermediaries between the popular spirituality of the bereaved and traditional official religious institutions. This frequently includes demands by the bereaved for ritual elements such as poetry and music from outside the domain of institutional religion.

The ethnography which follows provides a complex and nuanced perspective on funeral directors and North American funeral ritual by building on and extending the existing literature and by focusing on funeral practices in an urban Canadian setting. At the beginning of each of the eight days described in the ethnography, readers will find a preview of the day which will illustrate how the key themes outlined in this prologue are illustrated in the day's events as well as linked to the broader literature on death, dying and funerary ritual.



## CHAPTER 4

### DAY 1

#### FRIDAY NIGHT / SATURDAY

##### **The Day in Preview**

On this first day, we are introduced to one of the three funeral directors who works at the Marlatt Funeral Home. We meet Dave as he steps into his role as a funeral director by answering the “first call” from the Meister family on Friday evening. Goffman suggests that individuals who perform before a particular group of observers adopt a personal front which includes appearance and manner (Goffman 1959: 22). At the time of the phone call, Dave is at home, where he nonetheless assumes the manner of a front stage funeral director. When he meets with the family on Saturday morning, at their home as well as at the funeral home, he also steps into the role of funeral director by dressing in his morning suit. Performance, as we will see during the following days is very important for all the actors: the funeral director, bereaved, deceased as well as the clergy, in the funerary drama. These performances are continually moulded and modified to meet the expectations and understanding of the audience.

The performance of the funeral director involves a personal front which is sustained before a particular audience, the bereaved. This is accomplished by means of their appearance as well as the way funeral directors interact with the bereaved, deceased,

clergy and visitors. The front which is adopted by the funeral director has already been established as a professional model of performance (Goffman 1959:27). When in the presence of others, the funeral director “infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts” about his role (Goffman 1959:30). The performance of the funeral director takes place on both the front stage, the public area of the funeral home as well as in the backstage area in the areas restricted from public sight, which includes the office and the “prep room”. The audience for the performance is dependent upon whether the performance is taking place on the front or backstage.

In the days which lie ahead, we will observe the funeral directors acting as mediators between the living and the dead as well as between the bereaved and the clergy. Funeral directors know how to meet cultural expectations of what can, should and must be done after a death occurs. It is for this reason that families seek out the assistance of the funeral director (Pine 1975:197, 40). As ritual experts in the area of death, funeral directors also take into consideration the spirituality, personal taste, ethnicity, religious affiliation and the fiscal capability of the bereaved every time they meet with a family to arrange a funeral, memorial service or direct disposal of the body by burial or cremation. Jessica Mitford describes funeral directors as salespersons who are motivated by the desire for personal gain (Mitford 1963). In contrast, the meeting of Dave with the Meister family depicts a professional who is compassionate and concerned for the bereaved family and who focuses on meeting their emotional, spiritual wishes and needs. Although Mitford (1963) and Walter (1990) believe that pre-arranging funerals is a way to capture and expand the market of the funeral home, my own research suggests that

there is a tension which exists between educating consumers about their choices in death care and the need to ensure the economic viability of the funeral home enterprise.

The removal of Mr. Meister's body from his home on Saturday morning illustrates the hidden nature of death in North American culture. Although most deaths occur in hospitals or nursing homes, a small percentage of deaths occur either at home or in hospices (Howarth 1999). Whether a death occurs at home or in a care facility, there exists a tension between the hidden nature of death and its visibility. While Ariès (1981) argues that society has banished death by hiding it from sight in hospitals, Walter suggests that recently there has been a revival of death which seeks to bring together public discourse and private experience (Walter 1994: 23, 63). Paralleling Ariès, Jacque Lynne Foltyn suggests that direct cremation allows the bereaved to hide the corpse, which is then represented by pictures at the time of the memorial (Foltyn 1995). One of the key conclusions I have reached on the basis of my fieldwork at Marlatt's is that death is neither exclusively "hidden" nor "visible" in contemporary North American funeral ritual. Rather, the reality of death is at different stages of the ritual process between the time of death and final committal both confronted and made visible *and* hidden or denied. This will become evident in the discussion about the death of Mr. Meister and the subsequent removal of his corpse to the funeral home. As well, we will see that the pre-arrangement of funerals provides further evidence for the revival of death and the belief that dying, funeral ritual and bereavement have, as Tony Walter suggests, become a matter of doing it "my way" (Walter 1994:189).

Our introduction to the world of the funeral industry in this first day will allow us to observe a “first call”, the performance of the funeral director as a death care professional, and the tension between the hidden and visible nature of death. We will see that the choices made by the bereaved are motivated by their personal desire to fulfill cultural ideals of what is appropriate and meaningful rather than only a response to pressure from the funeral director to encourage the bereaved to spend a large amount of money in order to assuage their guilty conscience or express love for the deceased.

### **Friday Night:**

When the pager goes off at ten o'clock on Friday night, it can only mean one thing - a new call. Dave answers the call immediately. “A family should never have to wait to speak to a funeral director,” he believes. When a death occurs, families find themselves at a loss as to what they should do. They rely upon the funeral director, as a specialist in the area of death, to help them begin to mediate, or bring about a sense of order from the chaos of decisions which must be made. Bob recalls that when his wife died, he felt totally lost in spite of the fact that he had been a funeral director for more than thirty years. His first reaction was to call another funeral director.

The initial contact made between the family and the funeral home is commonly referred to by funeral directors as “the first call”. The term “call” is used to denote an individual’s death. It comes from the idea that a family must call the funeral home. As well, it suggests that the bereaved family is calling upon the funeral director to provide his services rather than the funeral director seeking out the bereaved (Pine 1975: 40).

Sometimes, as on this occasion, it is the first contact the family has with the funeral director.

Suzanne Meister, the daughter of the deceased, tells Dave that her father has died at home surrounded by his family. It is not often that funeral directors are called to a family home. Today, more than 75% of individuals die in hospitals, hospices or nursing homes, tended by nurses rather than by family members (Howarth 1999).<sup>6</sup> Dave inquires whether the doctor has been to the home or if he is on his way. “Yes, that call has been made.” The family is presently awaiting the doctor’s arrival at their home. When someone dies at home, it is not necessary for the body to be moved from his bed to the hospital to be pronounced dead. However, according to Ontario law, regardless of the place of death, a physician must pronounce the person as deceased, and fill in a death certificate before the body can be removed to the funeral home.

Dave’s next question concerns the “transfer” or “removal” of the deceased from the home to the funeral home. Dave asks Suzanne whether the family would like him to come immediately or if they would like more time with the deceased. When speaking with the family, the more common term “transfer” is used, as it sounds less harsh than the word removal, which is used among the funeral home staff. Interestingly, when the funeral home is unable to pick up a body, they call the “removal service”.

The family has no idea that Dave is at his house, about half an hour away from the funeral home, or that he is wearing a pair of jeans and not a “morning” suit. Dave steps

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<sup>6</sup> In the duration of my fieldwork, a period encompassing 3 years and almost 400 calls, only 4 deaths occurred at home. The remaining calls were “removals” at local hospitals and nursing homes. Hamilton region has only recently opened an end stage care hospice.

back into his role of funeral director for the period of the conversation only. The family only knows that he is the funeral director answering their call and their questions in a calm, reassuring and authoritative voice. According to Chris “Even if the funeral director does nothing, the family feels by speaking with the funeral director that things have been put into motion.” When Dave hangs up the phone, he steps out of his role of funeral director.

“Can we keep my father at home tonight?” Suzanne asks. “My mother wishes to have one more night with him at home. Can you come in the morning instead of now? Does it matter or make a difference to you?” Without missing a beat, Dave assures Suzanne that the morning will be fine. He reassures her that should they change their minds, they can call him regardless of the hour and he will come to the house. This small piece of information opens a window of opportunity for the family, letting them know that Dave is available to help them regardless of the time. Chris says that when a family calls during the night, they just want to tell you about the death. When the family hears the funeral director say “I will look after things”, they feel better knowing that things are under control, even if they are only coming to the funeral home in the morning to make their arrangements. What is important is that the family believes the funeral director is dealing with their issues at that moment.

Looking ahead to the next day, Dave asks the daughter what time would be good for him to arrive, suggesting mid morning, around 10:30a.m. Suggesting a time helps give the family a sense of structure, a time frame within which they can operate. Scheduling for mid morning allows Dave the time he needs to attend to the morning tasks

at the funeral home and to avoid rushing the family in their own morning routine. Before saying good-bye, Dave tells Suzanne that he will call in the morning before leaving the funeral home to confirm his arrival and reminds her that he is available during the night to assist in any way.

Once Dave hangs up the phone, he begins to arrange the “removal”. It is 10:30 p.m. when my phone rings and Dave explains the situation. I have been to the morgues in the local hospitals several times in the past, but I have never gone out on a home “removal” which involves interacting with family rather than morgue staff. The next call Dave makes is to ensure that someone is at the funeral home during the period of time that we will be with the family. The funeral home is staffed from 8:30 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. every day and until 5:00 p.m. on weekends. This staff schedule ensures that people who decide to come directly to the funeral home without calling, or “walk in”, as they are referred to by the directors, are met by knowledgeable staff persons rather than finding a phone number to call for information posted on the door. After hours, the phone line is signed over to an answering service which pages the funeral director with the name, phone number and message left by the family. This arrangement means that regardless of the time of day or night, a newly bereaved family is able to speak with a funeral director either at the funeral home or after hours within minutes of having called the funeral home phone number.

### **Saturday Morning:**

No further “calls” come in during the night. On Saturday morning Dave does a quick walk around the funeral home, turning on the lights and checking that the rooms are tidy before vacuuming the front hall and office. This morning routine ensures that the funeral home makes a good first impression when a family walks through the front door.

Having concluded the walk around, Dave adds Mr. Meister’s name to the roster board located beside the phone in the back hall. This area is used only by the staff and for the delivery of flowers, caskets and “*cremains*”. He notes what little information he gained from his discussion the previous evening concerning the funeral and disposal. After meeting with the family, Dave will add more information about the type of funeral or memorial and the reception onto the board. The board provides a quick reference for all staff members. At 10 a.m. Dave calls the Meister family’s home to arrange the time of our arrival.

While going to the hospital morgue requires only one staff person, going to a family home always involves two funeral home staff members. Removals from the morgue can be performed by any staff member. Chris prefers that removals from the home are performed by a funeral director and a staff member because he believes that personal contact with a bereaved family from the very onset is important as a means of providing personal service. The exception to this rule occurs when there is only one funeral director at the funeral home or the staff is busy with a funeral and the family does not want to wait for any period of time to have the body taken from the home. In these



instances a licensed removal company is called by the funeral director and instructed to go to the home.

Removing a body from a hospital morgue is a very sterile procedure. In most hospitals the morgue is hidden in the recesses of the hospital, out of view and away from the heavily traveled hallways used by the public (Sudnow 1967). Prior to the arrival of the funeral home staff member, the body will have been washed and labeled with toe and wrist tags and wrapped in a plastic shroud by the nursing staff before being placed on a stretcher and taken to the morgue. The funeral home staff person meets quickly with the morgue attendant and after checking the chart and the tags to ensure the correct identity of the deceased, signs for the removal of the body. The entire procedure in the hospital morgue takes less than ten minutes.

Homes, in contrast, have “occupational hazards” that have to be maneuvered around such as hallways, stairs, beds and families. More importantly, homes have family members present. The divide between life and death is much smaller when a person dies at home. The deceased remains dressed in his/her own clothing, surrounded by familiar articles and attended to by loved ones. In most cases, the “removal” takes place within a short period of time following the death and the body is still warm as it cools down to room temperature. Absent are the toe and wrist tags, the shroud and the medical chart. The deceased often lies in his/her own bed rather than on a metal gurney in the morgue. Home removals require the funeral home staff to be both sensitive and efficient, disturbing as little as possible in the home when removing the deceased. In one respect home removals are much more public than those at the hospital in which a service

entrance is used rather than the main hospital doors. The funeral home's van, which cannot be distinguished from any other minivan by its color or size is always used to "remove" bodies from both the hospital and the home. The removal service also uses an unmarked van for all removals. These vehicles draw much less attention than the "coach" or as most people refer to it, the hearse. Behind the façade of a nondescript van, the funeral home staff are able to move their "cargo", having hidden death from the eye of the public (Howarth 1999:106).

It is a short drive to the Meister's condominium. As instructed by the family, Dave parks the van at the front of the building. We take from the back of the van a collapsible stretcher, upon which a blue corduroy body bag has been placed. The stretcher is designed to lay flat during transportation but upon arrival at the home or morgue is unfolded thereby securing it as a carrying device. So far we have been lucky and we are the only people waiting for the elevator. The elevator arrives, and when the door opens, our black suits make it very clear to the couple inside that we are not an ambulance response team. We let the first elevator go by without us and wait for the next. As the door is about to close, another couple dashes in, squeezing in around Dave, myself and the stretcher. The door closes behind them and we begin the ride to our respective floors. It is really difficult not to notice that there is an "elephant" in the elevator. The man and woman make small talk with us about the weather, not daring to ask about our mission. Everyone is relieved when we arrive at our floor, the door opens and we step out into the empty hallway.

Standing at the door, Dave and I go over the short list of family requests: “Don’t put the cover over his face when you place him on the stretcher. My mother would like to see him one more time before you leave.” Once we are inside the apartment, there will be little verbal discussion between Dave and myself. Before entering, we have to be very clear about our procedure and the family’s instructions and flexible enough to accommodate any unexpected requests or problems. Pine suggests that as long as the funeral director appears to be doing things correctly, most people will see his work as “expert” (Pine 1975:110).

We are met at the door by Suzanne and her mother. It has been a long night and they appear tired, but very gracious, welcoming us into the apartment. Dave does the introductions and offers our condolences. As we stand and chat briefly, making small talk, Dave assesses the setup of the room. The deceased is lying in a hospital bed which has been set up in the living room. It is obvious that this area has been the focal point where the family has gathered in the previous days. The kitchen table, cluttered with medicine and syringes and the chairs can be easily moved to make room for the stretcher. Suzanne and Mrs. Meister bring us to the side of the bed, assuring us and more likely trying to reassure themselves that they are now ready for the deceased to leave. The scene is reminiscent of the “tame death” attributed by Ariès to the early Middle Ages, where the dying person, lying in their bed is surrounded by family with whom they share their last hopes and requests before being released from life (Ariès 1981). Suzanne tells us that her mother has spent one last night lying next to her husband. Suzanne also tells us

that a letter and lock of hair have been placed under the deceased's shirt by his granddaughter and asks that both be left in place.

One of the main tasks of a removal from a home is putting the family at ease as their loved one is being moved. This is accomplished by asking the family to step into another room. The two women go into the bedroom where they will wait for us to transfer their husband and father from his bed onto the stretcher. Once the family retires to another room, moving the body becomes a non public activity reminiscent of the same activity in the morgue. While one concern is to move efficiently and quickly, it is also important that the body be treated respectfully and moved gently.

We raise the hospital bed to its maximum height so that we can slide rather than lift the deceased onto the stretcher. Having ensured that the note and lock of hair are securely placed, we shift him from the bed to the stretcher. Except for the whispers between us, the room is quiet and the family remains unaware of any difficulties we might encounter. Once we have placed Mr. Meister onto the stretcher, we secure him with the safety straps, closing the buckles as quietly as possible. We close the zipper part way before covering him with a blanket. We leave his upper chest and face exposed for the family to see. After adjusting the stretcher slightly, we are able to tidy up the bed area, folding the sheets and blankets and replacing them on the bed. Only then do we begin moving toward the front door. The wife and daughter meet us part way to the door. This is the most difficult moment for the two women who must let go of the man who has been a husband for almost 50 years and a father for more than 40. When his wife and daughter lean over to hug and kiss their husband and father, it will be their last physical

contact and the last time they will see him, since they have decided upon no viewing or visitation at the funeral home. Dave spends a few minutes with Suzanne and Mrs. Meister reassuring them, that they can call him at the funeral home prior to coming in to make the arrangements later that afternoon. This small gesture helps him create a warm working relationship with the family as well as emphasizing his professional capabilities as a funeral director (cf Pine 1975:111). Once we are through the door and it has been closed behind us, we carefully enclose the deceased into the body bag before we move to the elevator. There is no mistaking what we are transporting. The living are transported on similar stretchers but with their faces exposed. By closing the corduroy bag around Mr. Meister, we have hidden his death from the gaze of the living even though it is quite visibly obvious that we are transporting a corpse (Howarth 1999:104). Both Dave and I hope the elevator comes quickly and that it is empty. Luck is with us this time. From arrival to departure, it has been twenty minutes.

The Meister family will come to the funeral home later in the afternoon when they will meet with Dave in order to finalize the arrangements. They have already indicated to Dave that they want a direct cremation followed by a memorial service during the following week. This is useful information because it will help Dave guide them through the process of making the arrangements as well as enabling him to make suggestions concerning memorial services. Upon arriving at the funeral home, Dave and I remove Mr. Meister from the van and take him to the “prep” room leaving him wrapped in the sheet and on the stretcher. It occurs to me that somewhere between leaving his bed and arriving at the funeral home, Mr. Meister has ceased to be a person and has become a

body which must be looked after and then disposed of according to the choice made by the family. The body is placed directly into a cremation container only if the family chooses a direct cremation.

When a family chooses direct cremation, there is no preparation of the body, embalming, visitation or ceremony prior to cremation. The viewing of the body is restricted to family members only. This serves the dual purpose of allowing the family some time with the deceased as well as allowing them to identify the body. Identification is required by the funeral home rather than by provincial regulation. If a family declines to identify the body, they sign a waiver form which releases the funeral home from the possibility that a body has been mistakenly removed. Occasionally a family will supply clothes but most often in a direct cremation the deceased remains naked or in the clothes they died in, wrapped only in the makeshift shroud of cloth or plastic, they were transferred in. Cremation, like earth burial, is a choice of how the body will be prepared for its ultimate disposition. According to Michael W. Kubasak, a funeral director in California who became vice president of Service Corporation International, the funeral industry initially rejected cremation and in some instances refused to serve families who chose direct cremation because it was perceived as an economic threat (Kubasak 1990:14, Laderman 2003:202). Funeral directors began to market cremation in the funeral trade journals as a way to increase a funeral home's number of calls (and revenue) (Prothero:2001:196). Today, most funeral directors regard cremation as a matter of personal preference. Many funeral homes such as Marlatt's have added "cremation center" to their name and display urns as well as other death care merchandise including

plaques, benches and tree memorials. When a family comes into the funeral home to make arrangements for cremation they must still purchase a casket or cremation container of wood or cardboard as a rigid container is required by law. Choosing cremation does not limit a family from observing rituals within their family traditions and customs. Cremations, direct or following a funeral account for 70% of the total calls per year, which is significantly higher than the projected figures of the Cremation Association of North America (2005 CANA). During the period of my fieldwork, direct cremations accounted for more than 60% of all cremations arranged through the Marlatt funeral home (2003 to 2006, see appendix). In *Purified by Fire*, author Stephen Prothero suggests that cremation is attractive to the ‘babyboomer’ generation because it is simple and ecologically friendly and not because it is less expensive (Prothero 2001:212). At the Marlatt Funeral Home and Cremation Center, it is difficult to identify any one particular group with cremation. The choice of cremation does not appear to be limited to the ‘baby boomers’ or any particular religious denomination. The funeral home statistics show an even spread of age, gender and religion both in at need and in pre-arrangements.

For now, nothing more can be done with the body until after the arrangements have been finalized by the family.

The period between our arrival back at the funeral home and the arrival of the Meister family at 3 p.m. is not idle time. Dave begins to organize the papers that will allow for the death to be registered at the Town Hall on Monday morning. These papers are required by law (Funeral Directors and Establishments Act 1989). The coroner on call is notified that we have a body for cremation so that he can come to the funeral home to

check the body and to sign the forms which will allow it to be cremated. Dave also sets out the funeral planning guide along with the call file. Every family is given a copy of the Funeral Planning Guide early in the arrangement process. The Planning Guide outlines for family members their choice of the types of funeral services and packages, an itemized price list for care of the deceased and use of the funeral home, as well as descriptions of and price ranges for merchandise such as caskets, vaults and urns. The Guide also outlines the terms of payment. The purpose of the booklet is to allow the family to see the costs itemized individually as well as the various prices for the different packages they can choose for burial or cremation. The packages are designed so that a family can add or delete services according to their needs. In this way the bereaved family begins to tailor the funeral or memorial service to reflect the personality and life of the deceased as well as meeting their personal beliefs. These choices begin the process of personalization. In contrast to the media who present funeral directors as pushy salesmen interested only in their own financial gain (cf. Mitford 1963, 1995, Roberts 1997), most funeral directors believe that caskets, urns, vaults and memorial book packages will sell themselves. Dave sees his role as a professional who can offer informed choices to bereaved family members. He will provide options, and help the family organize and manage the details concerning the disposal of the body and if they choose, a memorial service. Bob blatantly refuses to sell anything. He will show the family caskets, urns and vaults but the final choice, in his opinion, belongs with the family. The funeral director's role is to guide families as knowledgeable professionals by being available to answer questions and not by pushing products or services. "If a family doesn't want an urn



because they are planning on scattering or burying the ashes, there is no point in selling them one because it is good for business” in Bob’s opinion. Families need to walk away feeling they have received good service from the staff rather than feeling pressured to make a choice one way or another. An unhappy family that feels pressured to purchase is bad for a business which relies on word of mouth advertising (Mitford 1963, 1995, Roberts 1997). Chris adds that “the funeral arrangements belong to the family; it is their funeral not mine. When it is my funeral, I will make my own choices.”

**Afternoon:**

Ron, the funeral home’s pre-arranger, arrives at noon to prepare for his 12:30 p.m. meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Hancock. The Hancocks, John, age 68 years and Mary, age 65 years, recently attended an estate planning workshop which Ron led at one of the local retirement homes. The Hancocks are typical of the age group attracted to these seminars, mostly retirees in their 60s and 70s. They are a little older than those who respond to the direct mailing campaigns, who are typically in their 50s.

Ron frequently leads seminars or participates in panels at workshops as a part of the funeral home’s outreach program in the community. These meetings are intended to educate the public about wills, estate and funeral planning. He brings numerous pamphlets which he makes available to individuals interested in gathering more information on topics as varied as talking about death with children to planning your funeral. Following the program, Ron is available to answer questions. Although there is no solicitation by the company, the funeral home hopes that people will follow up the

program by calling for an appointment once they have had an opportunity to leisurely review the estate planning booklet as well as the brochures. Pre-planning or pre-need selling is a way for funeral homes to expand the size of their market by drawing clients into their establishment rather than that of their competitors (Mitford 1998: 296, Walter 1990: 267). A funeral which is prepaid today, guarantees a funeral at a later date at the funeral home. In some ways, pre-paying acts like an insurance policy for the funeral home as a means of generating future income.

Pre-arranging allows individuals to make decisions concerning their funeral and the disposition of their body which will act as a guide for their family at the time of their death. When asked what the benefits of pre-arranging a funeral are, Ron candidly replies “price protection, responsibility and peace of mind.” There are many reasons for planning ahead and finalizing arrangements by pre-paying directly to the funeral home. By planning ahead, the Hancocks will have the opportunity to make their decisions concerning the type of funeral and method of final disposition of the body by burial or cremation calmly and logically ahead of time. They can “shop around” and take their time to consider their choices (Walter 1990:268). Not only is it possible to die “doing it our way”, today it is possible to extend the range of choices to include post-death ceremonies (Walter 1994: 33). In contrast, Mitford suggests that people pay now, yet they die poorer when their bereaved family begins to pay for the “extras” which an individual might not have chosen for themselves (Mitford 1998:256).

During the seminar, Ron suggests that people begin to organize their thoughts and those of their loved ones as a way of identifying personal needs. His suggestions include,

making a list of loved ones and important friends in your life; make a list of the associations and church you belong or belonged to; consider how you would personalize your funeral with music, pictures, mementos and charities; list the people you would like to assume key roles such as pallbearers, speakers and clergy and discuss with loved ones what would make a funeral memorable to them (Alderwoods Pre-arrangement checklist).

Ron meets John and Mary at the front door of the funeral home a few minutes before 12:30 p.m. Although Ron has met the Hancocks briefly at the seminar, it is important that he presents himself as knowledgeable about arranging funerals as well understanding and insightful about the needs of each person he meets. Although the role of the pre-arranger is essentially selling funeral and memorial arrangements, it is particularly important that (s)he has a service orientation which reflects the funeral home's relationship with its families which emphasizes personal service (Pine 1975:123). Before going downstairs to the Alderwoods' room, Ron takes a few minutes to show John and Mary the two visitation rooms, the chapel and the reception cottage located beside the funeral home. Most visitors to the funeral home come to pay their respects during a visitation or for a funeral and see the funeral home as a locus of activity. They are often quite surprised at the size and décor of the visitation rooms, the bright and airy feeling of the chapel and the charm of the cottage. Ron, like the funeral directors, has a sense of pride when he shows his "home" to visitors.

Meeting in the Alderwoods' room rather than at the Hancock's home will allow them to see their choice of caskets, urns, vaults as well as stationary and flowers which are available. Whether planning a pre-arranged or an at-need funeral, there are many

choices to be made. Another pre-planner commented that “it makes sense to come into the funeral home so you can see what you are buying. You wouldn’t buy a new car from a salesman who was sitting in your living room.”

Once everyone is seated, Ron explains that pre-arranging and pre-paying are different. If a funeral is pre-arranged but left unpaid, the directions are kept on file for the family to review when making decisions when the death occurs. When payment is received in advance, a Guaranteed Funeral Pre-Arrangement Contract which is numbered and monitored by the government is completed. Although the executor can make changes, the contract allows the funeral home to “act quickly and confidently when the notification of death is received, giving the family time to collect themselves and begin coping with the situation without feeling pressured to make difficult funeral decisions in an emotional state” (personal correspondence, R. Heintzman).

John tells Ron that he and Mary have life insurance and other investments in place for when they die. He wonders whether that would not be enough to pay for the funeral at the time. Ron explains to them that by pre-paying directly to the funeral home their money will be held by a third party, often an insurance company until the time they are required. This arrangement not only safeguards their money but is designed to offset any price inflation. Pre-paying can be accomplished by two methods. Ron explains that the first option is payment in full for the cost of the funeral. This money is held in trust by a third party which assures people that their money is safe in the case that the funeral home might close. A second option is to pay monthly using an insurance company to hold the funds. This allows individuals to make low monthly payments to suit their budget. It

allows for the same peace of mind and price protection without having to pay a large sum of money at one time.

Ron says the best way to illustrate the value of pre-paying is by giving an example which compares the costs today with projected costs. If a funeral costs \$7,000 today, it is likely that the same services will cost as much as \$14,000 in ten years. For someone who prepays for their funeral today, the funds will be held by the insurance company where they will accumulate interest. At the time of death, the money might have grown to \$12,000. In this scenario, there is a shortfall of \$2,000. When the contract is pre-paid directly to the funeral home, the contract states that the services outlined will be performed at the time of death and that they have been paid in full. The funeral home would receive the \$12,000 in accumulated funds but would have to absorb the outstanding balance. Ron tells John and Mary this is called “Long Term Growth Protection” which means the funeral is only paid for once. Furthermore, Ron explains, if the money accrued is greater than the cost of the funeral, money which was not used will be returned to the estate. Several months prior, Ron tells the Hancocks, the funeral home provided services for a man who had prepaid for his funeral twenty years prior to his death. At the time the policy was taken out, the cost for his pre-arrangements including newspaper notice, 2 days of visitation, casket, funeral service, opening and closing the grave as well as a liner for the grave was \$2358.00. The cost of the same arrangements at today’s prices would be \$7,150.00. Because the funeral was pre-paid, the family saved \$4792.00 when they met with the funeral director to finalize the arrangements for his funeral. Ron admits that not every family will save that amount of money but with rising

costs, every family will save the difference between today's cost and those "down the road".

John has a confused look and inquires "How is this different from my life insurance policy?" This is a frequently asked question and Ron answers "Although the money is paid to an insurance company it is not a life insurance policy. A life insurance policy only guarantees a set amount of money at the time of death and does not take into account the reality that funeral costs are continuously going up. As well, a standard life insurance policy does not save the bereaved family from making decisions at the time of death."

Ron can see that John is giving this some thought while Mary asks "What if we were to relocate, say we decided to move to be closer to our children who live out of this area?" This is another question which is often asked during the seminars as well as pre-planning meetings. The population today is very mobile and no one wants to be tied to a particular city by a pre-arranged funeral policy. "The arrangements are very flexible and are fully transferable to other funeral homes. Anything you decide today can be changed." Ron tells John and Mary that recently a funeral was held for a man who had prepaid at another funeral home in the city. His daughter, who was the executor had met with Ron prior to the death and decided that she would like to move the funeral arrangements to the Marlatt funeral home because she lived in the area and thought it would be more convenient for her family and friends. Similarly, a funeral that had been pre-arranged in Dundas was held in Calgary, where the deceased had relocated. Changes

can be made, Ron tells John and Mary, to the type of service, funeral or memorial, type of final disposition, burial or cremation as well as the location, either church or chapel.

A big selling point for many people who decide to pre-arrange is that they will be saving their families money by arranging their own funeral rather than leaving it to a bereaved family member at the time of death. Ron believes that most people will spend less money on themselves than they would on someone else. This is also true when planning a funeral for oneself or for a loved one (Mitford 1998:257, Walter 1990:268). Mary tells Ron that when her father died, her mother followed his wishes and had one visitation and a traditional funeral. She chose a modest casket which was buried at a local cemetery. When her mother died a number of years later, Mary says even though she knew her mother wanted a very simple funeral similar to her father's funeral, that she felt guilty and had decided upon a much more expensive casket and flower arrangement. Had Mary's parents pre-arranged and paid for their funerals, it would have saved her from making numerous decisions while struggling with her sense of loss. Mary says that saving her children from what was a very stressful experience for her at the time, is one of the motivating factors for today's meeting. When the time comes, both she and John would like to be cremated and to have a memorial service at a later date. John says that "if it was up to him, he would be cremated immediately and there would be no service" but that he understands that his children would feel very lost without some sort of service in which they can share their loss.

Ron records the choices being made by John and Mary: direct cremation, one hour of visitation before the memorial service, personalized stationary, burial of their

cremains following the service and a reception in the funeral home cottage. The same personal information which is recorded at the time of death concerning birth date and location, names of parents, name of spouse, type of employment during working years as well as their affiliation to a local church is recorded on the provincial records chart during the meeting. Ron gathers as much personal information as possible. This will also assist him in directing individuals who are pre-planning to find ways of personalizing their funeral or memorial. He jots down on a piece of paper that John is a fishing enthusiast and that Mary has been part of a quilting group for many years. These are directives for the funeral director who will work with the family at the time of death. Ron also includes the name of a favorite hymn which Mary would like played and a popular music tune which is John's choice.

As Ron initials the contract outlining the choices the Hancocks have made today and has David sign with him. The Board of Funeral Services also requires a licensed funeral director to review the arrangements and to sign the contract. The role of the pre-arranger is filled by people who have become knowledgeable about the products and services available in the funeral industry. The role of a licensed funeral director is directed towards service, caring for the dead and their families rather than towards sales. Ultimately, the products and services being sold are considered to be the responsibility of the funeral director, who has acquired his knowledge and training at a recognized professional school. As a licensed professional, the funeral director knows what can, should and must be done after a death occurs (Pine 1975:28). He, and not the sales



person, is answerable to the Funeral Licensing Board of Ontario for all funeral contracts whether they are pre or at need.

As Ron walks with John and Mary to the front door of the funeral home he reassures them that he is available should they have any questions or concerns about the choices they have made during their appointment. The time is 2p.m.

Mrs. Meister and her daughter have arrived a little earlier than their appointment time. Dave is prepared and meets them at the front door at 2:30 pm. He escorts them downstairs to the Alderwoods' Room, where they will finalize the arrangements for the direct cremation, memorial service and the burial of ashes. Even though it is located on lower level of the funeral home, the large and brightly lit arrangement room is much less intimidating for families than its precursor, the casket and urn room. Families who made arrangements at Marlatt's in the past and have more recently returned have commented on how much they prefer making arrangements in the new room which is more open and spacious than the office upstairs. Moreover, many family members confided in me that they find it much less stressful to choose a casket from the new display which uses primarily casket corners rather than full caskets.

Dave offers the family coffee and tea as he seats them around the table. At every arrangement the funeral director must collect specific information which is required for statistical purposes by the government to record a death. This information includes the full name of the deceased, date of birth, names of their mother and father, location of birth, type of work in which they were employed, and religious affiliation. This is the same form which Ron used an hour earlier to prepare the pre-arrangements for John and

Mary Hancock. During the at-need arrangement, the form affords the funeral directors a way to open a discussion which will allow the family to personalize their arrangements. It is a short leap from filling in the form to preparing the obituary notice. The obituary notice, in Chris' opinion, is one of the most difficult tasks for any family because it requires them to focus on relationships within the family. The Meister family has decided that they will not place an obituary notice in the newspaper. They feel that the news of Mr. Meister's death will circulate quickly among their personal friends, work colleagues and church members. Conversations during arrangements often wander as the funeral director asks questions. This is how we inadvertently hear about Mr. Meister's love for Lindt chocolates and a fondness for homemade ice-cream. Information shared about the deceased's life allows the funeral director to make suggestions to the family which will assist them in further personalizing the visitation as well as the funeral or memorial service. It is also information which can be shared between the funeral director and the clergy. Although these details may seem insignificant, they can be very helpful if the family is not affiliated with a church and an unknown member of the clergy is called to meet with the family and later to perform the funeral.

Prior to their arrival, Mrs. Meister and Suzanne have decided that they would like to have a memorial service held in the chapel of the funeral home with a brief visitation prior to the service. Only the family will attend the committal and interment of ashes at the cemetery immediately following the service. What remains to be decided is the day and time of the service. Their preference is to hold the memorial service as soon as possible. Dave assures them that this is not a problem as the cremains or ashes could be

returned from the crematorium by Tuesday afternoon. Before committing himself, Dave takes into account several factors. First, the coroner must come to the funeral home to give permission to proceed with the cremation, and second, since it is now Saturday afternoon that the death cannot be registered before Monday morning. Until the death is registered and the coroner signs off, the body cannot leave the funeral home to be cremated. Monday morning is the earliest time for departure, making Tuesday the first available date for the service. Timing is critical when planning a memorial in which the family wishes the cremains to be present at the service. It is better to delay a service by a day than to disappoint a family at the last minute. Occasionally, things don't work out as planned because of an unforeseen delay at the hospital or the crematorium. During my fieldwork, there was an unexpected delay in the release of a body by several days. In that instance, the family chose to proceed as planned with the "funeral" service without the body being present.

Mrs. Meister has already contacted their own minister telling him about the death and requesting him to perform the funeral service in the chapel of the funeral home. Dave writes down the minister's phone number so that he can contact him regarding the arrangements the family has made at the funeral home as well as those made with the minister. Dave's call to the minister is more than a courtesy call. It is important that the clergy and the funeral director are "on the same page" before the day of the service. As in this instance, many families will often share with their minister rather than with the funeral director, their choice of music, poetry and special prayers they would like to include in the funeral service. As Dave is the liaison between the family, the clergy and

the organist, he needs to know what special requests the family might have so that he can inform the organist when he confirms the time of the service.

Although no formal arrangements had been made with the funeral home prior to the death, it is obvious that the Meister family has given considerable thought to how they wish to proceed with the memorial service. During my fieldwork at the funeral home, I found that most families, with the exception of very sudden and unexpected deaths, had taken some time to consider their choices concerning burial or cremation, traditional funeral or memorial service. Mitford (1963, 1998) and Roberts (1997) suggest that families who are making funeral arrangements are extremely vulnerable to the high pressure sales pitches made by the funeral director working with them at the time of arrangement. It has been my experience that funeral directors are not high power salespersons who believe they can take advantage of their client's highly emotional state. Most families, including the Meister family, arrive at the funeral home in a state of numbed grief. Prior to arriving at the funeral home, the Meister family had made their decisions about the type of disposal, urn, service and committal. All that remains is for them to finalize the funeral contract with Dave. The funeral contract is a legal contract which corresponds to the Funeral Planning Guide General Price List book. The contract sets out the cost of all the goods and services which the family must pay, any costs which are being absorbed by the funeral home, or services which are not being used and hence deducted. A minimum payment of 10% of the total cost is taken at the time of arrangements and the balance is due within 30 days. This allows families time to collect from insurance policies which may have a death benefit. Some families choose to pay the

full amount by either check or credit card but there is no pressure for them to do so at the time of making the funeral arrangements.<sup>7</sup>

The memorial package chosen by the Meister family is the cremation package, memorial funeral service. This package provides for the care and preparation of the deceased, use of the facilities and staff for the memorial service and the transportation of the deceased to the crematorium. Not included are the cost for the urn which the family has chosen, stationery such as the guest register book and memorial cards and the honorarium for the minister and the organist. The Meister family's preference is to include these costs in the funeral contract which Dave writes up with them during the arrangements. Signing the contract is the final aspect of the funeral arrangement meeting. While it may seem harsh to discuss money at a time when family members are making decisions concerning the remains of their loved one, funeral arrangements involve the procuring of a professional's expertise in dealing with matters which concern a person's death. The bereaved family is agreeing to pay the funeral director for the care of their family member in the manner which they have stipulated from the time of removal from the place of death until the final committal. More than that, the family is paying the funeral director for his expertise in the legal matters which must be attended to following a death, his knowledge of the caretaking of a dead body, as well his ability to organize and coordinate the funeral service.

A large amount of information is exchanged by the funeral director and the family during the arrangement meeting. The family takes a copy of the funeral arrangement

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<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Service Corporation International (S.C.I.) one of the other large funeral "corporates" has a policy that the funeral charges must be paid in full prior to the time of the funeral service.

contract and the Funeral Planning Guide for several reasons. First, the law requires the funeral director to give every family a “hard copy” of the itemized price list as well as their arrangements. Second, more importantly, once a family has made their arrangements they begin to feel a sense of order emerging from the chaos that follows a recent death. At home, family members sitting in a familiar place have time to review their decisions, decide if they want to make any changes and to call the funeral director and ask questions which may have been previously overlooked during the arrangements. As the family prepares to leave, Dave reminds them that he is available to answer their questions or help them in any way between now and the service on Tuesday afternoon. He knows that all families require time to process the amount of information that has been shared during arrangements so he would not be surprised to receive a phone call or two between today and the memorial service from either Mrs. Meister or Suzanne.

Once the family has left, Dave goes out to the garage and brings in a “number 10” cremation container, into which he will place Mr. Meister’s body. The container is a chipwood box intended only for direct cremation according to the specifications outlined by the Province of Ontario regulations. We place Mr. Meister, who remains wrapped in the sheet we used at the time of the removal, into the container. We ensure that the lock of his granddaughter’s hair and the note have remained in place. The lid of the casket is placed on top but not secured. It will only be screwed down once the coroner has come to the funeral home and has reviewed the death certificate and if he/ she “releases” the body for cremation. The papers which will accompany the body to the crematorium are secured to the top of the casket which has been marked with the family name, date and

the name of the funeral home in indelible black ink. The lights in the “prep” room are turned off, the door is closed and Dave returns to the office to resume completing the paperwork on the Meister call.

Before leaving the funeral home, Dave calls the answering service to sign out the lines for the night. He informs the answering service that he has the pager and will be taking any calls which come between 6 p.m. and the next morning. As Dave checks to make sure the doors are locked, he turns off all but the two lights in the front window and the hall light. A sign is placed on the window of the front door with information about how to reach a funeral director during the night. With one last look back, Dave turns on the outside lights, locks the back door to the funeral home and leaves for his own home.

## CHAPTER 5

### DAY 2

### SUNDAY

#### **The Day in Preview**

The second day takes us to the prep room where we observe Dave dressing Mrs. Johnson prior to the arrival of the hairdresser. The task of reconstructing the physical and social identity of the dead is a ritual performed by the funeral directors on the dead for the bereaved through embalming, dressing and the application of cosmetics (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999: 11). These processes help decontaminate the polluted corpse while recreating the deceased's personal identity so that the body may take its place as the main performer on the stage. Paradoxically, embalming and other funerary practices both tame death and yet simultaneously contribute to the hidden character of death. By concealing the body's decomposition, death is at least temporarily abolished through these practices (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:201). Jessica Mitford argues that we attempt to deny our own mortality when we make the dead look alive (Mitford1963). Conversely, Folytn, in her article "Dead Beauty: The Preservation, Memorialization and Destruction of Beauty in Death" suggests that analysts such as Mitford fail to understand that to beautify death is to acknowledge it (Foltyn 1999:79).



Mary Bradbury suggests that for Westerners the body has become a container within which mortality resides (Bradbury 1999:118). In relationship to the living world, the corpse is like a shadow of its former self (Bradbury 1999:126). The task of the funeral director is to create a memory picture in which the bereaved are able to discover the mortality of the embodied self of the deceased (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:126). According to Foltyn when the dead are aesthetically transformed into memory, the living relatives are transformed into mourners and the boundary of death is transgressed (Foltyn 1995:72). Furthermore, she argues that beauty becomes a way of denying death but also a way of reaffirming what makes life worth living. In this respect, Foltyn echoes Lévi-Strauss who observes that the mediation of binary oppositions, such as death and life, beauty and ugliness and vitality and decay, allows us to neutralize potentially destructive experiences (Lévi-Strauss 1967). The final procedure of transforming the corpse into a social entity is the process of casketing in which the body is laid out in a restful pose.

The funeral director in contemporary North America has assumed the role once held in many social contexts by the midwife, who washed, dressed and laid out the deceased in their home prior to the wake, which was also held in the family home ( Pine 1975:17, Small 1976: 25; Verdier 1976). Over the last century, death has moved out of the domestic space and into the public space of the funeral home, reformatting the wake into what we now refer to as the visitation (Davies 2002:35). In contemporary North America, the wake is often fused to the funeral service because it is held on the same premises (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:208). Contessa Small suggests there are several advantages for bereaved families when they hold the wake in the funeral home which

include allowing the family to spend time away from the deceased and the creation of a less dreary public space for visitation (Small 1976:24, 26). As well, Small points out that whereas wakes were once a community affair in which friends, neighbors and distant relative stepped in and assisted, in contemporary North America wakes are no longer a community effort but rather these tasks are accomplished with the assistance of the funeral director (Small 1997:27).

Sunday brings us face to face with the death of a child, baby Kayla. Child deaths in Canada are a rare occurrence in the twenty-first century, having reached an all time low of 5.6 deaths per 1000 live births (Northcott 2001:136). In our society, the death of a child is acknowledged as one of life's worst tragedies (Ariès 1981:584). Statistics Canada calculates the number of children's deaths to be 5.6 per 1000 live births in Ontario. The rate for girls (5.4) is slightly lower than that for boys (5.7) (Statistics Canada 2001-2005 /updated 2008-01-14). As the rate of infant mortality decreases and life expectancy increases, parents expect to outlive their children. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the death of a child is acknowledged to be one of life's worst tragedies (Ariès 1962:401).

Unlike a stillborn infant, at eighteen months, baby Kayla had become a part of the social world around her. Sociologists such as David Sudnow and Jenny Hockey distinguish the difference between a stillbirth and the death of a child in terms of the amount of time invested by parents in the child as (s)he becomes a person (Sudnow 1970:113; Hockey 1999:75).

On Saturday, we became aware that when the "first call" is taken by a funeral director, the front stage as well as the backstage is prepared for the actors which include

the funeral director, the deceased and the mourners. Each one steps into the role they will perform in the arrangement of the care and disposition of a loved one. This act is repeated with every new or “first call” to the funeral home. When we observe Dave sitting with Kayla’s parents we are reminded that funeral directors perform a complicated role as mediators who must balance emotion, personal taste, and religious belief in their interactions with every family. The choices made by Kayla’s family will be motivated by their personal desire to fulfill what they perceive is right and meaningful.

Day 2 introduces us to some of the ways in which death can be transformed. The social identity of the deceased is recreated by the funeral director who mediates between life and death through the processes of embalming, dressing, application of cosmetics and casketing of the deceased. In addition, we revisit the construction of roles and performances by the funeral director and the mourners in making funeral arrangements as well as during a visitation. We will see for the first time that the roles of the funeral director and those of the clergy are not mutually exclusive but rather that these professionals work together for the benefit of the bereaved and the dead. Here, my findings contrast with those of Mitford (1963, 1998), Bowman (1959) and Fulton (1961) who argue that the relationship between clerics and funeral directors is one of opposition.

**Night:** A quiet night passes. No “calls” are taken by the answering service.

**Sunday Morning:**

Dave arrives at the funeral home at 8:30 a.m. He begins the morning by signing the phone lines back to Marlatt’s from the answering service. As he walks from room to room turning on the lights, he goes through the daily maintenance list checking the lights overhead as well as the lamps, the carpets, the bathrooms for toilet tissues and hand towels, and the sound system. The sign on the front door is removed and the door is unlocked.

Mr. Meister lays in the cremation container in the prep room waiting. On Monday morning, after his death has been registered at the Town Hall, he will be transported to the crematorium by a staff member of the crematorium. For his family, it is a time of gathering together in their grief at their home.

Chris’s aunt, Mrs. Johnson, who died on Friday, lies on the embalming table. She was an elderly woman living in “the Villa”, a local nursing home, and had been ill for a long period, coming to the doorstep of death several times. Nonetheless, her sudden death came as a surprise to the entire family who had visited with her at the nursing home the prior day.

As the executor for his aunt’s estate, Chris, like all newly bereaved families, had to come to the funeral home shortly after her death to make the arrangements for her funeral and the final disposal of her body. As his aunt’s health declined over a period of months, Chris had taken the initiative to pre-arrange the details of the funeral by filling in

the vital statistic forms, choosing a casket and a format for the funeral. Since his aunt was a veteran, Chris had contacted the federal government ministry of Veteran Affairs regarding the provisions they make available to veterans and their families at the time of death. These provisions include financial support and the opportunity to bury either the body or cremains in a military section of a local cemetery. Nonetheless, as with all pre-arranged funerals, there always remain details that can only be completed after the time of death. Chris has chosen a traditional funeral for his aunt, including embalming and visitation. He has also requested a legion service to honor her years of military service during the Second World War. Although Chris is a capable embalmer, he prefers to leave the procedure of embalming his aunt to Dave.

This morning, Mrs. Johnson dressed in the clothes which her family has chosen, remains lying on the prep room table waiting for Bonnie, the hairdresser, to style her hair. Once her hair is styled, she can be placed in the casket and her makeup applied. Embalming, dressing, styling hair and makeup are ways of transforming Mrs. Johnson's body from a dead corpse into a symbol of who she was in life. Later in the afternoon, we will take her into the visitation room for the evening visitation.

Meanwhile, the funeral directors have been on call waiting to hear from the parents of an infant who is dying at home. Childhood deaths have become increasingly rare in Canada, so much so that the death of a child has come to be unexpected (Northcott 2001:136).

No funeral arrangements have been made with the pre-planners, Marnie and Ron, or with either of the funeral directors. In fact, the contact person has been the Regional

Manager, Andrew, whose his wife is a friend of the mother of the baby. With no firsthand knowledge of the family, it is difficult to know what to expect when the call does come. That call comes this morning around noon, not from the parents but from Andrew. The child has died at home.

Dave immediately calls the parents, Mr. and Mrs. Mason. This call is to let them know that he is there to assist them in any way as well as to set a time for them to make arrangements. Dave inquires whether they would like him to come to the house to meet with them or if they prefer to come to the funeral home. The parents decide they would rather meet at the funeral home. The Masons tell Dave that they will bring their infant daughter with them. It is a difficult time for the family now that the end they had been waiting for has arrived.

This is not the first time that Dave has sat down with grieving parents to make arrangements. It is a role that he is not entirely comfortable with regardless of the age of the child. He is not alone in feeling this way. When asked about making arrangements for stillbirths and children, the ten funeral directors whom I approached admitted that there is always a sense of unease when approaching the bereaved parents. Chris says “I have learned to block out personal feelings around the death of a child. How could I serve a family if I become as emotional as they are?” With child mortality rates at an all time low, perhaps it is not surprising that funeral directors are not taught how to make arrangements with bereaved<sup>8</sup> parents. Looking back at post-grad<sup>8</sup> topics over the last 50

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<sup>8</sup> A two day post grad course is required for all funeral directors every five years. The course focuses on topics which the Board of Funeral Service believes to be relevant to the practice of funeral professionals in their work with bereaved families as well as their role as death educators in the community.

years, Bob says that “most topics focused on the more technical aspects of funeral directing rather than the psychology of grief.” He cannot recall any discussion about working with bereaved parents as being different from working with anyone who is bereaved. In searching his notes made as a funeral service student, Dave cannot find even a paragraph which focuses on child mortality.

This baby girl, aged nine months, is the first deceased young child I have encountered during my fieldwork. Up to this time, all the infant deaths I have observed have been stillbirths. Dave remarks to me, as he has several other times that he has held many dead babies but he has never held a living one. He is 22 years old, single and has no children or friends with children. Dave has been a licensed funeral director for a year, having been accepted directly from high school into the funeral service program at Humber College in Toronto<sup>9</sup>.

Sitting down with bereaved parents is never an easy task for a funeral director regardless of how many years of experience (s)he has arranging funerals and memorials.

In Chris’ experience,

“Because most parents are in extreme shock, it becomes a fight to get parents to open up and communicate with me. It becomes a conversation where I ask questions and they simply answer. The funeral director really has to think on the fly. At the same time (s)he must be prepared before the family comes in. Most times you have a sense of the age of the child.”

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<sup>9</sup> Approximately 30% of the funeral directors who graduate from the funeral service program are admitted directly from high school. The remaining students have chosen funeral service as a second career and come from a wide range of first careers (2008 Jeff Caldwell, Humber College Funeral Service Program).

Today, Dave's role will be to sit with Mr. and Mrs. Mason, who have suffered a terrible blow. He hopes that he will be able to assist them in making good decisions which will enable them to move forward. The first step will be talking with Dave about the life and now death of their daughter, as parents who are mourners. He understands that parents, like all mourners, need to share their experiences, and he is a willing listener.

**Afternoon:**

The Mason family arrives at the funeral home. Janet Mason, the mother is carrying her daughter, Kayla, wrapped in a blanket, in her arms. The baby is still warm, but her skin is now pale in death. Dave asks Janet if she would like him to take the baby but she refuses, saying she wants to hold her child just a little longer. Dave is concerned about making the arrangements while the mother is holding the baby but without saying a word, he escorts the parents to the Alderwoods' Room. Throughout the discussion of arrangements, Steve Mason, the father does most of the talking. Janet continues to hold the baby, sitting at the table and rocking her baby. Occasionally Janet comments, but for the most part, her focus is on the baby in her arms. The parents have decided to cremate Kayla and bury her ashes at a graveside ceremony for family and close friends.

Dave explains to the Masons that Alderwoods' policy is to absorb most of the costs of an infant funeral, including the casket, memorial cards and funeral home costs. Dave shows them a picture of the little white casket in which he will place their daughter. The mother continues to rock the baby, holding her close. It is clear from her body language that she is not ready to let go of the baby. I wonder how the mother must be



feeling since it is clear that once the arrangements are complete she will have to pass the baby to Dave or Paul and leave her behind. At the same time, I wonder how Dave feels about receiving her into his arms and once the parents have left, taking her to the prep room where she will lie until tomorrow morning. I wonder how Paul, who is a grandfather, will feel when he sees this tiny girl in the casket, wrapped in her blanket as if she were sleeping, when he escorts the coroner downstairs to examine her before signing the death certificate. I marvel at how composed Dave and Paul remain during the entire procedure, and I wonder if it is only me that is crying inside for this family. Chris has often told me that to be a good funeral director one must be able to take a giant emotional step back and at the same time, to remain empathetic and compassionate. It is a balancing act. A funeral director who is too distant cannot help a family deal with their own emotions. On the other hand, a funeral director who is overly empathetic or gushes with compassion may be perceived as being “phony” or “laying it on thick”. Dave offers the parents as much time as they need to spend with their baby before they leave the funeral home for their home and other children, without Kayla. When the arrangements are complete, the parents stand up hesitantly and the Mother passes the baby from her arms to Dave, without saying a word. Later, Dave tells me “this was one of the most surreal moments I have ever had working in the industry”. He adds that he hopes the parents did not sense how awkward he felt making arrangements with them while Janet was holding the baby in her arms.

In other cases of infant deaths Dave has experienced, parents were making arrangements following a stillbirth rather than for a baby who died at home. In the

instance of a stillbirth, the parents leave the baby at the hospital to be picked up by the funeral home. It may be a day or even several days following the stillbirth before the parents come to the funeral home to make arrangements. Sometimes, it is the grandparents who meet with the funeral director in an attempt to soften the blow or to spare the mother and father the harsh reality of their loss. In Chris' experience of more than twenty years, it is most often the father who came to the funeral home to make the arrangements because the mother was still in the hospital. Arranging the care for a stillborn child is the easiest to arrange because "there is not the emotional attachment with this baby as there would be with a child that has lived for one day or fifteen years." Sociologist David Sudnow suggests that stillborn infants lack personhood, having never taken a breath or cried and as such become a special category of the dead (Sudnow 1970:113; Hockey 1999:75).

During my fieldwork, parents made arrangements with Marlatt's for the disposal of ten stillbirths. In every instance but one, the stillborn infant was cremated, the ashes were taken from the funeral home, and the visitation and memorial service, if conducted, were done away from the funeral home with no funeral staff present. In the single exception, the family decided to have a visitation in the funeral home followed by a memorial service in the chapel and a burial attended by only family the following day. For healthy babies, aspects of personhood are assumed after birth, often through religious rituals such as baptism or baby naming. Until recently in Euro-American societies, no such rituals existed for stillborn infants. Hockey and Walter describe programs in the United Kingdom which encourage parents to spend time participating in activities which

would “affirm the human status of their stillborn child, as well as the set of relationships within which it was located” (Hockey 1999:74, Walter 1990: 273). In contrast, the parents I met during my fieldwork chose not to bond with their stillborn child. For many in contemporary Canadian society, the stillborn child remains de-personalized, making a funeral unnecessary. The decision to cremate affords a simple solution for the disposal of the body of the infant. When I questioned Chris about the ashes of these babies, he told me that most often the family takes the ashes but that occasionally he has buried a stillborn. In those instances, the baby is most often buried in an existing family grave. In contrast, he believes that most children who die are buried so that “the family can have a place to memorialize the child, a place they can always return to.” Locally, some but not all of the cemeteries offer the family of deceased children a special section of the cemetery which is dedicated to children.

The only family that chose to have a visitation and service for their stillborn child had also chosen to hold their daughter. At the visitation there were pictures of the baby in her parent’s arms as well as several pictures of her wrapped in a blanket in a bassinette. The service of memory, conducted by Father Curtin, the Roman Catholic priest of St. Augustine’s Church in Dundas, was attended by close to a hundred people who came to show their support for the bereaved parents and grandparents. Father Curtin began the funeral service by welcoming the baby’s soul into the community of believers. After the service, Father Curtin explained to me that the Catholic Church has changed its views on stillbirth because the reality of an infant’s death is difficult enough for parents to face without the added anxiety that the child might not be welcomed into heaven because it

has not been baptized. When I inquired from Father Curtin if he had often officiated at funeral services for stillborn infants, he told me that such services had been rare during his more than twenty years at St. Augustine's church.

For the other parents of stillborn infants who came to Marlatt's during my fieldwork, funeral directors always suggested ritual services which would afford the family closure. However, this typically evoked a polite "Thank you for your concern; we will do something on our own later." The offer is always made, leaving the door open should a family change their mind at a later date to return for a memorial service tailored to their needs.

A coroner must come to the funeral home and sign a death certificate before Kayla's body can be sent for cremation. This standard procedure rarely takes more than a few minutes during which the coroner reads the death certificate which has been signed by the attending physician and certifies the cause of death is without "malice". In most instances the coroner does not examine the body. It is different when the coroner comes for the baby. Although Kayla is well known at the Children's Hospital where she has been treated since birth for her chromosomal abnormality, the coroner does not know the child or anything about her. He insists on seeing the body as well as speaking to the physician who signed the death certificate. The coroner points out that although we have a death certificate, it is most unusual for an infant to die at home and to be carried into the funeral home. He would be remiss if he did not ensure that this body was that of the indicated child by speaking to the family physician. The telephone discussion between the doctors is extensive as they review the diagnosis, the progression of the illness and

finally the ultimate cause of death. Once the coroner is satisfied that there was no foul play involved, he signs the certificate. All that remains is to register Kayla's death on Monday morning. Before moving Mrs. Johnson, Dave places Kayla, still wrapped in her blanket into the small white baby casket. He closes the top of the casket and marks her name on it. Once the coroner has signed her release, Dave will attach the cremation forms which serve to further identify the body in the casket.

While Dave was making the arrangements with the Mason family, Bonnie, the hair dresser, has arrived and styled Mrs. Johnson's hair. Once the hair has been styled, Dave can apply makeup to the face and hands. The funeral directors at Marlatt's try to use as little makeup as possible, preferring to give the skin a more natural color by using a small amount of tint in the embalming fluid. Before applying any makeup, Dave wipes away the moisturizer cream which was placed on her face to prevent dehydration following embalming. He brushes on a small amount of skin tone makeup along her cheeks and forehead. Using a fine paintbrush, Dave paints the lips using a color as close as possible to the color of Mrs. Johnson's lips in the photograph which Chris has brought for the purpose of recreating the image of his aunt. A fine white powder is dusted over her face to set the makeup. Dave places a towel beneath Mrs. Johnson's hand so that he can lightly apply some color to her hands. This is the next step in the process of reconstructing Mrs. Johnson's identity so that her body will as closely as possible resemble her living body (Hallam 1999:12). Sociologist Elizabeth Hallam suggests there is a sense of collusion between the funeral director and the family in the representation of the deceased which will be put on public display (Hallam1999:135). The final element of

reconstructing the identity of Mrs. Johnson will take place with the presentation and positioning of her body in the casket.

Moving Mrs. Johnson from the prep table to the casket requires several people to manually lift her body even though she is not a particularly tall or obese woman. The alternative method is to use the lifting device which is kept in the corner of the prep room. In choosing to use the lifting device, any funeral director can easily and safely move bodies weighing as much as 500 pounds from the prep table without the help of other staff members. The lifting device, built of tubular steel, stands almost five feet in height. It is balanced by two legs at its base which can be adjusted from 22 inches to 40 inches, allowing it to fit around the bottom of the prep table. A steel suspension bar with telescoping ends permits the length of the bar to be adjusted to the size of the body. Four adjustable straps are placed beneath the body for support: one supporting the head, beneath the shoulders, the lower torso and the legs. Once the straps are in place, they are hooked onto the suspension bar. For ease of the operator, a single foot is operated by means of a hydraulic valve which allows the body to be lifted and then lowered into the casket. Rubber tired swivel casters allow the funeral director to move the lifting device with almost no effort even when carrying a body from the table to the casket. Moving a body using the lifting device is respectful to the body of the deceased. As well, the device saves the funeral director(s) from unnecessary back strain from lifting the “dead weight” of the corpse.

The transition from the prep table to the casket is symbolic of the transition Mrs. Johnson’s has made from a profane corpse to a beloved and even sacred artifact which in

itself symbolizes who she was in life. The presentation of Mrs. Johnson's body in the casket is very important. She is placed with her head on a pillow, her arms and hand positioned over her stomach. Positioning the body is done carefully to ensure that the body does not lie too low in the casket and that the head, resting on the pillow, is not overextended and arching the neck. This gives Mrs. Johnson a natural and restful appearance in which real death is carefully hidden (Howarth 1996:166; Hallam 1999:135). Preparing the body, particularly the hands and face has been practiced since ancient times. Dating back to the Neanderthals particular attention was assigned to the body parts which give us our distinctive appearance and identity (Foltyn 1995:77). Dave regards Mrs. Johnson's body from several different angles making small adjustments beneath her head and upper body. Once he is satisfied, Dave removes the towel from under her hands and closes the bottom of the casket leaving only Mrs. Johnson's head, upper body and hands visible.

Mrs. Johnson is now ready to leave the backstage area of the funeral home and to make her appearance on the front stage, in the visitation room. Dave covers her face with a Kleenex to prevent any smudging of her makeup on the casket's interior before he partially closes the top of the casket. The ramp is steep and requires two people to guide the casket in order to prevent bumping into the wall.

The front room of the funeral home is flooded with natural sunlight through the windows as we push the casket into place along the wall opposite the windows. Although this is the smaller of the two visitation rooms, many people choose it because they enjoy the natural light for their afternoon visitation. The casket is lifted from the church truck

that has been used for transport from the prep room onto a bier which is covered with a simple cloth skirt. Instead of a casket spray, Chris has chosen to place a Canadian flag as a symbol of his Aunt's years of service in the military. To the left of the casket, we place a small wreath bearing a number of poppies which has been sent by the local Veteran's association. Other flower arrangements are placed around the casket and on the end tables. On the right side of the casket, we place a picture board which chronicles Mrs. Johnson's life from childhood until weeks before her death.

**Evening:**

Visitation for Mrs. Johnson is scheduled from 7 p.m. until 9 p.m. Chris and his family arrive at 6:30 p.m. This will allow the family to have some time alone with Mrs. Johnson prior to the public visitation. As well, it will afford Dave some time to make any cosmetic adjustments to the body or to reposition an item of jewelry prior to the public viewing. Although Chris has seen his aunt before, this will be the first time the rest of the family will have seen her since her death. This period is a very emotional time for every family as they come face to face with the reality of the death of a loved one.

There is nothing a funeral director enjoys hearing more than a family member praising his work as an embalmer. Chris has said on numerous occasions that money is made in the funeral industry in the embalming room and not in the casket display room. He believes that families who see their loved one transformed from the ravages of age and disease are more likely to return to the funeral home for a traditional service. Bob agrees with Chris asserting that one of the reasons that many families turned to cremation



and memorial services because they were “unhappy with the way their family member looked in the casket.” This supports sociologists Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth’s belief that real death has been transformed “into fictionalized images” which are desired by the bereaved family and their friends who “consume them”, (Hallam 1999:135).

Although not a large number of visitors come to the funeral home, the evening passes quickly. Mrs. Johnson is an octogenarian widow who has been living at a local senior’s nursing home for a long period of time. Prior to her move to the nursing home she lived in a small city near Hamilton. Had the visitation been held at the senior’s home, it is likely that more residents would have come to pay their respects to her and the family. During my fieldwork, although there were many seniors who had lived in local nursing homes, not one family chose to have a visitation away from the funeral home. However, there were several families who did choose to have one hour of visiting prior to a funeral or memorial service held in the chapel of the nursing home. Attendance by elderly friends, nursing home residents and nursing home staff were markedly higher than when the visitation and service were held at the funeral home.

By 8:30 p.m., only family remains in the visitation room. Mrs. Johnson’s sister can be found sitting on a chair which has been placed by the head of the casket. Her brother, Chris’s father, remains seated in a large chair, at a distance from the casket. The tension of the first few minutes of the “viewing” has decreased over the evening as family members spoke with their guests. Frequently the conversation drifted to Mrs. Johnson’s

war time efforts in the army as guests noticed the Canadian Flag emblem on the memorial cards.

Normally, funeral home staff can be found at the front door or in the office during a visitation. This allows staff to be visible and available to the family and their guests. Regardless of what other tasks must be completed in the private “backstage” sector of the funeral home, there is never a time when a staff person is not present in the public “frontstage” area. Bob, Chris and Paul, who have long histories of community involvement and service, frequently know family members and their visitors socially as well as professionally. Nonetheless, once they have exchanged greetings with the family, as funeral home staff they withdraw from the visitation room. However, tonight, Chris is the family and he welcomes all the staff into the visitation room to spend time with him and his family as their guests. As 9 p.m. approaches, Chris encourages his family to prepare to take their leave by saying good-bye to Mrs. Johnson.

The funeral is scheduled for the early afternoon and Dave decides that we will do the “changeover” from the visitation room to the chapel in the morning rather than this evening. If the funeral had been scheduled for the morning, the casket, flowers, and cards would have been moved to the chapel as soon as the family had left the visitation. Instead, we tidy and vacuum the visitation rooms, the lounge and the bathrooms in preparation for the morning before turning off the lights. Dave prepares to close the funeral home for the evening, retracing his steps from the morning, room by room. Before leaving he signs the lines over to the answering service, informing them that he has the pager should there be

any calls during the night and finally, he places the sign on the door informing any callers of how to reach him by phone.

The evening ritual completed, we remark as we take one last look at the board before leaving for the night that it has been a busy weekend. Three calls are on the board – one traditional funeral for Monday afternoon; two cremations, one set for a graveside funeral and the other, a memorial service on Tuesday.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DAY 3**

### **MONDAY**

#### **The Day in Preview**

During the first two days we observed funeral directors performing their roles as mediators and ritual specialists in the initial stages of arranging a funeral or memorial service. As well, we observed how the work of the funeral director re-sacralizes or culturalizes the body of the deceased through the processes of embalming, dressing, application of cosmetics and casketing which turn the corpse into a guest who has an appropriate place among the living. We noted that these practices simultaneously tame death and yet contribute to the hidden character of death. Death is transformed and neutralized but not denied. We observed that the choices made by the bereaved are not as simple as Mitford suggests regardless of whether a funeral is prearranged or arranged at need. The choices made by family members are motivated by their desire to fulfill cultural ideals of what is appropriate and what makes sense of death's tragedy. When arranging a funeral, the funeral director must balance the domains of emotion, spirituality, personal taste, religious commitment and commerce.

During this third day, we will observe the funeral director as he prepares for and facilitates a traditional funeral which will be followed by cremation and the meal which follows the funeral and the process of cremation.

Emile Durkheim writes that funeral rituals enable the group to affirm its existence as a collectivity and to offer comfort to its members, especially the immediate kin (Durkheim 1965:423). In his book “Funerals and How to Improve Them” Tony Walter suggests that funerals also include social, psychological, spiritual, physical and economic aspects which impact on the dead, the bereaved and the community (Walter 1990:41). Three actors have been identified by Hertz as participants in funeral and mourning rites: the corpse, soul and the bereaved who are ritually moved through these rites which change their status (Hertz 1960:29, 45; van Gennep 1960: vii). Funeral rites carry the mourners through the stages of separation, transition and reincorporation (van Gennep 1960: vii, 3). The period between the death and the funeral is a period of liminal time. Following Roger Grainger, Tony Walter states that the main purpose of a funeral is to signify that a death has occurred, a human life has ended and that this event must be interpreted in some way (Walter 1990:111). The funeral rites move the mourners out of the liminal state.

Prior to the Reformation, the funeral was a rite of passage where the task of the living was to assist the passage of the dead (Walter 1990:97). While funerals once focused on the deceased, contemporary funerals are often preoccupied with the mourners (Walter 1990:130). As we will see on Day 3, funerals are ritual performances which are carefully orchestrated from start to conclusion. Walter suggests that “like any religious

act of worship, the funeral is a theatrical performance” which dramatizes the feelings of the participants. In contemporary North American funerals, the clergy or celebrant seeks to offer hope to the bereaved as well as focusing on the unique life and death of the deceased. Contemporary funerals are frequently a balance between the traditional liturgies of official religious institutions and the popular spirituality of the bereaved. In our ethnography of Day 3, following the brief Veteran’s Service, the Johnson funeral will draw upon the more traditional Anglican funeral service. The Veteran’s Service is an example of what Hobsbawm describes as an invented tradition, a “set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain norms and values of behavior by repetition, which implies a continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm 1992: 2). It is not uncommon to find invented traditions such as the Veteran’s Service grafted on to older traditions of funerary ritual. Although Heinz (1999) suggests that funerals are custom made in the way that automobiles are, and that the role of mourners in directing funerals is quite passive, we will observe that Mrs. Johnson’s funeral has been transformed from the standard Anglican funeral service and personalized with the addition of poetry and music which reflect the tastes of the family.

Following the service, we will observe Mrs. Johnson’s casket as it proceeds to the crematorium and through the ritual process of cremation. The popularity of cremation in the twentieth century was attributed by many, including historian Philippe Ariès (1981) to a radical denial of death. In his book, *Purified by Fire*, author Stephen Prothero suggests that rather than being a denial of death, cremation is the method of disposal chosen by

individuals who are “more stoic and insistent on the real” (Prothero 2001:207).

Furthermore, Glennys Howarth and Peter Jupp suggest that cremation is not a denial of death but rather an “anonymous technical method for speeding up the dissolution of the body in to a few pounds of featureless ashes” (Howarth and Jupp 1995:61). Both embalming and cremation turn away from these aspects of death which include decay and dissolution.

The Cremation Association of North America (CANA) identifies eight key trends which have affected the growing popularity of cremation: people are dying at older ages, environmental considerations are becoming more important, ties to tradition are becoming weaker, while education levels are rising (Cremation Association of North America 2005, Prothero 2001:207; Cronin 1996:11). Economic factors are not a consideration, as those choosing cremation are often affluent (Prothero 2001:210). Although slow to accept cremation as an alternative to burial, funeral directors have come to believe that cremation is a matter of choice and should be regarded as a preparation for memorialization (Prothero 2001:192; Cronin 1996:44; Kubasek 1990:45). In Western culture, mourners rarely witness the consumption of the body in the retort at the crematorium. Although families are able to attend a final committal service at the crematorium, in the same way that families accompany a body to the cemetery, most families choose to take their leave of their dead at the funeral home.

Day 3 introduces us to the funeral ritual which includes invented traditions such as the Veteran’s Service as well as more the more official liturgy of the Anglican church

funeral service. As well, we confront cremation as a method of rapid disposal of the body as an alternative to ground burial or encryment in a Mausoleum.

**Night:**

Another quiet night – no calls during the night.

**Morning:**

Once the morning conference call has been completed, a busy day lies ahead. These telephone conferences allow the “sister” funeral homes which are located in Hamilton, Kitchener and Cambridge, which is regarded as Alderwoods’ western Ontario group of funeral homes to communicate with each other and with the regional manager, Andrew. Information about the calls on their boards, staffing concerns as well as any problems which have occurred in the past few days can be aired during the call. The conference call is often upbeat and includes congenial bantering. Serious issues involving a particular funeral home or individual are never aired during the telephone conference. On a quiet morning, Chris is most likely to take the call in his office, but today, since the staff is preparing the home for the afternoon funeral, Chris takes the call in the back hall and puts it on speakerphone so everyone can hear.

The crematorium has been notified that the coroner has signed for both Mr. Meister and Baby Kelly. The death certificates are taken to the City Hall where they are registered and the cards permitting burial or cremation are issued. Without these



certificates it is not possible to send the body to the crematorium or to commit the remains to their final resting place. A staff person from the crematorium will pick up both caskets later that morning when they return the cremains belonging to another family. The crematorium located 30km away in Paris is the only one of the three local crematoria that will pickup bodies and drop off ashes at funeral homes. The other two crematoria require the funeral home to bring the body or to pick up cremains. On a busy day, the additional service provided by the Paris crematorium is welcomed by the Marlatt's staff because it affords them the manpower and time necessary to prepare for a visitation or to orchestrate a funeral. The organization of time and manpower is critical to the efficient running of the funeral home on the morning of a funeral. Regardless of the number of people expected to attend the service, vehicles must be washed and polished and put into place and the funeral home and chapel vacuumed and dusted before the family arrives. The funeral director in charge of "taking the funeral out" is responsible for coordinating the activities before, during and following the funeral service. The funeral director in charge today is Bob. Having assigned duties to all the staff, Bob will concern himself with the needs of the family and the minister.

The funeral today is for Chris's aunt, Mrs. Johnson, so I did not expect to find Chris overseeing the morning activities and the setup of the chapel. This morning his feet are firmly planted on the organizational side of the industry but this afternoon he will take on the role of the bereaved, and join the rest of his family at the front of the chapel.

The funeral home is always a beehive of activity when staff are preparing for a funeral. The routine or "changeover" as it is called by the staff, is the same for all

funerals: dust and vacuum the chapel; move the casket and flowers from the visitation room to the front of the chapel; place the visitation book and memorial cards for family and guests; designate the reserved seating for family and pallbearers; check the lights and sound system. The hearse or coach, as it is often referred to by Chris, is parked in front of the chapel for later use.

If a funeral is taking place in the morning, the changeover is done following the visitation, on the evening prior to the funeral. Most often, however, the changeover is done at night because it is impossible to predict with any certainty that there will be no calls during the night. When the funeral director closes the funeral home in the evening, it is always left ready for the morning. While “walk in” families, those who arrive without calling ahead or making an appointment were a rare occurrence during my fieldwork, there were several “walk-ins” who did arrive as soon as Marlatt’s opened in the morning on the day of a funeral. When, as in the case of Chris’s aunt, the funeral takes place in the afternoon, “the changeover” may be left until the morning of the funeral.

The small house used as Marlatt’s Family Center for receptions needs to be cleaned and tidied before setting up for the reception which will follow the funeral. The reception house is staffed by one or two women who are paid to act as hostesses for the reception depending on the number of people the family expects to be hosting. Marg and Gert are responsible for setting up the food which is brought by the caterer, making the coffee and later, helping the family and their guests. Paul heads over to the family center; Bob and I begin moving flowers into the chapel.

While we are busy in the funeral home and the family center, Chris is working in the office. It seems strange that Chris is answering phones and doing business as usual while we set up for his aunt's funeral in the chapel. Bob recalls when his wife, Sarah, died many years ago, that he had no hand in organizing, setting up or directing her funeral. Nonetheless, during that time he arranged and organized five other funerals in order to keep himself busy doing something familiar rather than confronting his own grief. Perhaps it is not too different for Chris. Even though he is a mourner, Chris goes through the motions of supporting his own family and preparing them for the funeral in his role as a funeral director. For a short period of time, he stands on both sides of the line as a funeral director and as a mourner. In two hours he will cross over that line and enter the funeral home as a mourner, the same way hundreds of other mourners have before him.

Preparing for this funeral is no different from preparing for any other funeral even though this time it is Chris's family that has lost a loved one. According to every funeral director that I spoke with, every funeral is important. Each family is important and needs to feel that the attention of the funeral home staff is focused, anticipating as well as meeting their needs. Vanderlyne Pine suggests that role of the funeral director requires him/her to treat each death "as important and ceremonially worthwhile, even though, to society, it may not be so (Pine 1975: 37).

Shortly after I began my fieldwork, a local family, which was financially challenged, suffered a bereavement. Alderwoods, the parent company of the Marlatt funeral home has implemented a plan which they refer to as 'the golden rule' plan for just

such calls. Jessica Mitford cynically suggests that these plans are intended to maintain client loyalty by “doing whatever is necessary” to keep their business (Mitford 1998: 32). In contrast, Alderwoods’ staff maintain that the plan effectively ensures that every family has access to a funeral that is dignified, meets their emotional needs but does not “break them financially”. Marlatt’s funeral directors claim they are sensitive to the needs of families on many levels including emotional, social and financial. The “golden rule plan” allows a family an option other than utilizing the city’s social service program for financial aid, enabling them to maintain their sense of self respect. The funeral director meeting with the family assists them in making choices which will allow them to remain within their budget but will be respectful and reflective of their desire to honor the deceased. The relationship which develops between the funeral director and their client is particularly important in the community funeral home and great effort is made by directors to project a sense of care and concern (Pine 1975:125).

In her book *The American Way of Death*, Jessica Mitford suggests that funeral directors feed on the guilt which families feel following the death of a loved one in order to sell them costly funeral merchandise and services (Mitford 1963,1998). During the “golden rule” arrangements at Marlatt’s, the widow was concerned about what people might think if she did not have what appeared to be an expensive casket. Chris reassured her that the casket she had chosen, covered in blue cloth, would look very nice with a casket spray. An alternative choice was that the casket could be completely covered with a pall, a large cloth which can be draped over the top and drapes to the floor. It is not often that a pall is used at the funeral home. Most often one is placed on the casket when

the deceased is a member of a funeral or memorial society. Funeral societies and their members “seek modesty, simplicity and dignity in their final arrangements over which they have control” (Mitford 1998:243). The funeral society in Hamilton always uses a simple cloth pall as a means of disguising the casket which has been built using either unfinished wood or particle board. Chris also reminded the widow that people were coming to offer their condolences to her and pay their respects to her husband and not to survey the cost of the casket. Ultimately she chose a simple casket spray which was laid upon the casket. During my fieldwork, I have frequently seen funeral directors suggesting less costly alternatives but I have never observed a funeral director trying to sell a more expensive casket or urn to a family which did not want it. In fact, there was a time when Chris actually dissuaded a family from purchasing an elaborate urn because he knew the family had not decided whether to bury the ashes or place them in a niche. By selecting a less expensive urn than their original choice, the family could keep their options open for the later placement of the cremains. After this incident, Chris commented to me that if his intentions had been motivated only by making money for the company, he would have had no problem selling the more expensive, larger urn. Instead, he discussed the pros and cons of both urns and helped the family make a wise choice which they would not regret at a later date. Funeral directors emphasize that the service which families receive today will often determine whether or not the family will utilize the services of the funeral home at another time. Journalist Jessica Mitford is an excellent example of a bereaved individual who believed she had been pressured into making choices following the death of her young son. She would spend the next thirty years of her life campaigning against

the funeral industry which she believed was one of the “seamier manifestations of American capitalism” (Lynch 2000:128). Any family which is not happy with the service they receive or feel they have not been charged properly for either goods or services can easily damage the reputation of the funeral home. In a community funeral home, the good name and reputation of the funeral home is one of the most important assets and it must be sustained. Their reputation is managed by means of personal contact with and personal service to the bereaved family (Pine 1975:74).

As Chris had predicted to the widow, when the visitation room and later the chapel were set up with the family’s picture boards and flowers sent by friends, it was lovely. I believe that the widow was pleasantly surprised when she arrived for the visitation. Nothing in the room differentiated this visitation from any other visitation or chapel service that I observed being held at the funeral home. One aspect which has remained with me is the sincere appreciation shown to the staff by the new widow who shook everyone’s hand and thanked us for treating her as if she were a millionaire. Although Marlatt’s has been a corporately owned funeral home for many years, it has remained a community funeral home which prides itself in giving personal service to every family as if they were a family member .

**Afternoon:**

One hour before the Johnson service we do a quick walk around the funeral home and chapel to ensure that everything is ready for the arrival of Chris and his family. The Canadian flag which normally sits at the front of the chapel has been draped over the

casket as a sign of respect for his aunt, since she was a World War II veteran. The draping of the flag over the casket is a choice which is made by some, but not all, families of veterans. The small wreath with poppies stands to one side of the casket. The memorial cards and register book have been placed on the desk at the side of the chapel for guests to leave their good wishes, write down memories of the deceased or simply to sign their names. The tape for recording the service is in place as is the CD for the Last Post. Poppies for the veterans who will attend the service have been placed in a bowl for distribution in the front visitation room.

Today's funeral will include two services. A veteran's service lasting approximately fifteen minutes honoring Chris' aunt's military service will precede the Anglican funeral service which honors her religious affiliation<sup>10</sup>. For veterans and their families, the veteran's service is perceived to establish continuity with an historic past (Hobsbawm 1992:1)<sup>11</sup>

Two O'clock: any time now, the family will arrive and take their place in the chapel. First, however, there is time for a quick break for the staff before the pace picks up again.

Arriving at the funeral home with his family, Chris has now become one of the bereaved. Admittedly, it is odd to watch Bob escort Chris and his family into the chapel and then go over last minute details about the service. The veterans have also started to

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<sup>10</sup> The Royal Canadian Legion or veteran's association was founded in 1925 to act as a voice for World War I veterans and to provide support, comfort and assistance to active duty troops and veterans. The service which is performed today has grown out of necessity and is built on the tradition and ritual of the military funeral.

<sup>11</sup> For additional discussion on the topic of invented traditions see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992.

arrive. We never know how many veterans will attend. The funeral director contacts the President of the local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion to inform him that a family has requested a veteran's service. The President of the Legion contacts his membership. It is often the same group of men, and occasionally a woman, who give their time to attend the service at the funeral home. Often the veterans knew the deceased person but sometimes, like today, they do not. They come to honor the family and to pay their last respects to the deceased, who like themselves served in the Canadian Armed Forces. At final count there are 12 veterans at this funeral. The day is warm and before long we find them congregated in small groups chatting on the front lawn of the funeral home, their poppies pinned on their lapels and medals worn proudly on their chests. The minister performing the service happens to be the Chaplain for the Legion and he joins the group on the front lawn. There is a sense of camaraderie born of long association as they begin to form rank in a double line to enter the chapel.

The period immediately prior to the funeral is often very difficult for family members. The family approaches the casket to say good-bye and the casket is closed. It is the last time they will be able to see or touch a loved one. Inside the chapel everyone has taken their place. Chris and his family, his parents and sister take their seats in the first three rows of pews. The pallbearers, normally seated on the right hand side are family members and chose to be seated with the rest of the family. As we open the doors to the chapel, the organ concludes its final notes.

The chapel is silent as the veterans begin their march down the center aisle and finish in a formation of three rows standing in front of the casket. The Legion service



commemorates “the loss of a comrade”, commits to memory another “fallen soldier” and beseeches God to take Chris’ aunt into His safekeeping. Standing at “attention” they recite:

They shall not grow old as we  
that are left grow old;  
Age shall not weary them nor  
the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun  
and in the morning  
We will remember them.

At the conclusion of the verse, each veteran comes forward before the casket, pauses briefly, stands a little more erect, salutes and then, removes the poppy from his or her lapel and places it on the casket before saluting again and returning to the group. One by one, they step forward until everyone has placed their poppy. The chapel’s silence is broken only by the sound of the Last Reveille, the bugle tones ringing loud and clear, then silence for a full minute. The veterans stand at attention until the music finishes when they are ordered to be “at ease”. At the conclusion of the service, the President of the Legion steps forward and formally greets the family to offer condolences on behalf of the membership. Several other men also come over to shake Chris’s hand and offer their condolences to the family. Usually they re-form their ranks and march out of the chapel in parade formation. Many of the veterans attending the funeral today have come to know Chris personally and professionally over the last ten years that he has been manager. Today many of them take seats in the pews and remain for the Anglican service.

Rev. James comes forward to begin his service. Although the chaplain for The Villa often performs funeral services at the funeral home for residents of The Villa, today

Rev. James has been requested because he is the Padre for the Armed Forces. As well, he was the visiting Anglican minister at the nursing home. The service follows the Anglican funeral liturgy, opening with remarks and a hymn followed by two biblical readings. The hymns chosen by the family are personal favorites. One of the hymns is sung as a duet by Chris' two daughters. The choice of hymns and the inclusion of poetry is a simple way to personalize the service to reflect the deceased as well as her family.

It is during the eulogy which Chris delivers that we begin to share a real sense of his aunt's life and personality. Rev. James responds with his own message to the family and their guests. He prefaces his remarks by stating how many times he and Chris have worked together at the funeral home or in the church for other bereaved families. He remarks, "How different it is for both of us, you Chris, seated with your family and me, standing here, to be addressing you today as the mourner". The service draws to an end with a concluding hymn. Before everyone is asked to rise, Bob concludes the service with several announcements: cremation is to follow; the register book will remain available for guests to sign following the conclusion of the service and guests are welcomed to join the family for a time of fellowship and refreshments at the J.B. Marlatt Family Center, located next door. The pallbearers are escorted to the chapel doors by a funeral director who will remain with them and instruct them concerning their role in carrying the casket to the hearse. The veterans follow behind the pallbearers and assume their positions as an honor guard, forming a double line outside the chapel door. Bob and Paul turn the casket and wheel it past the family who will follow behind. As the casket approaches the pallbearers, I open both doors of the chapel which allows sunlight to flood

into the chapel. The pallbearers step in to lift the casket which is to be carried to the waiting hearse. The honor guard comes to attention and as the casket goes by, they salute one last time. As soon as the casket is lifted, I step into the road to stop the traffic coming in both directions, something which is done as a part of the recessional in every funeral as a sign of respect for the deceased and their family. It is a small gesture but one which the funeral directors believe is emotionally important for families, as well as a safety measure. Everyone moves slowly and carefully as the casket is placed and then secured in the back of the hearse. The door is closed. The family remains on the sidewalk watching as the hearse pulls out and very slowly drives away en route to the crematorium. These last few minutes are often very emotional for families and today is no exception. Chris draws his family close to him. As the hearse makes the turn around the corner and disappears from sight, the traffic begins to flow again and the only telltale sign of the funeral is the family and friends lingering on the sidewalk before walking to the family center for the reception.

Receptions are like a breath of fresh air after the funeral. The stress of the funeral is left at the front door of the family center. It is not unusual for family members who have left the chapel in tears to arrive at the reception center located next door to the funeral home, dry eyed and ready to mingle with their friends. The family center provides a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Large quantities of food: sandwiches, cheese trays, vegetable platters, desserts and fresh fruit platters cover the two long tables. On a separate table, hot and cold drinks are available.

Marg and Gert, who staff the family center, welcome the family and offer their condolences, shaking each person's hand. They fill the role of hostesses which relieves family members from the obligation of offering refreshments to their guests. The hostesses' main concern, however, is with the bereaved and ensuring that they eat and drink something before they are overwhelmed by well wishing friends. It seems that many bereaved family members lose their appetites and forget to eat or eat very little during the days of visitation and the funeral. Sharing food with friends and family, according to one of the hostesses, is a first step back into the mourners' new life. Today's reception is not any different because it is Chris's family.

Receptions tend initially to be low key but progress quickly towards a more party-like atmosphere replete with laughter among the chorus of voices, each one rising above the other to be heard. There is no time limit set for a reception so that families can enjoy the company of their friends and family. Often family members as well as their guests travel long distances in order to attend the funeral. The reception allows everyone including the bereaved a relaxed venue where they can continue to share memories and catch up on current family news. When the family is preparing to leave, one of the funeral directors meets briefly with the family. At that time, the executor of the estate is given a pouch containing ten death certificates, cards from the flowers and donation cards as well as thank you cards. Usually the funeral director informs the family that Ron, the person responsible for aftercare will be contacting them in the near future to arrange a meeting time. Today, that step will not be necessary because Chris is both funeral director and the bereaved.

Half an hour after leaving the funeral home, the hearse arrives at Holy Cross Crematorium which is located in a picturesque setting of fields and trees, near Paris, Ontario. The crematorium as well as the mausoleum and cemetery which are at the same location are owned and operated by the Catholic Diocese of Hamilton. It is the first crematorium operated by the Diocese and offers its services to Catholics and people of other faiths and cultures. Built in 1998, the crematorium has seen a steady increase in use by families in the Hamilton and Brantford area. Similar to a funeral home, the crematorium also has a back stage and a front stage (Goffman 1959: 22; Davies 1995:62). The utilitarian back stage which includes a refrigerated storage space, three retorts and a working office is used only by crematorium and funeral home staff. In contrast, the front stage, which is available to the families of the deceased as well as individuals who wish to make cremation or burial arrangements directly with the district Cemeterian, is a beautifully decorated and expansive entrance which overlooks the fields and forest which surround the crematorium. During my fieldwork, I accompanied only two families to the crematorium where a short committal service was held prior to the cremation. Neither family chose to make use of the small chapel which is available or to watch the casket being placed in the retort. In line with research by Walter (1994s) and Davies (1995:61), I observed that very few mourners choose to witness the cremation process. The final disposition, by either burial or cremation is not an important part of the funeral ritual and family most often attend briefly and then leave (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:208)

Today, the hearse pulls into the docking bay located at the rear entrance of the crematorium as no family has accompanied the deceased. The service entrance remains

closed and hidden away from the public. It is only used by the funeral homes and the crematorium's service vehicles. A crematorium staff member meets the hearse with a church truck onto which the casket will be placed while it is being registered. The deceased is registered by using the information on the application for cremation forms which have been filled in by the funeral home and signed by the family as well as the coroner. The family application includes the vital statistics of the deceased and the name, address and telephone number and relationship of the applicant to the deceased. A brief explanation of the cremation process can be found at the top of the application. When a family decides upon cremation as the method of disposal, it is with the knowledge that valuables left with the deceased will not be recoverable. As well, the family is informed that the cremated remains or cremains are bone fragments and that these will be further reduced in size and placed in a container which will be returned to the family relatives. Under no circumstances does a member of the crematorium staff open the cremation container or casket holding the body of the deceased. The applicant's signature certifies that they are the "authorized representative" of the deceased and have "full legal authority to authorize the cremation, processing and disposition of the cremated remains of the deceased (application for cremation form – Catholic Diocese of Hamilton). As well, the executor gives their instructions to the crematorium including whether the family will be accompanying the deceased to the crematorium for a Cemetery Chapel service; if the family desires to witness the placement of the casket into the retort and if there is an urn being supplied. A small section is filled out by the funeral director that certifies that the deceased is accompanied by a burial permit and a Coroner's certificate. Cremation

cannot take place if the coroner has not signed the Ontario Coroner's Cremation Certificate which indicates that the circumstances of the death have been investigated by the coroner and that no reason for the further examination of the body exists.

Every casket is logged into the crematorium system using the application form. At that time the casket is identified and tagged with a number and metal disc which follows it through the entire cremation process. This procedure ensures the proper identification of the deceased "while the deceased is in the custody" of the crematorium and "the cremation process" (The Catholic Cemeteries of the Diocese of Hamilton: Application for Cremation). Once the deceased has been registered, the casket is placed in a refrigerated holding bay until a retort is available or it is placed on the lifting device and taken directly to the retort. Today, a retort is available for immediate use. As we push Mrs. Johnson's casket to the retort, a crematorium staff member presses the button which will begin the start up sequence for a three hour cycle. The retort is fully automated and records the temperature of the burners as well as the emissions from the retort. Emission control is strictly monitored by Environment Canada so that crematoriums are not polluting the air with particles as they burn off in the retort. Once the afterburner has been turned on the casket slides over a cardboard tube roller into the retort and the loading door is closed. The temperature of the cremation chamber is raised to approximately 1000° C. The size of the body and type of casket or container determines the length of time required to reduce the human remains to its basic elements of bone fragments. Approximately three hours later, the recoverable remains of Mrs. Johnson are carefully swept into a receptacle and allowed to cool. When her remains are removed from the retort, the numbered paper

slip which identifies her is taken from the retort and placed with the container of ashes. Using a magnet, the metal parts of the casket and any remnants of metal left with the casket are removed so that her bone fragments can be mechanically crushed before they are placed into the container in which they will be returned to the funeral home. If the family had provided an urn to the crematorium, the cremains would be placed directly into the urn prior to their return. The metal tag which corresponds to the number for Mrs. Johnson's file and the register card is placed with the ashes. In this manner Chris and the crematorium will be able to trace Mrs. Johnson's cremains even after they leave the crematorium to be returned to the funeral home the next day.

While Chris and his family are at the family center, the Meister family has stopped by the funeral home so they can have another look at the chapel and to decide whether they will place the urn containing Mr. Meister's cremains on the table or the "ark". The "ark" is specially designed to hold an urn for display in the chapel and can be used for transporting the urn in the hearse. It is constructed of wood and sits approximately three feet off the ground on a wooden pedestal. The sides of the "ark" can be extended to allow flower arrangements, pictures and candles to be placed around the urn. If the family chooses, a glass top can be placed over the urn so they can place a picture or bible. Two handles extend from the sides which allow pallbearers to carry the ark in the chapel or at the cemetery. Mrs. Meister decides that she prefers the table rather than the ark because the inurnment or burial of the urn at the cemetery is going to be a private service for family only. She prefers that she and her daughter carry the urn in their own car rather than having it carried out to the hearse. Dave tells her the "ark" is an



alternative to using the table in the chapel and that many families, like herself, prefer the more traditional look of a table. As well, the daughter, Suzanne wants to make sure the sound system is working because they have decided to bring a favorite CD to be played during the service tomorrow. Dave not only reassures them that the system is working but he also puts on a CD so they can hear it for themselves. Today they are concerned with the technical details of the service; “Will the CD be played at the right time; will the music be the right volume, will we have a microphone for the minister?” Dave patiently reassures them that we are ready for tomorrow and that we have taken care of these details. They try the microphone and the CD player one last time before they leave. Relief is written on their faces. Once they have left, Dave mutters that “This isn’t the first funeral we have ever done.” It is however, the first funeral this family has ever done.

Occasionally tension occurs between the bereaved and the funeral director when the bereaved are unable to relax enough to allow the funeral director to look after the organizational details. In these instances, the funeral director begins by reassuring the family that everything is under control and that their concerns are “pre-funeral jitters”. Sometimes, like today, the funeral director will “walk the family through” the funeral or memorial service, showing them how to turn on and off the microphone or simply explaining how they will enter the chapel and where people will seated. When a family assumes a “do it yourself” approach, the funeral directors step back and assist the family in their endeavors. Bob always reminds me that even though the funeral director is in charge “the funeral belongs to the family.”

**Evening:**

The funeral home and the reception house are vacuumed, dusted and prepared for the memorial service scheduled for the next day. The rule of thumb is to be prepared and not wait until the morning, which is reserved for last minute details only. The chapel is left in the preparatory stages of “set up” for the Meister memorial which is scheduled for Tuesday afternoon. The table has been brought in and two candles placed to one side of where the urn will be placed. A space is left for flowers which are expected to arrive in the morning and for pictures which the family will bring with them. One last look for the night as the lights are turned off and the door to the chapel closed.

## **CHAPTER 7**

## DAY 4

### TUESDAY

#### **The Day in Preview:**

As we move through the week, we are beginning to see many recurring themes: the role of funeral directors as mediators; the tension between taming death by making it visible and hiding it through the processes of embalming and dressing; the re-sacralization or culturalization of the body of the deceased; and the development of new funeral rituals which are often meshed with more traditional liturgies of official religious institutions.

Looking ahead at Day 4, Tuesday, the funeral home takes several new calls. We become aware of the importance of participation in the life of the local community to the role of the funeral director particularly in the community funeral home model. The memorial service for Mr. Meister allows us to continue to observe the relationship between the funeral director, and the clergy as one which is not mutually exclusive but rather one in which these professionals work together for the welfare of the bereaved and the deceased. Finally, we will be introduced to the ritual procedure of embalming, revisiting the question of whether the corpse is perceived as human or non human.

Sociologist and funeral director Vanderlyne Pine suggests that the role of the funeral director extends beyond the funeral home into the community (Pine 1975:74). .

It is important for community funeral home directors, like those at Marlatt's, to make personal contacts and provide personal service. Participation in community organizations such as the Lion's Club and Rotary Club provide a way in which funeral directors can enhance their position in the community. Preparing the dead has been described as "dirty work" because those who handle the dead are viewed as profiting from death and grief (Thompson 1991: 408, Howarth 1996: 83). Although they have now attained the status of "death care professionals", funeral directors are well aware of the stigma associated with their work (Pine 1975:28). Writing about stigma, Erving Goffman (1963:57) suggests techniques which allow the discredited to distance themselves and conceal the cause of their stigma. However, in many contexts, funeral directors want to be recognized for their work by the community and therefore rely on strategies that will reduce the stigma linked to their profession. Glennys Howarth describes a variety of "accounting and neutralizing tactics" including distancing, stressing the essential nature of the work and professionalizing (Howarth 1996:71). Another way funeral directors are able to distance themselves from the stigma associated with their profession is through participation in local charity groups. This helps enhance "their public image and promote their social credibility" (Thompson 1991:405). While shifting the emphasis of their work from sales to service, funeral directors present themselves as individuals who are interested in serving the living. Ultimately, one of the most important assets of the funeral home is the reputation of the funeral directors within the community (Pine 1975:74). Many of the families who use the Marlatt Funeral Home are returning clients who have confidence in the funeral directors and their ability to meet their personal needs as mourners as well as

the quality of care that will be given to the deceased (Pine 1975:9; Emke 1999). Others, like the Meister family who have never previously required the services of a funeral director, will choose Marlatt's because of its reputation in the community.

The memorial for Mr. Meister is an excellent example of the collaborative relationship between the funeral director, the bereaved and the clergy. In addition, in Day 4, we will see that cremation is not the final act but calls for a complementary rite such as the burial or scattering of the ashes as an act of re-incorporation of the deceased (van Gennep 1960:148, Hertz 1960:42). This final rite symbolizes the passage or transition of the deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead (Hertz 1960:81)

Memorial services, like funerals, can be thought of as theatrical performances which involve three main actors: the corpse, soul and bereaved as well as supporting actors such as the clergy and funeral director (Hertz 1960:29; Walter 1990:124, 127). During memorial services following cremation, props such as pictures or pieces of clothing which symbolize the deceased are often placed on a table with or instead of the urn containing the ashes as a reminder of the person who has died (Walter 1990:125). Tony Walter (1999) and Donald Heinz (1999) suggest that the body of the deceased plays an important role in the traditional funeral process. During my fieldwork, I have observed an increase in direct cremations which are followed days, weeks or even months later by a memorial service during which the deceased is represented symbolically as the principal actor. This suggests that the rite of passage for the bereaved and the deceased is incomplete until a final ritual, the memorial service, has been completed.

The funeral ritual, concluding with a burial or scattering of the cremains or cremated remains, continues to serve as a rite of passage for the deceased and the bereaved. However, the ritual process can be extended over a long period of time, depending on the preferences of the bereaved.

There exists a distinct division of labour between the funeral director and the clergy in the funeral process as well as on the day of the funeral service. The funeral director works to facilitate the funeral service, mediating between the bereaved and clergy, by scheduling the funeral or memorial according to the wishes of the family as well as the logistical constraints on the clergy and cemetery (Pine 1975:92, 146). During my fieldwork, I have repeatedly observed clerics consulting the funeral director who made the arrangements with the bereaved family in instances when the family is not affiliated with a specific church. Regardless of how the clergy and funeral director perceive their roles, Pine suggests that the bereaved may perceive the funeral director as having the lead role and hold him/her more responsible for the success of the funeral service (Pine 1975:133). Jessica Mitford (1963, 1998), Fulton (1961, 1988) and Bowman (1959) argue that this perception is not only held by bereaved families but also by funeral directors. According to these researchers, this perception is one of the basic causes of tension between funeral directors and clergy. Other causes of tension between clerics and funeral directors cited by Mitford (1963:241, 247), Fulton (1988:259) and Bowman (1959:61) include the dramatization of the corpse through embalming and makeup; lack of concern for spiritual and theological matters and taking financial advantage of the bereaved. In contrast, the findings of my own survey querying clergy about their

relationship with funeral directors (see Appendix V for questions), fall in line with those of Kalish and Goldberg (1978) and with more recent research by Canadian sociologist, Ivan Emke (1999) who found that the personal experiences of the clergy in their interactions with funeral directors are in general favorable (Kalish and Goldberg 1978:250).

A large percentage of the funeral director's role is performed on the front stage of the funeral home in view of the bereaved and their guests during visitation and funeral/memorial services. However, the funeral director has another audience, the deceased. This relationship plays out primarily in the non public backstage area, the prep room (Pine 1975:113). Almost without exception, the care of the dead is carried out by the funeral director rather than by family members (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:11). Laderman writes that the corpse is worthless but that to the family it is a "sacred trust" which is "surrounded by sentimental memories and has value beyond price" (Laderman 2003: 109). For this reason, he suggests, to be chosen by a family as the person into whose hands a deceased loved one is placed for final care is a "an act of the greatest confidence the living can bestow" and should be treated as a "sacred obligation" (Laderman 2003:109)

Final care includes preparing the body for viewing, including embalming, washing, dressing and casketing. Embalming operates on two levels, as a technical process and as a ritual which transforms the corpse. Hallam, Hockey and Howarth write that in our increasingly secular culture, the dead body becomes the "material reality of death" as the key signifier of our mortality and the location of our sense of "self"

(Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999: 126). The embalmer's task is to transform the corpse into an icon which will represent the individual previously associated with the body (Howarth 1996:147; Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:15, 126; Pine 1975:114). Through embalming, the boundaries of the body are re-established and the ravages of death, bloating, malodour, and pallor are controlled (Bradbury 1999:113, 126). The result is that it is possible for the "corpse to acquire a sacred status" which is more comforting than horrifying (Laderman 2003:22). Sociologist Glennys Howarth suggests that theatrical strategies such as the use of makeup, hair styling and clothes "breathe life" into the corpse before it takes its place on the front stage (Howarth 1996:147; Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999: 15). One of the skills of the embalmer is to remove the signs of illness, injury, or wounds and to set the features into a reposed configuration that reflects a good death. Embalming can be considered an attempt to hide the distasteful physical results of death rather than denying that death has occurred, by gaining mastery over death's impact on the body.

Day 4, Tuesday, sees the funeral home becoming a busier and more complex center of activity in which the choices of the bereaved can be seen to direct the role of the funeral director and the clergy. As well, we continue to observe how the funeral director through embalming is able to re-sacralize or culturalize the body of the deceased in order to allow the living and the dead to share the same social space.

**Night:** Quiet night – two calls remain on the roster board in the back hall.



**Morning:**

Chris takes a new call from a woman, Rachel, whose mother Mrs. Elgin has died after being readmitted to hospital, several weeks following a minor surgical procedure. There is no rush to meet with the family today as they have been told that an autopsy must be performed to establish the cause of death. Chris suggests that the family come to the funeral home tomorrow morning at 10:30 a.m. to make their arrangements. Chris calls the hospital morgue to inquire when the body will be released since autopsies can delay the release of the body by a day or two but occasionally take longer. This information is critical and Chris will need it before he sits with the family to discuss times for visitation and the funeral. The morgue attendant informs him that it should be possible to release the body tomorrow, but cautions Chris that he should call before coming to pick it up.

Occasionally a body will be held for more than two days while awaiting an autopsy depending on the reason and type of autopsy required as well as the number of autopsies pending in the hospital morgue. In contrast to a non autopsied body, which is removed from the location of death as quickly as possible, the time between death and removal of an autopsied body to the funeral home can be prolonged by several days. During this period both corpse and the bereaved experience a change in status as they enter this transitional stage. The new corpse is human and yet no longer human, having no relation with the social world (Bradbury 1999:123). In the morgue, the body will be opened, dissected and parts of organs including the brain will be removed for examination

at a later date. Although the body will be loosely put back together, it is only later at the funeral home that its appearance will be manipulated, returning it to a more recognizable container of humanity. During this interim period, ownership of the body is ambiguous as it becomes the property of the hospital until the time it is released by the coroner to the family and the funeral home (Bradbury 1999:184). Once the body has been released, the hospital will notify the funeral home in order that the body can be retrieved. At that time the coroner will issue the permit which will allow the body to be either buried or cremated. The permit allows the family to arrange the type of final committal they desire. The cause of death is not established on a death certificate when a body has been autopsied. The death certificate helps create order in the face of death by providing a cause of death. As Mary Bradbury suggests, death must have a cause if it is to be controlled (Bradbury 1999:126). Following an autopsy, families are frequently left without answers about the cause of death for many weeks. For some family members, not knowing the cause of death will prevent them from moving through this liminal period between death and committal as mourners. Unless there is a specific health hazard to those handling the body at the hospital and the funeral home, there will be no communication concerning the cause of death.

Good communication between the hospital and the funeral home is essential in every instance but especially when an autopsy is required. The funeral director acts as the liaison between the hospital and the family. In one instance during my fieldwork a family assumed that because the death of their loved one had occurred at a particular hospital that she had remained there for the autopsy. In fact, all autopsies in the region are done at

one hospital and the deceased had been transferred. During the immediate period following an unexpected death, it is common for family members to become lost in the details and information which they are being given by the hospital staff. One of the roles of the funeral director is to be able to make sense of the social chaos surrounding any death for the bereaved family. In the instance of the family mentioned above, a simple phone call by the funeral director provided enough information to share with the family to set their minds at ease concerning their “missing person”. The family began to make the transition into their new role as “bereaved” by making arrangements with the funeral home for the care of their loved one.

Taking the file out, Chris observes that Bob had planned the funeral for the father of the family. Shortly after the death of her husband, 5 years earlier, Mrs. Elgin had pre-arranged her own funeral. As a result, finalizing the arrangements tomorrow would be less emotionally taxing for the family, since they will have fewer decisions to make. Chris takes a cursory look over the notes which detail the visitation, a church funeral followed by burial. Although the visitation and funeral plans had been made and previously paid for, the final decision to follow through with the deceased’s wishes remains with the executor of the estate. The funeral director is legally obligated to follow the choices made by the executor whenever a funeral is being organized, whether it is “at need” or has been prearranged.

During my fieldwork there were several instances when the executor chose not to follow arrangements previously made by the deceased. In one instance, the executor was a great niece who lived far away and chose to ignore her aunt’s wishes for a traditional

visitation and funeral and opted instead for a graveside funeral. The difference in cost is several thousand dollars which is turned back into the estate. At the time, the niece believed she would leave the funeral home with a check for the difference in costs. Her decision for a graveside service might have been motivated by the opportunity to save money. Alternatively she might have truly believed that her aunt had outlived her family and friends in the area and that as a result following her Aunt's wishes for visitation, music, church service and burial would have served no emotional purpose. As a facilitator, the role of the funeral director is to assist the bereaved in making their decisions rather than forcing issues or trying to manipulate people to opt for choices of any kind (Pine 1975:91).

In another case, the executor, who was not a family member, chose to follow the instructions of the deceased who wished to be directly cremated with no memorial service. The son of the deceased, a funeral director in Toronto, opposed the executor and demanded a visitation and burial for his mother following the arrangements his father had made a number of years earlier. The funeral director was caught in the middle, legally obligated to follow the instructions of the executor but also sympathetic to the wishes and feelings of the family. A compromise mediated by the funeral director gave priority to the executor to carry out the deceased's wishes, but also took into account the emotional needs of the family. The deceased was immediately cremated as he had requested but an hour of visitation and a memorial service was held by the family in the funeral home chapel.

In both instances, the funeral director was used as a sounding board for the thoughts, ideas and concerns of the bereaved. Whether the funeral director agrees with the decisions which are being made, the director's attitudes, body language and responses are carefully controlled to generate an aura of cooperativeness and helpfulness (Pine 1975:100).

At this early stage in planning, all Chris can do is add the new name to the board, omitting the details of time and place of the visitation and funeral which he will add following his meeting with the family. Under the remark column on the board, Chris notes the 10:30 a.m. arrangement meeting which he has scheduled with the family on Wednesday. Downstairs, in the office, Chris' desk is slowly being covered with active files, one for each of the calls which remain on the board. Each file contains the arrangements, death certificate, newspaper notice and a checklist of which preparatory tasks have been completed in organizing the funeral or memorial.

**Afternoon:**

While the finishing touches are made in preparation for the afternoon memorial service, Chris slips out to his weekly Rotary Club meeting. All the funeral directors at Marlatt's belong to local community service organizations. Vanderlyne Pine suggests that community participation is a way of enhancing the position of the funeral director as well as a means of perpetuating business (Pine 1975:74). The personal contacts made by the funeral directors in the community make a real difference to how the community perceives the service offered by the funeral home. For Chris, Bob and Dave, one of their

most valuable assets is their reputation in the community as respected personal service funeral practitioners (Pine 1975:75).

Chris is barely through the door after the meeting when the phone rings: another new call. While Chris is talking to the woman on the phone, he is also writing quick notes on the “First Call” sheet, noting the name of the caller and that of the deceased, the relationship to the deceased, where the death occurred and whether or not the call is “at need” or has been pre-arranged. During the phone call, Chris suggests several possible times in the afternoon when the family could meet with him at the funeral home. In doing so he takes into account the timing for the Meister memorial so that both families feel they are receiving the undivided attention of the funeral director and staff. He asks the daughter to bring, if possible, her mother’s social insurance card, which will be needed to fill in the death certificate information. There is just enough time to begin the file and the paperwork before the Meister memorial service begins.

Dave, having made the arrangements with the Meister family will also oversee their memorial service. He greets the family at the front door and escorts them into the chapel. One of the main roles of the funeral director on the day of the funeral is to maintain order so that the funeral runs smoothly by adhering to a strict agenda (Pine 1975:103). A chain of communication exists among staff which is critical to sustaining what appears to be a seamless service. Pine notes that the organization of the community funeral home should foster the impression that the funeral director is a part of a larger team working for the benefit of the bereaved family (Pine 1975:123). The funeral director is both a leader and a team member. Regardless of which staff member the family

approaches, the information or concerns they express are shared with the remaining staff. It is important that everyone knows what is happening in the chapel with the family and their guests at all times.

The Meister family has arrived two hours before the service because they have arranged an hour of visitation prior to the service. Visitations prior to a funeral or memorial are scheduled for a specific time most often in the funeral home chapel. An early arrival by the family affords them the time to set up their pictures and personalize the chapel with the assistance of staff members without feeling rushed. As well, they can enjoy some quiet time in the chapel as a family before their friends begin to arrive. The daughter, Suzanne, gives Dave the CD the family has chosen and indicates which songs she would like played before and during the service. Music is a very common and easy way for families to personalize a service. Suzanne also gives Dave packages of *Lindor* chocolates that she would like offered to their friends as they leave the chapel following the service. I put the chocolates in two decorative baskets and place them at the back of the chapel.

Funeral home staff members are in position now – Paul at the front door of the funeral home, myself at the chapel doors and Dave moving between the family, minister and organist. Chris is busy with paperwork and preparing for his meeting with another family later in the afternoon. We have no idea of how many people to expect as the news about Mr. Meister's death and the time and place of the service was circulated by word of mouth rather than being posted as an obituary notice in the local paper. There is a steady stream of friends arriving during the hour of visitation and the chapel is rapidly filling up.

From the back of the chapel I have a good view and can keep an eye on the family and their guests. I am also able to replenish memorial cards and generally be available to the family.

I recall Bob telling me when I first began my fieldwork, that the person who is responsible for the chapel doors holds a very important position. Everyone relies on my ability to observe the activity in the chapel. The person on the chapel doors is usually the first staff person the family's visitors see. It is important for that person to make a good impression. I do not keep track of how many times the daughter and the grand-daughter of the deceased has asked me to check the sound system. Each time, I pass on their concerns to Dave, who is the funeral director in charge of this service. I can see he is getting frustrated. Apparently, they have also asked Paul and Dave the same questions, repeatedly. Regardless of how many times they ask the same questions and appear to be checking our competence, we continue to reassure them that everything is under control and that they need be concerned only with meeting with their friends. Questions and problems are dealt with individually as they arise by all staff members. Later we will laugh about the stream of questions but at the moment, the family is our priority.

The family's minister, Rev. Hines arrives approximately thirty minutes before the service and introduces himself to me at the chapel doors. This is the first time Rev. Hines has overseen a memorial service at Marlatt's. I show him to his office which is adjacent to the chapel and tell him that I will inform Dave, the funeral director who is in charge today that he has arrived. Rev. Hines has spoken with Dave on the phone several times in the past few days but this is the first time they will have met at the funeral home. Dave



and Rev. Hines meet briefly to discuss the final details concerning the memorial service before they meet with the organist to finalize the music selection. Once the technical details have been dealt with, Rev. Hines goes into the chapel to spend time with the family before the memorial service.

There is a distinct division of labor between the funeral director and the clergy (Laderman 2003:67). Funeral directors concern themselves with the organization of the funeral which includes the care of the corpse as well as the time and place of the funeral and final disposition, either by burial or cremation. The role of the clergy extends to officiating at the funeral service and overseeing communal rituals. Many members of the clergy confided that they offer early grief counseling to the bereaved which they regard as a part of their pastoral role. In contrast, when questioned about grief counseling, funeral directors did not feel they were trained to fulfill the role beyond helping families deal with the immediate social and legal issues. Within the funeral home as well in the church setting, there is a crossover of the interests of the funeral director and the clergy in their relationship with family members which allows the funeral to appear seamless. Conflicts between the clergy and the funeral director have been identified by authors including Jessica Mitford (1963,1998), Leroy Bowman(1959) and Robert Fulton (1961). However, it has been my experience that these two professional groups complement one another in the types of services they offer the bereaved. Major Jacobs told me he believes the clergy and the funeral directors should be thought of as “converging circles” which share the emotional care of the bereaved as well as the arrangements for the funeral service time (personal correspondence – Major Jacobs, Salvation Army). With the family and the

deceased as their focus of concern, it is important that a good working relationship and lines of communication remain open between the funeral director and the members of the clergy.

By service time, I have greeted and seated more than 125 people in the chapel. One last look for stragglers and the doors of the chapel are locked. In the final moments before the service begins, Dave escorts the family into the chapel from the visitation room and seats them in the first row of the pews. This is the signal to their guests to also take their places. The room becomes quiet except for the organ music. The service begins when Dave asks everyone to stand and Rev. Hines enters the chapel.

For staff who are not directly participating in the service, the time during the memorial is used to discuss problems incurred prior to the service as well as assigning tasks for the conclusion of the service. Quite often, the staff is able to have a quick cup of coffee. The topic of conversation today is the number of times the same question was asked by the family to each one of us. While it may be true that the staff has done hundreds of funerals and memorials, the fact remains, “this is the only funeral which this family has done” and they want it to be perfect, from start to finish. As the minister concludes the service with a prayer, we resume our positions in the chapel. Dave makes a final announcement reminding friends to sign the guest register if they have not done so and invites each person to take a chocolate as they leave the chapel. Paul and I are standing at the chapel doors with the baskets of *Lindor* chocolates, festively wrapped in red and gold. The chocolates are Gunther Meister’s trademark, since he carried them in his pockets for years and shared them with family, friends, co-workers, and ultimately the

doctors and nurses at the cancer clinic. His friends have come to say their goodbye to him, and in turn, he leaves them with one last sweet, a symbol of the times they spent together.

As their friends leave, the family gathers together in the chapel and prepares to leave for the committal of Mr. Meister's cremains. There will be no formal procession to the cemetery as the family would like this to be a private farewell. A procession would attract the attention of friends who might desire to join them for the final disposition. Instead it has been arranged that Dave meet the family at the cemetery in half an hour, allowing them to bid farewell to their friends and leave the funeral home. The flowers which the family has chosen to take to the cemetery are gathered together, the cards removed, and placed in the trunk of the car which Dave will drive to the cemetery. The urn is placed into a blue velvet carry bag. The bag will allow the urn to be lowered respectfully rather than being dropped awkwardly into the four foot deep grave. As we prepare to leave for the cemetery, Dave passes me the urn, which I will hold en route to the cemetery. Most families choose to have the cremains transported from the funeral home to the cemetery with the funeral director and the clergy. The one exception is when they have chosen to use the ark, in which case the ark carrying the cremains travels in the hearse. Even though the body is now ash, there remains a division between the living and the dead.

At the grave site, a small box covers the opening of the grave. The urn which has been removed from a velvet carrying bag is placed on the box while the concluding funeral prayers are read. The committal takes only a few minutes. The cremains are

transferred back into the velvet bag and then lowered into the ground for burial. Rev. Hines concludes the service saying “from ashes to ashes, dust to dust”, as he symbolically crumbles a small amount of dirt over the urn. This moment stands still in time for families as they leave a loved one’s ashes or body behind at the cemetery and return to their daily lives. The ritual committal marks the end of a transition period for the body, the soul and the bereaved. The deceased’s ashes will remain in the cemetery among the other dead; the soul has been committed to God’s keeping and the bereaved will return to their community where they will continue to make adjustments in their daily lives which reflect the absence of their loved one (van Gennep 1960, Walter 1990:28). Dave and I wait at the grave until the family has left and for the cemetery workers to come to the graveside.

At the funeral home, the Cairns family arrives punctually. Chris meets them at the front door, extending his hand and offering his condolences. Chris has a very reassuring manner when he meets a new family which he told me is important. A funeral director has very little time at such initial encounters to make a good impression and to demonstrate that he or she is knowledgeable about what must be done in arranging the funeral. Impression management is key to the performance of the role of the funeral director as he builds his relationship with the bereaved family (Pine 1975: 41). Irving Goffman, in his analysis of the presentation of the self, suggests that in service occupations, clients are offered a “performance” which expresses competence and integrity (Goffman 1959:26). Every time Chris, Dave or Bob meet a family, they foster the impression that their relationship with family members is very special and the

relationship they are developing is unique. This impression is sustained through their tone of voice, body language and gestures as well as their carefully chosen words. In an established role such as that of the funeral director, the performance tends to become institutionalized in terms of the stereotyped expectations of the bereaved (Goffman 1959: 27). Chris exudes confidence and sincere interest when he meets a family and invites them to join him in the Alderwoods Room to make the arrangements for their loved one.

Sitting around the table in the Alderwoods Room, Chris begins the discovery process by asking simple questions about the deceased, who he refers to as “Mom” rather than by her given name. When speaking with family members, funeral directors frequently personalize their relationship with the family and the deceased by referring to the deceased using familial names such as mom or dad (Pine 1975:127). In contrast when speaking with funeral home staff members, the deceased is referred to by their given name or as the “call” as a means of impersonalizing the deceased especially when attending to the more “mechanical aspects” such as embalming the deceased (Pine 1975: 40).

What appears to be idle conversation gives Chris the information required to complete the provincial death certificate, and helps him gain some insight into the family dynamics and their relationships with the deceased. He eases the family through decisions they may or may not have already considered prior to the meeting. It is essential that the funeral director appear concerned and knowledgeable when explaining as many of the aspects of the funeral as possible. Chris offers suggestions and advice when asked by the family, who at times may use him as a sounding board. Some of the decisions which must

be made initially include the choice of burial or cremation, and the choice of having a funeral or memorial service or no service at all. At no point in the discussion does Chris force issues or try to talk the family into making decisions. The role of the funeral director is that of facilitator who can explain funeral customs as well as arranging for specific details the family might want to carry out during the visitation and funeral. Quite often the funeral director fulfils the role of an educator for families who have never previously planned a funeral (Pine 1975:91). Community funeral home directors, like those at Marlatt's, are expected to be competent and knowledgeable about all areas of funeral service from planning to directing the funeral.

As a part of filling in the death record, Chris must also find out the family's religious affiliation. During the arrangements, the family must choose the type of service and casket, but they must also make arrangements for the time, place and date of the funeral service. By starting with information which is required, the funeral director helps the family focus on details with which they are familiar before tackling more difficult questions (personal communication with Thomas Poulton, funeral director, 2005). This often leads the family into a discussion about their choice of the type of funeral, whether they want a church, chapel or graveside service; and whether they have chosen a minister or priest or prefer to have one obtained for them by the funeral home.

For some families, these decisions can be difficult, but the Cairns family is Catholic and has already decided upon a traditional Catholic mass at the local Catholic church, preceded by two visitations the day before, in the afternoon and the evening. The daughter, Rachel, tells Chris that they have called Father Curtin and informed him of their

mother's death and their desire to have a funeral mass. Chris will call Father Curtin after the family has made their arrangements to finalize the day and time of the mass as well as the possibility of having the priest come to the funeral home to recite the evening prayers.

During the conversation with family members, Chris learns more about Katherine, the deceased. He will keep this information in mind for a time later in the arrangements when he will assist them in finding ways to personalize their visitation by bringing pictures, crafts, painting, music or even special mementoes to the funeral home. Having offered coffee to the family, Chris seats everyone around the large table in the Alderwoods' room. He gives the family a copy of the Funeral Planning Guide and price book so that as they discuss their options, the family can follow along the price list and make decisions about additions or deletions of services offered. Ultimately, it will be the executor, the deceased's son Brian, who will make the final decision. It is important however, that all three bereaved family members see themselves as participating and having input in the decision making process.

Chris explains to the family that embalming is not required by law, but is an option which they may consider, particularly if they want an open casket. Although embalming is not required by Ontario law, prior to the 1970s, it was considered standard procedure. Once the body had been removed from the home or hospital to the funeral home, it was immediately embalmed. Consent for the procedure was implicit unless otherwise specified. The most common reason for not embalming was for religious reasons. During the same time period, two days of visitation prior to a traditional funeral and burial were also considered standard choices by the bereaved. Times, practices and

choices have changed in the last thirty years and embalming now is another choice which must be made by the family.

When the time comes to choose a casket, Chris explains the differences between the caskets which are available. He sounds knowledgeable and is able to anticipate and answer the family's questions. Chris shows the family some of the options available such as decorative casket corners and liner inserts that will allow them to personalize the casket. However, he does not pressure them to purchase anything. Funeral directors do not believe it is their job to sell caskets (Pine 1975: 92). Chris believes that "caskets will sell themselves" and that his job is to explain the differences between the various models. The Alderwoods' room has eight full size caskets of various types on display. Within the display room there are also an additional twelve wood casket "corners" and eight metal casket "corners" which show products available for purchase. The concept of using "casket corners" rather than full size caskets in the showroom provides a non-intimidating atmosphere where a greater variety of caskets can be shown to families. The use of casket corners requires much less space. A much smaller stock of caskets on hand also means that the financial outlay for the funeral home is much smaller while at the same time providing a large selection for families to choose from. Caskets can be delivered to Marlatt's from the Batesville or Victoriaville manufacturers within twenty four hours of ordering.

Another option the family must consider is whether they will upgrade the underground grave liner required by the Catholic cemeteries to a vault. Chris explains the differences in types and costs of liners and vaults but does not press the family to make a



decision. A vault affords the casket more protection from the ground water and the changing temperatures of the soil. Recognizing that the choice of casket is a very personal matter and often requires some discussion among family members, Chris gives the family some time together without him, letting them know that he will be close by should they have questions. This approach sustains Chris's performance as a funeral professional rather than as a casket salesman. Within a short time, the Cairns family chooses an oak casket and decides to upgrade to a vault from the grave liner required by the Catholic Cemetery Board.

Chris inquires if the family has any ideas about what flowers they might like for the casket spray and shows them a book of floral arrangements. This service is offered to all families as a convenience. Jessica Mitford suggests that many corporations have clustered secondary activities which include owning and operating flower shops and limousine companies as a means of "mass production" of the dead (Mitford 1998:191). The florists which are used by Marlatt's have been chosen because they are local merchants as well as for their quality of service. According to the family's preference flowers can be ordered through the funeral home or directly from a florist of their choice. On occasion, the funeral directors will call local florists and comparison shop for the family if they choose a very expensive arrangement or casket spray. The Cairns family decides to order through a florist they use regularly rather than through the funeral home.

Before the family finishes the arrangements, they must decide whether they want to place an obituary notice in the newspaper. Writing the obituary, according to Chris, is one of the most difficult parts of making arrangements:

“Things can be going really well, everyone is in agreement and then you start with the notice and suddenly you discover the true dynamics of a family. It’s important not to offend anyone by not including them in the notice, so it’s often best to keep it simple rather than listing names”.

Chris asks whether they would like to specify a charity, perhaps one of their mother’s favorite charities to which friends can make donations. The Cairns family chooses the Heart and Stroke Foundation as their designated charity, remarking that it was a stroke that had “stolen their mother” from them. Chris offers the family a choice of register book packages which also include memorial and acknowledgement cards. Many Catholic families, like the Cairns, frequently prefer to use “prayer cards” which have a religious theme rather than the more secular memorial cards. Families can choose from eight different religious pictures including Jesus, Mary, and angels that can be personalized on the back with a prayer and information about the deceased.

Other decisions such as the use of a limousine between the funeral home and the church on the day of the funeral need not be made at the moment. Upon questioning, Chris discovers that the family does not own a cemetery plot. Choosing and purchasing a cemetery plot is not done with a funeral director. In Canada it is illegal for a funeral home to own and operate either a crematorium or a cemetery. As Mrs. Cairns is a member of the local Catholic Church, the family would like her to be buried in the cemetery owned by the Catholic Diocese. Chris phones the diocese office to inform them of the death and to arrange a time which is convenient for the family to meet at the cemetery to choose a plot. Most often families who are making arrangements “at need” will pay the cemetery directly for the plot as well as the opening and closing of the grave. If a plot has been pre-purchased, the cost of the opening and closing can be added to the list of

disbursements paid on behalf of the family by the funeral home. Other disbursements include paying the clergy and organist, the payment of the obituary notice and when applicable payment for the refreshments for the reception.

Once the arrangements are complete, Chris adds up the total costs, including the disbursements for the newspaper notice and clergy fee, before going over the details of the contract with the family. By reviewing the contract a second time Chris ensures that everyone seated at the arrangement table not only knows but also understands the choices they have made before he and the executor sign the contract.

Chris suggests that someone from the family, perhaps Katherine's daughter, choose an outfit in which to dress "Mom". He suggests they return to the funeral home later that evening. As well, he offers the family a picture board to take home with them. By taking the picture board home with them, the family will not feel the pressure to sort and organize pictures immediately prior to the visitations. Chris and Dave encourage families to bring family portraits or pictures which can be hung on the walls of the visitation room as well as displayed on the board. Mrs. Cairns was an avid knitter, and Chris suggests that they might want to bring in her knitting basket, needles and even some items that she had made to display to their guests. In this way the visitation room can be personalized so that it reflects the life and interests of the deceased.

Before the family leaves the funeral home, Chris tells them to call if they have any questions about the arrangements. As he is leaving, the son remarks how much easier it was to make these arrangements than he had anticipated and thanks Chris for his help, noting he will be back later with his mother's clothes. One of the goals of the community

funeral home director is to form a team with the bereaved so they see themselves as mutual participants in the funeral process (Pine 1975:133).

While the Cairns family has been making the funeral arrangements, their mother has been picked up from the hospital and brought to the funeral home, where she lies in the prep room. After Chris sends the draft of the obituary notice to the newspaper and places the order for the casket the family has chosen with the Batesville casket company, he proceeds to the prep room to begin embalming.

I argue that embalming is a ritual act in which both the funeral director and the deceased are performers. Roy Rappaport defines ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (Rappaport 1999:24). Furthermore, Catherine Bell suggests that ritual acts may include a wide range of social acts, not all of which are religious (Bell 1997:94)<sup>12</sup>. The process of embalming fits into Rappaport’s description of ritual acts which includes a set pattern of acts which are pre-established; that the actions are repetitive and stylized in a formalized setting; there is very little variation in the actions and that there is a sense of performance by the performers (Rappaport 1999:32-47). I argue that embalming is a ritual process which transforms the body of the deceased from a putrifying and polluting corpse into an icon which represents or symbolizes the deceased person. The funeral director who performs the embalming is takes on the role of the ritual expert who, with his expert knowledge, performs the transformation of the corpse in an area which has

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion on the subject of the genres and characteristics of ritual action see Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Chapters 4-5. Oxford: Oxford University Press. or Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Chapter 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

been marked off for this specific purpose (Pine 1975:122; Heinz 1999:133). Embalming which takes place in the back stage part of the funeral home is often considered to be secretive behavior by both the funeral professional and the bereaved (Pine 1975:117). Great care is taken by the embalmer to restore the face and hands of the deceased, giving him/her as natural likeness as possible (Pine 1975:115). Chris takes great pride in the presentation of a body which he has embalmed because he wants to present the bereaved with a “lasting memory picture” which reflects the deceased as “peaceful in death” regardless of how the death occurred.

The prep room looks very much like a small operating room theatre. It contains a stainless steel table, a single cupboard containing embalming supplies and instruments, a spool of string, latex gloves, toweling, a sink and suction equipment. The embalming machine and tubing coils which sit above the large sink identifies the sole purpose of the room. The pallor of the body contrasts starkly with the brightness of the fluorescent lighting in the room. Behind the door, there hang three yellow aprons belonging to the funeral directors. Dave has drawn a happy face on his apron. Perhaps this is one way of defusing the sensitive nature of the task of embalming a body. There is always a lingering odor left behind after this task, a mixture of embalming chemicals and cleaning agents.

Before entering the prep room, Chris checks the medical report that has accompanied the body. This gives him a reference point concerning the possible state of the body. Mrs. Cairns has died of a stroke and this suggests to Chris that the vessels may be constricted, requiring the use of several injection sites for the embalming fluid. Had

she died of cancer or liver disease, he would check for edema and jaundice as well as emaciation (Mayer 1976: 91, 129, 184). Chris puts on one of the large aprons and a pair of gloves before beginning to wash the body with a topical disinfectant. At the same time he does a cursory inspection of the body for open wounds, surgical shunts, intravenous tubing, urinary catheters and ostomy bags. If the deceased had a pacemaker, Chris would remove it only if the corpse is being sent for cremation. While the body is being washed, the limbs are flexed, rotated and bent as a means of relieving any rigor mortis which has set into the body. Massaging also helps move the blood which may have pooled on the back after death due to gravity (Mayer 1976:193-200). The eyes must be closed and the features set prior to the embalming process. The preservative arterial fluids used in embalming have the effect of firming the muscles, making repositioning difficult. The object of pre-embalming positioning of the body is to make the body appear comfortable and restful when it is placed in the casket (Mayer 1975:198). Chris elevates the head by placing it on plastic head rest, which also elevates the shoulders and upper body slightly. The body is straightened as much as possible, arms left at the side or folded over the abdomen, the legs and feet are aligned and placed close together. Plastic eye caplets are inserted over the eyes to keep the eyes closed as well as to give them a rounded shape. If the mouth is open, Chris will use a needle injector to place a wire in the jaw so that the mouth can be mechanically closed.

The embalming procedure is done in three stages: a pre-injection which opens and lubricates the vessels; the injection of embalming fluid; aspiration of abdominal cavity fluids and insertion of stabilizing cavity fluids.

Chris prepares the pre-injection, one bottle of pre-injection mixed with two gallons of warm water, and leaves it in the tank of the embalming pump. This fluid has no preservative ingredients and is used only to lubricate the vessels prior to embalming. It will be used once Chris has raised the right common carotid artery and the right internal jugular vein. A second choice he has considered is the right femoral artery and vein (Mayer 1976:175). Chris makes a short incision just above the collar bone with the scalpel. Unless the family chooses a blouse or shirt that is low cut, the incision will be hidden beneath the clothing. There is very little bleeding from the tissue. Chris uses his fingers to dissect down to the vessels. He tells me that the artery and vein feel different to his touch and that he will initially identify them with his fingers before a visual identification. Arteries are thick, white in color and elastic, in contrast to veins which are much smaller and tend to collapse when there is no pressure. Once the artery has been found, a small hooked instrument is used to elevate it. Two strings are placed around the artery and a single string around the vein. Only the artery is opened and a curved arterial tube directed to the lower body is inserted for the pre-injection. A second arterial tube is inserted and directed toward the neck and head. This is left in the open position until blood comes back through it, indicating that the pre-injection fluid has gone around the entire circulatory system. The Luer lock stopcock of the second tube is then closed but left in place. By opening the artery and keeping the vein closed during this initial procedure, the arteries are forced to dilate under the pressure of the additional fluid. When the pre-injection has been completed, the vein is opened using a scalpel blade and kept

open with an instrument dubbed “mickey mouse” because the grooved top appears to have two ears and an angular face on the drainage forceps.

Before mixing the arterial solution, Chris takes into account whether there is edema, dehydration, or jaundice, in which case he will use gluteraldehyde rather than formaldehyde. As neither of these conditions is present in this instance, Chris mixes a bottle of arterial solution with two gallons of warm water and two ounces of tint in the pump. It is the addition of the tint which restores “life like” colour to the body which without any blood flowing through it becomes sallow and discolored where the blood has settled. Some funeral directors choose to add two to four ounces of water corrective which adjust or buffers the pH of the tap water being used to the ideal pH. (7.38 to 7.4) for embalming, based on the normal body pH (Mayer 1976:112, discussion with funeral director Dave Morden). Raising the pH provides an optimal environment in the tissues. The solution is run through the tubing to clear it of air before it is connected to the arterial tube. Chris adjusts the flow of the solution to ten pounds per square inch (psi) for the body but will lower the pressure when he switches from the body to the head. The main reason, he tells me, for lowering the pressure is to try and minimize the pressure and swelling in the neck and face. If there is any swelling a cold compress will be made of cotton batting and placed on the face. As the embalming solution flows into the body, blood flows out of the jugular vein and is washed along the trough of the prep table by a cold water hose which has been placed at the head. From time to time Chris closes the forceps in the vein, pulling it back slightly and then reopens it to free any clots that might be caught in the vein. While keeping an eye on the level and pressure of the pump, Chris



begins to gently massage the extremities which have been sprayed with a germicidal soap. Massaging “helps coax the chemical down and the blood up” so the fluids reach the furthest extremities which are fed by the smallest vessels (Dave Morden, funeral director). Once the extremities have “pinked” up, the first arterial tube luer lock is turned off and the tubing is switched to the second tube which will perfuse the head and neck directly. One way of telling how well perfused an area is by whether the bluish tinge of livor mortis dissipates. The ears and fingers have turned pink and Chris turns off the pump, having used almost all of the embalming solution. Chris removes one arterial tube at a time, tying the vessel with the string to prevent leakage. He will leave the vein open for a short period of time while he washes off the body and then proceeds to begin the cavity injection. This allows any blood to drain out before tying the cavity closed and inserting the *neo-leako* jelly, which is used to cauterize and dry up the open wound.

Cavity aspiration is necessary to prevent purging and distention of the abdomen (Mayer 1965:260). The abdomen containing the intestines and bladder are sites where bacteria will grow rapidly and gases will form causing increased pressure on the stomach and its contents. Chris marks off the point where he will insert the trocar, a long sharp pointed rod with holes at the tip that he has connected to the hydroaspirator, which allows blood, urine and tissue to be flushed away through the sink drain. A small incision is made two inches to the left above the navel. An alternative method is used by Dave, who prefers to use the trocar to puncture the abdominal wall. He tells me that it is really a matter of preference since both are equally acceptable methods. The trocar slices across the heart and lungs, spleen, stomach, liver and pancreas as well as the intestines and

bladder. Chris explains that the slicing motion serves two purposes; first, it removes residual blood, fluids that may be in the lungs, stomach and bladder and second, that it creates more surface space to absorb the cavity fluid (Mayer 1975:260). From time to time, Chris withdraws the trocar and suctions a small amount of water to clear the line. Cavity embalming serves to disinfect the abdomen as well as to firm up the abdominal cavity. A single bottle of cavity fluid is drained into the abdomen using gravity. The hole is plugged with a small plastic button which is inserted and then glued into place. The embalming procedure concludes with the sewing of the neck incision.

Throughout the embalming procedure, Chris does not refer to or address the body by name. By impersonalizing the deceased person's body, the funeral director makes it less human which allows him/her to perform the more technical aspects of care (Pine 1975:40). Mrs. Cairn's body is washed with soap and warm water. The rubbing will continue to disperse the embalming fluid through the tissue. Her hair is shampooed and then toweled dry. A moisturizing cream is smoothed over her face to prevent it from excessive dehydration. Her hands are elevated and placed in a position of repose on her abdomen. Sometimes a hand stabilizer is used to sustain correct positioning. A trick that Chris and Dave use is to position the hands and keep them wrapped in a towel or hospital gown. The body is allowed to sit for a period of time before dressing so that leaks or droplets of moisture rising to the surface of the skin can be detected. Out of respect, Chris places a large flannelette blanket over Mrs. Cairns for the night. The clothes that the family has chosen hang on the hook waiting until the morning when Mrs. Cairns will be dressed prior to the arrival of the hairdresser. Her hair has been combed out following the

embalming procedure to loosely resemble the picture the family has left with us. The picture which has been chosen is about ten years old but it is how the family would like to remember her. It is to this end that the embalming has been able to partially refill her sunken cheeks and return her in death to another time.

Over the past two hours, the corpse has been dramatically changed through the ritual of embalming. Nothing more can be done tonight. The lights are turned off and the door to the prep room is closed and locked. Without Chris realizing, the afternoon has become the evening.

Chris begins to format the memorial cards which the family has chosen on the computer. Only after they have been printed and he is satisfied that he has done as much as possible will he leave the building for his home. It is after 10 p.m. when Chris signs out with the answering service. Placing the pager on his belt, he turns off the lights in the funeral home and locks the door behind him. Chris has been at the funeral home since 8:30 a.m. and it has been a long and busy day.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **DAY 5**

#### **WEDNESDAY**

##### **The Day in Preview**

Having gained insight into the role of the funeral director, the bereaved and the clergy, we now turn to the day ahead which includes a funeral at the graveside for Baby Kelly in the afternoon and two visitations for the Cairns family. As well, Chris has scheduled a morning arrangement meeting with the Elgin family, whose mother's body is being held at the hospital for an autopsy. As the morning unfolds, a "walk in" call, a family without an appointment, arrives at the funeral home wanting to make "at need" funeral arrangements. Late in the day another name will be added to the board in the back hall when the Dumoulin family comes to the funeral home and sits down with Chris to finalize the pre-arrangements made by their father. In this chapter, we will observe how impression management is achieved by funeral directors, the use of props for presentation and we will be introduced to making funeral arrangements for families with no church affiliation.

As we saw on Day 1, the management of the funeral director's "personal front" is critical to his/her performance in the role of a death specialist. Goffman describes the personal front as those attributes which we identify with the performer including clothing,

age, speech patterns, bodily gestures and facial expressions (Goffman 1959:24). A funeral director must conduct him/her self as a professional personal service practitioner (Pine 1975:18; Howarth 1996:78). The manner in which the funeral director interacts with the bereaved must illustrate abstract qualities such as care, compassion and knowledge. The staff of the Marlatt Funeral Home form a strong social unit which is built around their understanding of their role in relation to the bereaved family. Although there may be a discrepancy between appearance and reality, on the front stage, the funeral director must always leave the family with an impression of infallibility, conveying the view that (s)he is the voice of authority in matters concerning death (Goffman 1959:40, Pine 1973:88). Sociologist Vanderlyne Pine (1975) writes that by maintaining the image of the bereaved as an audience, funeral directors are able to deal with bereaved family members without developing emotional ties (Pine 1975:102). Tact and diplomacy are important tools for impression management. As mediators, funeral directors are careful to modulate their attitudes, actions and behavior to create an aura of cooperation with bereaved family members whether or not such cooperation actually exists (Pine 1975:99; Howarth 1996:115). Funeral directors frequently attempt to underplay or conceal ideals or motives which are not compatible with an idealized “vision of self and the product they are selling” (Goffman 1959:47). In my experience, it is common to see funeral directors fostering the impression that their current relationship with a bereaved family is unique and special. By adding the personal touch, a warm smile, a firm handshake and a sincere tone of voice, funeral directors are able to convey a feeling of personalized service. Goffman suggests that the maintenance of expressive control is critical to sustaining an

impression which is compatible with the desired performance (Goffman 1959:49, 56). Performance, as we have observed previously, takes place on the front stage, in the arrangement room and visitation rooms, as well as in the hidden back region, the prep room. Because the prep room is considered a place for “dirty work,” performance in this area remains hidden from the bereaved family (Goffman 1959:40; Pine 1973:103,113).

In the back region of the funeral home, funeral directors frequently use techniques which will allow them to distance themselves from work such as embalming which is considered “dirty” or polluted in Douglas’ (1966) sense to counteract the stress of working with the dead and bereaved (Pine 1975:39; Howarth 1996:75). Funeral directors and other staff frequently make use of argot, a specialized vocabulary, with one another but never with or in the presence of bereaved family members or their guests. We saw on Day 1 how funeral directors will use the term “call” to represent a deceased individual. Other argot terms frequently used include “box” when referring to a casket; “coach” when referring to the hearse and “direct” or “number ten”, referring to a direct cremation, for which number ten type caskets are used. Glennys Howarth writes that argot is used to distance funeral directors from the “stark realities” of their work (Howarth 1996:75, Laderman 2003:103). It is crucial that argot terms not become part of the rhetoric of the funeral director’s front stage performance so that the audience, the bereaved family, perceives the funeral director as “wholeheartedly embracing” his/her role (Howarth 1996: 75, Pine 1975:39).

As we have seen during the previous days, the presentation of the funeral director’s performance primarily takes place on the front stage area of the funeral home

which includes the arrangement office, the visitation rooms, and the chapel. Following a funeral, the front stage frequently moves to the cemetery but rarely to the crematorium. In his discussion about setting the stage, Goffman divides the front into personal front and setting (Goffman 1959:22). The setting in a funeral home includes the furniture, décor and physical layout as well as background items such as church trucks and flower stands. As in any theatrical performance, props are important for the creation of the appropriate ambience which will make the performance believable. This is also true in the funeral home setting (Pine 1975:41). In preparation for the visitation for a deceased Roman Catholic such as Mrs. Cairns, a cross is placed behind the casket, Easter candles are stood at both ends of the casket and a “kneeler” is positioned in front of the casket. Although the deceased might be considered to be the principal actor on the stage, in my experience, I have found that the deceased, lying in the open casket, frequently becomes a part of the staging, another prop in the visitation room. Mary Bradbury describes the corpse as a symbol system through which the survivors are able to “articulate their systems of beliefs about society, life and death”(Bradbury 1999:116). This statement is also valid when the casket is closed and a picture symbolizing the deceased is placed on or beside the casket. As we observe another visitation in Day 5, we begin to realize how funeral professionals carefully construct and control the front stage area using the casket, flowers, music, pictures and even lighting as props. As Goffman writes the split between “what is real and what is theatre is particularly hazy in the social organization of death” (quoted in Bradbury 1999:188).

Stepping aside from the visitation room, we move to another stage, the arrangement room. Today we will see two contrasting arrangements, made with the Gorman family who will arrange “at need” for a sudden death and the Dumoulin family, who will finalize the pre-arrangements which their father made many years prior to his death. Both families will sit down with a funeral director and rely upon his knowledge of funeral customs and laws and his ability to assist them in making choices which will reflect their personal needs (Pine 1975:91). The decisions which will be made are not as simple as Jessica Mitford (1963) suggests in her book *“The American Way of Death”*. In my personal experience, I never witnessed a funeral director pressuring the bereaved to spend more money on funerary goods and services. During the arrangement period, it is not uncommon for bereaved family members to use the funeral director as a sounding board for their ideas concerning the visitation, funeral or memorial or to engage in an open discussion about the death of their loved one (Pine 1975: 91). We will see that funeral directors offer advice and suggestions only when solicited.

Both the Gorman family and the Dumoulin family arrangements provide good examples of how funeral directors act as mediators for families who are not affiliated with a specific church but who continue to hold religious or spiritual beliefs. Families with no affiliation have become more common in recent years according to a study of Canadians conducted by Reginald Bibby (2002). Catherine Garces-Foley (2003) believes that approximately one third of Americans do not claim membership in a religious congregation. The results of my survey of families who choose the Marlatt Funeral Home suggests a slightly higher number of non-affiliated families. According to Bibby’s



survey, Canadians frequently continued to identify with the religious groups of their parents particularly for rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death (Bibby 2002: 28, 40). Furthermore, there has been no decline in the number of people who want funerals carried out by a representative of a religious group (Bibby 2002: 128).

Bereaved families who are not affiliated with a particular religious institution do not have a member of the clergy or other ritual specialist upon whom they can call to perform the funeral service. As a result, one of the funeral director's tasks is to assist bereaved family members in creating a funeral or memorial service which will be meaningful for them (Garces-Foley 2002: 288). At Marlatt's this is often accomplished by suggesting a member of the clergy or a celebrant who will be well matched to their specific spiritual needs. Matching a family with the right spiritual leader is vital to the success of the funeral and the family's experience at the funeral home (Garces-Foley 2002: 292). Among the qualities the funeral directors consider is flexibility, humour, warmth, and the ability to fulfill the pastoral role when meeting with the family and later while leading the service (Garces-Foley 2002:292). Families are most frequently matched with members of the clergy. This is partially explained by the small number of celebrants who are locally available to serve family. Also, many families choose a member of the clergy because they are familiar with the role of the clergy in funeral ritual. When the minister and the family do not know each other, in the case of the Dumoulin and Gorman families, the funeral director is frequently required to share information about the family with the clergy member before he or she meets with the family. Although the funeral service is planned by the family and the clergy member,

funeral directors often suggest that family members think about music, readings and the type of funeral ritual they might wish to have prior to meeting with the clergy. In particular, the funeral director is likely to ask the family whether they wish to follow the traditional liturgy of a particular denomination or whether they would be more comfortable drawing upon their personal spirituality (Garces-Foley 2002: 293). When organizing a funeral with a family which is unaffiliated, the funeral director and the clergy work together in the planning and execution of the funeral service.

In observing the Gorman and Dumoulin families as they make their funeral arrangements, we will find that both families choose a chaplain associated with a local senior's retirement and nursing home but for very different reasons. Although Joe Gorman was a nominal Catholic in his life, his wife chooses a secular service to commemorate his death. The Dumoulin family has not attended church for many years which is reflected in Mr. Dumoulin's choice of a direct cremation with no memorial service. His daughter, however, having followed the wishes of her father for this type of funeral when her mother died several years earlier, was left feeling unfulfilled without any type of memorial service. As a result, she chooses a non-denominational memorial service led by a chaplain to honour the memory of her father. Later in the week, we will observe the choices made by the Gorman family and how these choices are facilitated by the funeral director and the clergy.

Day 5, Wednesday, is a busy one at the funeral home, with a grave side funeral, a Catholic visitation, and the arrangement of three funerals including two for families who have no church affiliation. We continue to observe the ways in which funeral directors

manage their performance on the front and back stage of the funeral home. As well, we will see how the role of the funeral director expands when they work with families who are not affiliated with any religious institution.

**Night:** No new calls during the night.

**Morning:**

Four names are on the board in the back hall. A quick glance shows a graveside funeral for baby Kelly and the visitation for Mrs. Cairns are both scheduled for the afternoon. Another long day lies ahead. We are waiting for the casket to be delivered by Batesville and for the arrival of Bonnie, the hairdresser so that Mrs. Cairns can be casketed. Chris has scheduled a 10:30 a.m. meeting with the family of Mrs. Elgin. So far the coroner has not released her body but Chris has been informed that the release is expected this morning. The time is 9:30 a.m., an hour before the family is expected to arrive. Chris is busy preparing for the meeting when he is alerted by the buzzer that someone has come in the front door of the funeral home. When he comes up the stairs, he finds four people in the front hall, two women, a teenage girl and a man. They are definitely not the family he was expecting. They are what the staff refers to as a walk in call, having arrived without an appointment or calling ahead. Chris greets them and invites them to have a seat in the small office to the side of the main hall. It is clear from their voices and body language that they are under extreme stress. As soon as the introductions have been made, Chris discovers several things: first, this is the wife of the

45 year old local man killed in a traffic accident yesterday which had been reported on the evening news, and second, that the deceased is the son of the former organist at the funeral home. It is most likely a sense of familiarity with the funeral home, if not with the current directors, that has brought the family to Marlatt's. Chris is faced with the predicament of balancing the needs of a walk in family that wants to make arrangements and a scheduled family that will arrive at any moment. He explains the situation and offers the family several options. Chris could call in a second funeral director who would meet with them in approximately forty-five minutes, or he can meet with them briefly now and again later in the day. The family prefers to meet briefly now with Chris and to wait for the second funeral director to arrive. Chris excuses himself from the office and calls Bob from the back hall to ask him if he is available to come in and meet with a family. As a rule, Bob does not make funeral arrangements with families unless one or both of the funeral directors is occupied or he knows the family from his years as manager of the funeral home. Perhaps it is a good thing that Bob will make the arrangements today as he is acquainted with the walk-in family, the Gormans. While waiting for the Elgin family to arrive, Chris takes the Gorman family downstairs to the Alderwoods Room where he tries to ascertain as much information in as short a period of time as possible. Ideally, Chris would like to have some sense of the direction Karen, the widow, would like to take in making the funeral arrangements so that he can give Bob a heads up when he arrives.

The Elgin family arrives exactly at 10:30 a.m. Chris has an obligation to meet them without delay. He escorts the Gorman family back up stairs and seats them in the

small office to wait for Bob. I offer them tea or coffee but they thank me and refuse, explaining that they have had more than their limit of coffee in the last 24 hours. Instead, they choose to go outside for a cigarette and then come back inside to pace. They are in and out through the front door numerous times while they wait for Bob.

Chris settles the Elgin family around the large table in the Alderwoods' room. This will be an easy arrangement to complete as the family wants to follow exactly the same format used five years earlier when their father passed away: two visitations at their church, a traditional funeral service and earth burial.

When Bob arrives, Chris excuses himself briefly to speak with him about the Gorman family. In a rushed manner, he passes along the information that it will probably be a “dump”, a term used for direct cremation with no memorial service to follow. Among the staff, direct cremations are referred to by several terms including a “dump” and a “#10” which refers to the casket type used and a direct burn. These argots are used only in the backstage private area of the funeral home. They are examples of what I refer to as “funeralese”, a language shared among the funeral home insiders (Pine 1975:39). The terms carry no connotation either positive or negative about the bereaved family's choice of disposal. When funeral directors meet to make arrangements with family members, the funeral home services are always referred to according to their formal description. A “dump” would be referred to as a “direct cremation without funeral ceremony”. Direct cremation with no service to follow provides a cost effective way to dispose of a corpse. Included in the \$1200.00 package is the removal of the body and transfer to the funeral home, use of facilities to shelter the body until it is transferred to

the crematorium, transfer to the crematorium and documentation including the coroner's certificate and death registration. The casket, which is required by law, is an additional \$295.00. Direct cremations without a memorial service account for approximately 28% of all the calls taken by the Marlatt Funeral Home.

Based on prior knowledge of the Gorman family, Chris has the feeling that the funeral home will have to involve social services if the family wants anything more than a basic funeral. Regardless of the family's social and financial situation, or Chris's presumptions about them, Bob walks into the meeting with an open mind concerning the arrangements. His primary concern is with the family as they are now rather than with their past history. When the discussion finally turns to the costs he knows that if the family needs financial assistance, Alderwoods has several policies in place to help families create the funeral they desire even on a shoestring budget. They can also be assisted in making financial arrangements through the Hamilton Community Social Services family assistance program.

Chris returns to the Elgin family, who are waiting in the Alderwoods' Room. Mrs. Elgin's daughter, Rachel, directs her questions to Chris concerning how things will proceed from this point in time until the visitations. Like most people, the family has no clear understanding about what an autopsy physically entails. Without going into great detail, Chris explains to the family as gently as possible that he will do his best with the embalming and restoration procedure so that the family will be able to leave the casket open. Following a brief discussion about timing, it is decided that visitation will take place on Thursday with the funeral to follow on Friday morning. The family has prepared

their own death notice for Chris to submit to the newspaper. They have already chosen the picture that they would like to place on the front side of the memorial cards. They give both to Chris to add to their mother's file. Chris suggests to the family that they choose an outfit for "Mom" and bring it to the funeral home at their convenience later today or early tomorrow morning. The arrangements come to a conclusion and Chris sees the family to the front door, again offering his condolences.

While Chris is making arrangements in the Alderwoods Room, Bob spends his time in the front office getting to know with the Gorman family and listening to them tell the story of their tragedy. With fifty years of experience as a director, Bob has met with families in many different circumstances, including the sudden death of a loved one in a traffic accident. The front office seems much more formal and crowded in comparison to the spaciousness of the arrangement room. Bob introduces himself and offers his condolences to everyone. His condolences are heartfelt as he relates how he remembers the deceased, Jake as a teenager many years ago when the family lived behind the funeral home. In turn Bob greets Karen, the common law wife, a woman in her early forties, Sharon, the teenage daughter of the deceased, Jim, the brother of the deceased and Liz, a female friend of the widow. Because Bob needs a hard surface to write notes on, he is forced to sit behind the desk across from the family who are seated on the four chairs on the other side of the desk. Sociologist Glennys Howarth suggests that this type of spatial organization establishes a position of power in the relationship between the funeral director and the "client" in which the funeral director has control over the dialogue (Howarth 1996:117). In contrast, the more spacious Alderwoods' room, with its round

table, situates the funeral director as both the director and an active member of a team which includes the bereaved (Pine 1975:127).

During the discussion Bob quickly determines that Karen is the executor and will be responsible for making the decisions, signing all the documentation and taking financial responsibility. While Liz, the female friend, gives the impression of being an authority on the matter of funeral arrangements, it is Karen, the wife to whom Bob addresses his comments.

As soon as Chris sees his family out of the funeral home, Bob will take the Gorman family down to the Alderwoods' room. This move will allow Karen to see the selection of caskets and urns. Bob explains there are several funeral and cremation packages available which will allow her to customize her choices. Karen decides that she wants to have three visitations with an open casket, a traditional funeral service which is to be followed by cremation. Although the deceased was Catholic, Karen tells Bob that Jake was not a practicing Catholic and that she would prefer not to have a religious service like the Catholic funeral mass. Bob suggests that Bev, the chaplain at The Villa, might be an excellent choice to lead the service as she is an exceptionally warm and compassionate lay leader with a great deal of experience. As a chaplain, Bev has experience working with families of many different faiths and many levels of spirituality. In the past five years, Bev has performed numerous funerals and memorial services which she has tailored to the spiritual and emotional needs of family members. Another choice would be to use Diane, a trained celebrant, who performs secular funeral services. Bob explains to Karen that a celebrant creates a personalized, meaningful service for families



who wish to honor the life of their loved one with a contemporary celebration of life rather than a traditional religious funeral rite. After giving the matter some thought, Karen decides that Bev would be a good compromise between a religious and a secular funeral service.

The next decision which Karen must make will be her choice of casket. This is the most expensive choice the family will have to make during the arrangement meeting. Karen seems torn between wanting a wood casket, which looks nice, and wanting to be practical, knowing that she has chosen cremation. Bob shows her the display of full size caskets which includes several rental caskets that he would like her to consider as an alternative to purchasing a wood casket. The rental casket has a liner which is hidden beneath the satin draping. He reassures Karen that the pillow and satin draping is fitted to the new liner each time the casket is used. The deceased lies in the insert during the visitation and the funeral and is removed from the outer shell prior to going to the crematorium. Rental caskets are a relatively recent innovation by the funeral and casket industry. According to Jessica Mitford, funeral directors frequently urge survivors to consider a rental casket rather than a less costly cremation container knowing that the rental casket shell can be used at least half a dozen times or more, thereby giving the funeral home an extravagant financial return (Mitford 1998:120). Rental caskets represent 16-20% of the total number of caskets purchased, in contrast to cremation containers used for direct cremation which makeup 45-50% of casket purchases (personal statistics gathered 2003-2005). In this instance, using a rental casket will allow Karen to have the wood casket that she would like, without spending the extra money required to

purchase. During my fieldwork, I was never able to understand why families who choose earth burial have fewer concerns about the amount of money they spend on a casket in contrast to those families who choose a traditional funeral service which is followed by cremation. In the case of earth burial, the casket will disintegrate underground and in the case of cremation, it will be burned by the heat of the retort. The greatest difference in these methods involves the speed at which the casket and its contents will be destroyed. When I questioned the funeral directors, they could not offer any reason except personal choice by the family is often determined by past experience. They would not speculate whether the decision to rent a casket was made for financial reasons. During my fieldwork, several families who chose earth burial, also chose to rent a casket. In these instances the deceased was buried in the casket liner.

Bob shows Karen the display of memorial guest books and matching cards and inquires if she is interested in looking at the various packages. Liz suggests to Karen that they “can do better at a stationery store.” Bob explains that the packages sold by Marlatt’s are actually less costly than those purchased at the stationers because they come with the book as well as an unlimited number of acknowledgement cards. However, he adds that the choice belongs to Karen. Stationery packages, like the floral arrangements the funeral home offers, are a service for families which they are not obliged to use. Karen decides that she will not purchase a stationery package.

Throughout the arrangement meeting, Bob is required by the Board of Funeral Service to show Karen the pages in the Funeral Planning Guide which correspond to her choice of visitation and funeral with cremation. Following the arrangements, the guide

becomes a part of the information package which is taken by the bereaved family. After reviewing the itemized breakdown of the funeral home services, casket price and the cost of the disbursements with Bob, Karen acknowledges that she is satisfied with the breakdown and total service cost. Following the price list, Bob writes up the itemized funeral contract including the disbursements for the clergy, organist, death registration and coroner, which he has discussed with Karen. When he presents the contract to Karen for her signature, she states that the figures are not what had been agreed upon and that she had not selected that particular funeral service package. Despite the fact that the page was still open to the page of service that had been selected, it was apparent that nothing Bob could say would convince Karen that the charges on the contract and in the book were one and the same. At this point, her friend, Liz joined into the discussion, angrily accusing Bob of misleading Karen concerning the cost of the funeral arrangements. It was clear that the meeting was beginning to take a new direction. Funeral arrangements, particularly after a sudden death of a young person are often very “emotionally charged”. Later Bob shared with me that in his opinion, the “tragedy and the tension Karen was under, as well as her friend’s comments and sarcasm contributed to the difficulty of making the funeral arrangements.” In addition, the Gorman family was further stressed by having to change rooms twice during the arrangement conference to accommodate the Elgin family who had arrived for their scheduled appointment. The situation was defused by Bob, who suggested that Chris, the manager of the funeral home should join the arrangement meeting. Chris, having finished his meeting with the Elgin family, brought a

new voice to the group and within a short period of time had resolved the issues concerning costs.

Before concluding the meeting, Chris explains again to Karen and her friends that until the body is released by the coroner, no definitive time or date can be made for the visitations and funeral. He promises to contact Karen as soon as he receives word from the hospital. In the meantime, he suggests they think about what clothes they would like Jake to be dressed in, and that they choose pictures from their family albums to place on the picture boards which he will give them to take home. Chris suggests that Karen might want to bring the CDs of Jake's favorite music to the funeral home so they can be played in the visitation room.

As Chris escorts the Gorman family to the door, it is difficult to say who is more relieved to conclude the arrangement conference, the family or the funeral directors.

While Chris and Bob are making arrangements, the casket for Mrs. Cairns arrives at the back door and we take it downstairs to the prep room. Mrs. Cairns needs to be placed in the casket, so the finishing touches of makeup can be applied to her face and hands. Preparing Mrs. Cairns becomes the priority, as her family will arrive an hour before visitation begins.

Flowers have been placed around the back visitation room which the Cairns will use and the memorial cards and guest register have been placed on the dais. Paul and I bring what is referred to as the funeral home's "Catholic equipment": two candles, a cross and the "kneeler" into the visitation room. The candles, which are placed at the head and the foot of the casket, will be lit when the family arrives. The large gilt cross is placed

against the wall, behind where the casket will rest. Once the casket is in place, the kneeler will be placed in front of the casket. As soon as Mrs. Cairns has been casketed, she will be brought upstairs to the visitation room. Once the Elgin family and the Gorman family have completed their arrangements and left the funeral home and the casket is in place, Paul will vacuum the front hall and visitation room one last time before the afternoon visitation begins.

Chris is mindful of the time. It is nearly noon and the Cairns family will be at the funeral home in an hour. As well, he must plan ahead for the 3 p.m. graveside burial of baby Kelly's cremains which will take place concurrently with the afternoon visitation for Mrs. Cairns. There is a lot of work to accomplish between now and then. The priorities are Mrs. Cairns, then tidying up the loose ends of the arrangements for the Elgin family. Casketing does not take as much time as making sure the face and hands are set in exactly the right position. Presenting the dead in a restored state is an important part of funeral directing (Pine 1975:135). Getting the right amount of makeup on the face is an art according to Chris who says that families are won or lost by the expertise of the funeral director in the prep room. Too much makeup or too little makeup under the lights of the visitation room can make a difference in how the family perceives the deceased (Laderman 2003:104). Once Chris finishes with the makeup, Mrs. Cairns is taken up to the visitation room, where her casket is lifted from the "church truck" onto the skirted bier. The time is 12:30 p.m.

**Afternoon:**

Chris goes back downstairs to his office. Today, the old adage, “so much to do, so little time”, rings true. The first task is to retype the obituary notice and fax it to the newspaper because the family would like the notice to run for two days, starting tomorrow. The newspaper will fax the notice back for approval before it can be published, thereby eliminating spelling mistakes or errors concerning the time or location of the visitation and funeral. Occasionally mistakes occur so it is important that the returning notice is checked carefully before it is signed off. All of this requires time and organizational skills. Being busy is not an excuse for missing the newspaper deadline for publication.

The next call is to the minister of the Elgin family’s church. Although the family has already spoken with their minister, Rev. Glick, Chris wants to touch base so that they can go over the details for the visitation and confirm the time of the funeral. Finally, there is the call to the morgue which informs Chris that Mrs. Elgin’s body has been released. Chris is hoping that the body belonging to the Gorman family might also have been released so that both could be picked up at the same time, avoiding two trips. So far only Mrs. Elgin’s body has been released. For now, the pickup will have to wait, since there is no staff member available to make the morgue run and Chris has chosen to not use the Removal Service.

The phone rings as Chris concludes his conversation with the hospital morgue. A new call! Chris arranges for the family to come into the funeral home to meet with him at

4:30 p.m. The funeral home is definitely humming today. Chris adds the new name to the board, bringing the total to five.

The Gorman family is only minutes out the door when Paul plugs in the vacuum to go over the front hall and visitation rooms in preparation for the afternoon visitation. Presentation is important to the funeral director who acts as the host to the bereaved family and their guests at the funeral home. To the visitor, standing at the front door looking in, the funeral home appears quite different than to the eye of the discerning funeral director and his staff. Once again I am reminded of Bob's belief that the funeral home should always be ready to accept families at any time of day or night. Since no one can predict when a call will be received or when a family will walk in, it is a minimum requirement that the front hall be vacuumed before leaving at night and before unlocking the doors and taking the phone lines in the morning and most importantly, before a visitation. Great care has been taken in setting up the visitation room including the placement of the casket, flowers, and lighting as well as the arrangement of the furniture. A few last minute adjustments are made and we are ready when the family walks through the door.

Another call is made to the hospital. Still only one body released. Chris calls downtown to arrange for our "sister" funeral home to pick up Mrs. Elgin's body from the hospital and bring her back to that facility for embalming, before bringing her to our funeral home. The two funeral homes often help one another out during busy times because Marlatt's Dundas has only two embalmers whereas Marlatt's Hamilton has four embalmers. The other factor is the size of the prep room which is currently at its capacity

in Dundas. At funeral homes owned by Service Corporation International (SCI) central embalming facilities have been instituted. The embalmer is just one of many positions which are found in the complex organization of what Pine calls the “cosmopolitan funeral home” (Pine 1975:66). In the centralized system, all bodies are embalmed and have cosmetics applied at one location before being transferred to the funeral home where the family will be holding their visitation. Many funeral directors have expressed concerns about centralized embalming believing that the funeral director who embalms should be directly responsible to the family. In cosmopolitan funeral homes which have centralized embalming, the embalmer never meets or spends time with the bereaved family. In contrast, funeral directors in community funeral homes such as the two Marlatt funeral homes develop an ongoing relationship with the families of the deceased which extends from making the arrangements to beyond the committal. Al, the managing director at the “sister” Marlatt funeral home in Hamilton assures Chris that it is not a problem for one of their directors to embalm Mrs. Elgin this afternoon. One of the Hamilton staff will bring her out to the Dundas funeral home later that evening or first thing the next morning in time for Chris or Dave to do her cosmetics and casket her.

A few minutes prior to expected arrival of the Cairns family, Chris comes upstairs. He wants to be present to greet the family, introduce them to the staff working and most importantly to be with the Cairns family when they see their mother. This will be the first time that the family will see their mother since her death at the hospital. The private viewing will help allay some of the fears the Cairns might have about their



mother's appearance. It is a time when the family can openly break down and display their grief to one another.

Chris escorts them into the room and to the side of the casket. He remains close by should the family have questions or comments but not close enough to intrude on their private family time. Chris knows that family members are not accustomed to seeing a loved one lying in repose in a casket and that responses vary from person to person. The family will need some time to grow accustomed to seeing their Mom lying inanimate in the casket with her features fixed in position and eyes closed. Through the process of embalming, funeral directors are able to prolong the period of meaningful contact between the bereaved and the deceased. Rather than denying death, embalming can be seen as an affirmation of a life which has been lived successfully and come to a restful end (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:208). By making the deceased resemble as closely as possible the living body it represents, funeral directors hope to create a "memory picture" which they can present to the family when they come to see the deceased. It is this image which funeral directors hope that members of the family will take with them when they leave the funeral home and later the cemetery.

Often, before the private viewing, families have not decided whether they want to leave the casket open or closed for the visitation. They may choose to have the casket open only while the family is alone with the deceased. Comments such as "She looks so peaceful" or "She hasn't looked this well in years" are usually a sign to the funeral director that the family is leaning toward leaving the casket open for visitation. Chris

tells me that the greatest compliment a family can pay a funeral director is the decision to leave the casket open for the public visitation.

The grace period prior to the open visitation gives the family a chance to spend some quiet time with their deceased loved one and one another. The Cairns family sits on the couch opposite the casket, talking quietly. Several family members remain by the casket and appear to be lost in their own thoughts. Nothing is taken for granted and Chris will check with the Cairns family prior to the arrival of their guests at 2 p.m. whether the family wishes to close the casket. As well, he will ask the Cairns if they are ready to greet their friends. Until they give us the go ahead, we will ask their visitors to be patient and take a seat in the other visitation room. The family is ready. Paul and I take our positions at the front door. Today we will be the first people that relatives and friends meet when they come to the funeral home. Frequently during a visitation, one of the funeral directors can also be found at the door in the role of the doorman. This affords the funeral directors the opportunity to become acquainted with the visitors. People often joke about the great service we offer as we open and close the door for them, but our role goes beyond greeting guests and seeing to their needs by helping with donation cards or giving directions to the washrooms. Throughout the visitation, the primary concern of the funeral director and the staff is with the bereaved (Pine 1975:97). The person at the front door is responsible for ensuring that the family does not become overwhelmed by the stress of visitation. As well, the man or woman at the front door is a point person that the family can easily find to answer questions or assist in any way. Sometimes, when the guests are elderly as is the case today, we assist those who use walkers or wheelchairs by escorting

them into the funeral home and up the ramp into the visitation room. As there is no ramp into the front entrance, a staff person escorts the visitor through the back entrance which is normally reserved for only staff and deliveries. It is the only time that a visitor has access to the “backstage” area of the funeral home.

Visitors to the funeral home are often surprised at how attentive staff members are to the small details such as opening the front door. One man offers to tip me for giving him such good “service with a smile”. When I thank him but decline, he teases me by offering to speak to the management about getting me a raise!

Half an hour into the Cairn’s visitation, Chris and I prepare to leave for the cemetery where we will meet the Mason family and an elder from their church. Bob is downstairs completing the paperwork for the Gorman family arrangements. Chris will be back long before the Dumoulin family is expected to come in to make their arrangements.

Chris and I arrive at the cemetery a few minutes before the Masons which allows Chris to check the grave site which is located in a new section of the cemetery. This particular cemetery does not have a specific section for infants and children. Kelly’s parents have purchased a double plot for themselves and it is in one of these plots that her remains will be buried. A small box has been placed over the grave. Moving the box aside, Chris checks the grave to make sure it is dry. The Masons have not indicated that they want to see the urn lowered but Chris knows that decisions such as this often change at a moment’s notice. It is better to be prepared. Jan and Jim arrive accompanied by their other children, family members and several friends who are carrying small stuffed animals and flowers. As soon as the Elder arrives, Chris speaks briefly with him and the

bereaved parents about the order of service. He checks again about whether they wish to lower the urn before the final committal. Jim, the father, says “No”.

As Chris once told me, regardless of how many people attend, a funeral or memorial service marks the important fact that a life, even a brief life, has ended (cf. Huntington and Metcalf 1991:84, Walter 1990:2,111). The elder, John Babbit begins by recounting Kelly’s short life and telling everyone how she had touched so many people in different ways. The brief service is punctuated by sobs from Jan, Kelly’s mother as well as several others who stand huddled around the small table upon which the urn sits. I am not sure whether their children, aged four and six years, understand the significance of the graveside service but they have joined their parents at the cemetery. More often in contemporary society, children are being intentionally exposed to death and funeral rituals as a way of helping them make sense of their changing world (Walter 1990:279). As the memorial service concludes, Jim nods towards Chris, indicating that he would like to speak with him. He and Jan have changed their minds and would like to see the urn lowered into the grave. Chris lifts the urn from the table and passes it to me to hold while he moves the table aside. Taking the urn, Chris gently lowers it into the grave for the family. Jim has one more request: that he and the family would like to fill in the grave before they leave the cemetery. The lowering of an urn or a casket into the grave is an unusual request from the bereaved, but the request to fill in the grave is even more unusual. We can see the cemetery truck parked at the edge of the cemetery road waiting for the family to finish before coming over to the grave. Chris motions to the cemetery workers that we need some assistance. The men in the truck bring us two shovels which

we offer to Jim and another family member. The clods of dirt make a dull thud as they fill in the grave. Everyone stands silently for the duration of time it takes for the shovel to be passed from person to person as the grave fills with dirt. Once the grave is closed, family and friends lay down the stuffed animals and flowers on the dirt before they leave. The funeral and final committal marks the conclusion of the transitional period for both the deceased and the bereaved (van Gennep 1960:149). The burial of the urn symbolizes the incorporation of Kelly into the realm of the dead. Only Jan and Jim remain for a few more minutes before returning to their car to drive home where they will spend time with their friends at a small reception. Chris and I stay at the grave site watching the vehicle as they depart from the cemetery.

We return to the funeral home at 4 p.m. The Cairns family is preparing to leave, taking advantage of the couple of hours break between the afternoon and evening visitation. Chris checks with the family to see if they were satisfied with the afternoon visitation. Before they leave, he would like to finalize some of the details concerning the funeral mass tomorrow morning, including the procession of cars going to the church and the flowers they would like to have placed in the church. Chris writes down the information so that it can be shared in the morning with everyone working the funeral. Having a car list for the procession to church is far less crucial than for a procession to the cemetery from the chapel. Only immediate family members will be returning in the morning for the hour before the mass, when the casket will be closed. As a result, there will not be a large number of cars in the procession which will follow the lead car and hearse to the church.

Once the family leaves, we begin to straighten the room. Paul empties the garbage containers, straightens the memorial cards and register book and tidies the table arrangements. The candles are blown out. I vacuum the front hall and the visiting room. The time is 4:15 p.m. There is just enough time for a quick coffee before the Dumoulin family arrives to meet with Chris. We have been on the go since 8:30 a.m., and even a short break is welcomed by everyone.

No one ever arrives fashionably late at a funeral home. Right on the dot of 4:30 p.m. the buzzer rings to let us know someone has arrived at the front door. Chris heads up the back stairs to greet the next family. Mr. Dumoulin's daughter, Pat, has no idea when she comes into the funeral home that it has been a busy day. Chris is just as concerned about the needs of her family as he was for the first family that walked into Marlatt's this morning. According to Chris, every family is important and needs to feel that their arrangements are the most significant thing that he is going to do that day. In his view, regardless of the type of arrangement they choose to make, families are the backbone of the funeral business.

Mr. Dumoulin prearranged his funeral 30 years ago, in 1970. The funeral was pre-paid at the current cost for the time. Looking at the file it is unbelievable that a direct cremation cost only \$371. In today's market, the same arrangement would cost \$2845. Chris inquires whether the family is aware of the arrangements that Mr. Dumoulin has made concerning the care of his body following his death. Even though his daughter, Pat knows her father's wishes, Chris reviews the arrangements again to refresh her memory. Pat recalls that she had followed her father's wishes and not had a memorial service when

her mother passed away a number of years ago. Now that her father has died, and the choice is Pat's alone, she feels that she would like to have a small memorial service for the family and close friends. Chris tells her that she is not alone in feeling that something is missing when there is no service. In Chris' experience "people who choose not to have a service of some type to mark the passing of someone they love, often feel that they are missing something in the weeks and even months or years to come." I have often heard Chris tell families who choose direct cremation only, that they can call the funeral home at any time in the future should they decide they want help planning a memorial service, even if it is not held at the funeral home. When I asked him if anyone has ever taken him up on his offer, Chris told me that he once had a family come back after more than a year after the death, wanting to organize a memorial service.

Discussing the memorial service leads Chris to ask about an obituary notice. Pat decides not to place an obituary notice in the newspaper as she believes most of her father's friends have already died. She will contact everyone that is invited to the memorial service to tell them the time and place of the service.

When Chris asks Pat if she has a family minister who could be contacted about performing the memorial service, Pat admits that her family is not affiliated with any church. Since the 1970's more and more bereaved families find themselves at a loss about religious options for funerals (Bibby 2002:15). During the period of my fieldwork, between 54% and 60% of all the families who used the Marlatt funeral home were not affiliated with any church, either Catholic or Protestant. (See Appendix IV). As a result, funeral directors are frequently asked to match families with clergy from the local area.

Although many bereaved families are unaffiliated, most continue to identify with the religion of their parents, recalling weddings, baptisms and funerals in which they have participated or attended in their particular denomination (Bibby 2002: 28,40). Chris suggests that the Dumoulin family might consider using the lay chaplain from the Villa, because their “Dad” was a resident there. Pat thinks that she may have met Bev at the Villa, when she was visiting her father in the past several years while he was a resident. She agrees that Bev would be an excellent choice and asks Chris if he can make the arrangements. The Marlatt funeral directors frequently act as the “go between”, linking up unaffiliated families and the local clergy. In this way, Marlatt’s is in line with the observations made by Sociologist Ivan Emke who states “for those without a connection to a church, the funeral director becomes the ceremonial lead who knows what has to be done.” (Emke 1999: 4). Because Pat would like the memorial to be on Sunday, Chris explains that it will have to be at 2 p.m. to allow Bev enough time to get home from church and then come to the funeral home. When Chris calls Bev, he discovers that she has left the Villa for the day. He leaves a message but assures Pat that he will personally call Bev again tomorrow. Once he has confirmed that Bev is available, he will call Pat to confirm the exact time for Sunday’s memorial service.

Chris suggests that they might prefer one of the visitation rooms rather than the chapel to be set up for the memorial service because a small space is less intimidating if the gathering is few in numbers. He does not take into account that Pat, who has no church affiliation, might regard the chapel as the most suitable place for the memorial service. Chapels are closely identified with funerals by many individuals because of their



association with rites of passage from their past experience. Although the number of people attending the memorial service will be very small, Pat thinks the family would prefer that the service be held in the chapel. As a way of personalizing the chapel for the visitation before the memorial service, Chris suggests that Pat might want to look through the picture album of memorial tables. The album contains pictures of how other families have personalized the table upon which the urn containing the cremains will be placed by using flowers, pictures, books or anything which was meaningful to the deceased. It is not necessary for Pat to make a decision today. One of the advantages of choosing direct cremation with a memorial service at a later time is that the family has time to be creative in planning their service (Garces-Foley 2003:298). Chris reassures Pat that Bev can help her choose the format of memorial service and that he and Dave will be happy to help her with details involving setting up the chapel or making memorial cards.

Chris draws up the contract, outlining the services being rendered. He explains that the family will be receiving a refund because the money which has been invested in their father's name surpasses the cost of the cremation and use of the chapel for the memorial service. Pat expresses surprise because she had anticipated paying the difference between the pre-paid amount and the cost of the chapel. As they shake hands at the front door, Pat thanks Chris for his thoughtfulness and for sharing his insight as well as for his suggestions concerning the memorial service for her father.

It is 6 p.m. and there is just enough time for a quick dinner before the Cairns family returns for the evening visitation. As we are about to sit down, we hear the back

door open. Scott has arrived from our sister funeral home in Cambridge to embalm Mr. Gorman.

**Evening:**

The Cairns family returns at 6:30 p.m. and are surprised to find Paul and myself already waiting at the door. Chris comes up from his office downstairs to greet them and to make sure the family has no problems or questions before the next visitation begins. This will be the last time any of us will see Chris until the end of visiting hours when he will join the family one more time. Chris is busy completing the paperwork for the three arrangements he has made today, going through the checklist for each family to ensure that nothing has been inadvertently forgotten. Paul and I will spend the evening at the front door of the funeral home, available again to the family and their guests.

The local Roman Catholic priest, Father Curtin arrives promptly at 7 p.m. to conduct the brief evening service of prayers with the family and their friends. The evening prayers are a part of the vigil for the deceased liturgy. Mourning and funeral rituals are intended to move the deceased and the bereaved through the liminal state in which both groups are separated from social life (van Gennep 1960:147). The evening vigil is the principle rite celebrated following the death and before the funeral liturgy or rite of committal (Krisman 1985:23). Father Curtin tells me that the purpose of the prayers is to bring together the family and their friends as a community<sup>13</sup>. Victor Turner describes the spirit of unity and mutual belonging created by rituals such as the evening

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on the role of ritual, see Donald Heinz, *The Last Passage*, Oxford University Press:Oxford 1999.

prayers as *communitas* (Turner 1969:213)<sup>14</sup> As a group they collectively turn to God in their prayers as a source of light and hope in the darkness of death. The community's principal role is to console the bereaved through prayer and by acts of kindness, including assisting them with their daily routine so that the bereaved may attend to planning the funeral. During the mourning period, the bereaved and the dead constitute a special group which is situated between the living and the dead (van Gennep 1960:147). The prayers of intercession read in the vigil ask God to "comfort the mourners and show mercy to the deceased" (Krisman 1985:30). Father Curtin pauses with a family member for a very brief conversation following the conclusion of the service before leaving the funeral home. There are no final details he needs to check with the family as the mass does not include a eulogy and he has already agreed that the family will do both Bible readings.

Downstairs, Scott is in the prep room embalming Mr. Gorman whose body had been released earlier in the afternoon from the hospital. A complete autopsy was performed by the coroner because Mr. Gorman, aged 45, had been involved in a motor vehicle accident and had been pronounced dead at the scene by the medics. The procedure involved surgically opening the cranial cavity, the neck, the thoracic cavity, and the abdominal cavity with the removal of organs. Following the autopsy, the removed organs that were not being examined were placed in a plastic bag or container which is sent with the body to the funeral home. What lies on the prep room table is the shell of the man known as Jake Gorman. Over the next few hours, it will be Scott's task to re-

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<sup>14</sup> For further discussion on *communitas* as a concept in ritual studies, see Victor Turner, *Liminality and Communitas*, "The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure" Gruyer: New York 1999. Pp.213.

humanize and reconstruct the social identity of Jake's body to "create an image of conscious embodiment." (Hallam, Hockey, Howarth 2000:15, 126).

Embalming a body following an autopsy is different from embalming a body which has not been subjected to invasive procedures after death. Scott will re-establish the boundaries of the body by attending to the trauma sustained from the autopsy as well as the lacerations and abrasions to the face and hands that occurred during the accident.

Scott tells me that when working on an autopsied body "the rule of thumb is to do one thing at a time rather than, for example, trying to set the features while injecting the legs." Because there has been a delay in the preparation of the body which has been refrigerated for a prolonged period, Scott will use a stronger than average arterial solution (Mayer 2000: 311). He works quickly and efficiently to repair the assault to the body resulting from the autopsy, through sanitation, preservation and finally restoration (Pine 1975:115).

It will require several hours and a lot of patience for Scott to reconstruct the body. When he finishes it is impossible to tell that there has been a fatal automobile accident or an autopsy. Chris has told Scott that the family, if at all possible would like to have the casket open during the visitations. The challenge for Scott is to hide the damage which the body has suffered in the accident and as a result of the autopsy. Scott replaces the skull bones, wiring them together before he closes the skull skin flaps. The body cavity is filled out and closed by a neat line of running stitches and the particles of glass carefully removed from Jake's forehead as well as his hands. Scott finishes by washing the body with soap and water, before drying and covering Jake with a large flannel sheet. Before

Scott leaves the prep room, he fills in the embalming record, marking the six points of injection, areas on the head and hands where reconstruction was necessary, as well as indicating potentially problematic areas which may require further attention in the morning.

Chris checks with Paul using the intercom to ensure that things are running smoothly upstairs in the visitation. At 8:55 p.m. he comes upstairs and waits until the last visitor has left before going into the room to meet with the family. Chris suggests that the family and whoever is acting as pallbearers gather in the chapel for the hour before we leave in procession for the church. Chris explains that this arrangement will give them time with “Mom” without the interruptions of visitors. During this time, they can say their final good-bye before the casket is closed. Since the reception will be at the church hall, Chris inquires if the family has decided which flowers they would like to be placed in the church and in the hall. These flower arrangements are marked with post-it notes so there is no confusion in the morning about which flowers must be placed in the church. The procession to St. Augustine’s Church involves only family cars so there is no need to obtain a list of cars. Everyone that is at the funeral home in the morning will be “flagged” with a “funeral” card on their car. Chris has recorded the names of the pallbearers and honorary pallbearers on the “funeral service” card. He briefly explains how the procession will move into the church for the mass and assures the family that he will be with them to guide them on their way into and out of the church. They will not be on their own wondering what to do or where they should be seated. Chris knows that he will have to reiterate the information in the morning because bereaved family members often

become “lost in translation”. Chris tells the family to take as much time as they need with “Mom” before they leave for the evening. Families are never rushed out of the funeral home at the end of the evening regardless of how late the hour or how much work remains to be completed. This practice fosters the service position of the community funeral home director (Pine 1975:97). Chris leaves the visitation room but the family remains another fifteen minutes, thanking us for staying late as they pass us at the front door. We assure them that it is not a problem. We know that the last fifteen minutes is more important to the family than it is for ourselves. It is always difficult for families to leave at night even though they know they are coming back in the morning.

As soon as the Cairns family leaves, we begin the ritual of the “change over” from the visitation room to the chapel for the morning. Chris, Paul and I are in motion, heading in different directions. The outside lights in the parking lot are left lit until we are sure that the last family member has left. The front doors are locked and the inside lights dimmed before we begin to move everything from the visitation room into the chapel. If the mass were later in the morning perhaps this job could be left, but it is safer to do the work tonight, just in case another call comes overnight. It is like a relay, carrying flowers from the visitation room to the chapel and repositioning them in the correct place. Only the flowers that will be placed in the church before the funeral mass are left in the visitation room. The last thing to be moved is the casket, which is lifted from the bier on which it has rested during the visitations onto the gold “church truck” so it can be wheeled into the chapel. The church truck is a portable and collapsible bier which facilitates moving the casket tonight and will also serve in the procession from the chapel

to the church. The casket is centered in front of the podium and the cross. The wheels of the church truck are all aligned in one direction. The alignment of the wheels is a small detail but Chris stresses that often it is the small things that are most important in funeral services. In any performance the props which are being used are important to the overall presentation (Pine 1975:103). It must never appear as if the flowers or pictures have been placed randomly or in a rushed manner. Once Chris is satisfied with the arrangement of the chapel, the carpet in front of the casket and between the pews where we have been stepping is vacuumed. The lights are turned off for the night at 10 p.m. The evening ritual is completed as Chris signs the lines over to the answering service and turns on his pager. Another long and full day: three funeral arrangements, one graveside service and two visitations.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **DAY 6**

### **THURSDAY**

#### **The Day in Preview**

Looking ahead at Day 6, we will move from the back stage area where we were concerned with embalming and the ritual transformation of the corpse to the front stage of the funeral home, the visitation rooms and the chapel, where the deceased takes his/her place among the living. We will observe that the front stage is a mobile area which can be extended from the funeral home to the church and the cemetery for a period of time (Goffman 1959:22). Having observed the relationship of the funeral director with members of the clergy in the funeral home, we will turn our focus to their relationship within the church setting.

This day opens with a brief visitation for the Cairns family prior to the procession to St. Augustine's Church for the funeral mass. On the morning of a funeral, the funeral directors and staff are prepared well in advance of the arrival of the family. Pine remarks that funerals are not run in "a haphazard fashion", rather, they are scheduled for a specific time (Pine 1975:103). Timing is critical for all funerals but this is particularly true when the funeral takes place outside the funeral home. As with any theatrical performance, the



funeral director must be prepared in advance for problems which might disrupt the performance (Pine 1975:103). In order to arrive at the church at the scheduled time, Chris must ensure that enough time has been allocated for family members to say their final goodbye before he closes the casket. This is a very emotional period for many and enough time must be allotted to ensure that the bereaved do not feel rushed as they take their place in the procession to the church.

The priest at the church awaits the arrival of the deceased and the bereaved. We have previously observed that the relationship between members of the clergy and the funeral director inside the funeral home is an amicable working relationship in which both are involved in the planning of the funeral. Whereas the funeral director takes on the responsibility of coordinating the events surrounding the funeral, the cleric, in this instance Father Curtin, is responsible for the religious ritual of the funeral mass (cf. Emke 1999:5).

Although the number of funerals being held in funeral home chapels continues to increase, there remain a number of families who choose to return to their own church to perform funeral rites. Mitford (1963) suggests that the proper place for a funeral is in a church and not in a chapel of a funeral home, though she does concede that the individual choice of the family must be respected by the funeral director and the cleric (Mitford 1963:245). Quoting Father Connolly, a Roman Catholic priest from Bellingham Center, Massachusetts, Mitford argues that there is a tension between the role of the priest and that of the funeral director, in particular when the funeral director brings the deceased and the bereaved family to the church (Mitford 1998:171). In contrast to Mitford (1963,

1998), my experience has been that the relationship these professionals share is equally amicable regardless of whether they are working in the funeral home or at the church. During Day 6 we are introduced to two clerics, Father Curtin, a Catholic priest who will lead the funeral mass for Mrs. Cairns and Reverend Doran, the minister at the Christian Reformed Church, who will meet with the Elgin family at the church prior to the first visitation for their mother. Mitford suggests that a cause of tension for clerics is that they are being “hired” and used as “props” by the funeral director (Mitford 1963:247). In contrast, in the ethnography of Day 6, we will observe both clerics taking leading roles with the families in spiritual matters and in the case of Rev. Doran, organizational ones as well. At the funeral home and at the church, the funeral director takes directions and cues from the cleric in regards to funeral ritual, whereas the cleric relies on the funeral director to oversee the more technical aspects of physically moving the deceased, the bereaved and their guests from one stage to another during the performance of the funeral rites. In a recent survey of clergy in Newfoundland, Emke (1999:11) reports that the current working relationship between clerics and funeral directors seems to be more collaborative than it is depicted in earlier studies by Fulton (1959), Bowman (1959) and Bradfield and Meyers (1980), as well as Mitford (1963, 1998). My own research supports this conclusion. I argue that the role of the funeral director and the clergy are not mutually exclusive but rather that their roles and responsibilities often overlap for the benefit of the bereaved and the dead.

As the number of memorial services and direct cremations continues to rise, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of funeral processions from the church or

funeral home chapel to the cemetery. During the period of my fieldwork there were no families who chose to take the opportunity of having a procession to the crematorium despite the fact that cremation, like burial, is a means of disposition for the body. As we observed on Day 3, the bereaved family typically processes out of the chapel following the pallbearers and the casket to the waiting hearse and then watches as the hearse drives away to the crematorium. On this day of the ethnography, we will observe a procession from the church to the cemetery and subsequently from the hearse to the graveside. According to funeral director and author Pat McNally, the procession is a final public enactment of love and respect for the deceased by the bereaved family and friends. He suggests that the funeral procession says:

This person was important to us. This day is not like other days. This journey is not like other journeys. Our loss is meaningful enough that we take special care in a special vehicle to solemnly and ceremoniously convey the earthly remains of our loved one to a special place where their life will be honored and remembered (McNally 2007: quoted on [www.dailyundertaker.com](http://www.dailyundertaker.com)).

Following the funeral at St. Augustine's Catholic Church and the committal, we will turn our attention to a different front stage, the visitations for Mrs. Elgin at the Christian Reformed Church and for Joe Gorman in the chapel of the funeral home.

As we observed previously on Day 2, (Sunday) and Day 4, (Tuesday), the embalming process restores and preserves the corpse long enough for it to be displayed in a casket on the front stage area of the funeral home. Embalming was introduced in North America during the American Civil War and became popular following the death of President Abraham Lincoln whose embalmed body was transported by train from Washington, D.C to his hometown in Illinois, and viewed at stopping points along the

route<sup>15</sup>. By the late nineteenth century, the viewing of the preserved body became a desired ritual moment because it afforded the bereaved one last opportunity to view their dead before or during the funeral service (Laderman 2003:8). Bereaved families began to choose embalming more often following the introduction of arterial embalming and cosmetic reconstruction which appeared to bring the dead back to life. Furthermore, embalming afforded family members who lived at a distance the time to travel in order to attend the wake and funeral (Laderman 2002: 6). Huntington and Metcalf write that embalming transformed the wake, a gathering in the home on the night following a death to view the laid out corpse before it was taken for burial, into something new and peculiarly American in form, the visitation (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:197).

As we have observed, great care is taken to restore the dead to a “natural likeness” of the deceased through embalming and the application of cosmetics. Funeral directors take pride in the presentation of the body because it is the restoration and not the casket which will impress the bereaved (Pine 1975:115). As well, funeral directors pay attention to the staging of the deceased because they believe this will have an impact on how the bereaved visualize the deceased and the memory picture which they will create (Pine 1975:117, 135; Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:126).

The question arises whether viewing the body has a positive impact on the grief process of the bereaved. Jessica Mitford (1963) argues that the only people benefiting

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<sup>15</sup> The “Lincoln Special”, as the train carrying his body was affectionately known, stopped at 180 cities and seven states between Washington D.C. and his hometown of Springfield, Illinois between April 26 and May 4, 1865. The stops were published in the newspaper in advance. At each stop, the casket was taken off the train and placed in a horse drawn hearse where it was led through the streets to a public building where it was put on display for public viewing. The train passed through large cities such as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Columbus, Ohio as well as many small cities such as Herkimer, New York. In every town and city, people lined up for hours in order to view the body of the President.

from the embalming process are the funeral directors who are paid for their services. Embalming according to Mitford has nothing to do with mental health or hygiene and everything to do with profits and sales (Mitford 1963: 63). As well, Mitford argues that the mental health and emotional state of the bereaved are not improved as a result of viewing the body of the deceased (Mitford 1963:64). Historian Philippe Ariès believes that embalming allows the bereaved to deny the reality of death and to approach the dead as if they were still alive. In his view, the practice of embalming protects the living from facing death, rather than preserving or honouring the dead (Ariès 1981:600). In a similar argument, Tony Walter writes that Americans do not embalm to preserve the dead but rather because it affords them the illusion of a good death and makes it possible to believe that the ravages of illness and death can be reversed (Walter 1990:44). Following Walter, Hallam, Hockey and Howarth write that “real death is hidden in our society, transformed into fictionalized images” which are desired by those who “consume them”, the bereaved (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:133, 136). As we will see in the following ethnography, the bereaved often think of the loss they have experienced in terms of being either a good or bad death (Bradbury 1999:142). In contrast to the theorists discussed above who are critical of the practice of embalming and visitation, Mary Bradbury suggests that the purpose of viewing is to “reassure the relatives that the mode of death was a good one, and not to register the fact of death” (Bradbury 1999:130). Bradbury argues that by asserting control over the effect of death through embalming, we assert our control over death. Furthermore, Bradbury asserts that good deaths are “created through discourse”, through culturally “prescribed ways of viewing death to delineate order”

(Bradbury 1999:42, 189). Laderman adopts a similar view. He claims rather than denying death, “the viewing of a body and the presence of a closed casket at the service are the quiet evidence of death and man’s willingness to stand in the presence of it” (Laderman 2002: 130). Similarly, Thomas Lynch, a funeral director, writes “seeing is believing; to name the hurt returns a kind of comfort” (Lynch 2000: 97). Through reconstruction signs of the self are reattached to the body. Even Hallam, Hockey and Howarth argue that body of the deceased is reconstructed and resocialized visually so that the bereaved can recover and continue their social relationship with the deceased (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999: 136). Many funeral directors believe that the bereaved begin their grief work by confronting their dead loved one and creating a lasting memory which has the potential to replace memories of the person in the last stages of their life, when they may have been frail or scarred by illness. According to this perspective, the final memories which are created by the funeral director in death are incorporated with those memories which have been accumulated of the deceased in their lifetime by the bereaved (Pine 1975:135, Lynch 2000:96). Viewing the body after death allows the bereaved to complete their memory through the various stages of life including death. Pine suggests that without this final memory, we weaken our ties, both to reality and to other people (Pine 1975: 136). Moreover, Mary Bradbury writes that “the ritual manipulation of the corpse provides a channel through which survivors can articulate their systems of belief about society, life and death” (Bradbury 1999:116, 118).

In this ethnography, I argue that death is neither exclusively “hidden” nor “visible” in contemporary North American funerary ritual. Rather through ritual

processes such as embalming, the basic fact of death is both confronted and made visible *and* simultaneously hidden between during the period between death and final committal.

**Night:** No calls are taken by the answering service during the night.

**Day:**

There is almost no space left on the board which lists the five calls at the funeral home, including the organizational details about each call: A funeral mass in the morning; an afternoon visitation at church, two evening visitations (one at church, one at the funeral home).

Chris has an early start at the funeral home, arriving at 7:30 a.m. Before his arrival, he has begun to organize the day. As a long time director, Bob says,

It is important to cover every possible detail so that there are as few surprises as possible. You have to think ahead about possible problems with the flowers, seating, time, so that you can have a contingency plan if need be. Planning a funeral is more than just showing up.

Funerals, as a performance, are not run haphazardly. On the day of a funeral, the funeral director becomes the producer overseeing a cast of actors who must be carefully positioned throughout the event. Regardless of the location of the performance, either the funeral home chapel or a church, it requires organization to set the stage. As well, the director must be able to anticipate the needs of all the performers, particularly the needs of the first time performers, the bereaved.

By the time I arrive at 8:30 a.m., Chris has washed the lead car and parked it and the coach at the front of the funeral home. Chris is downstairs in his office working on tidying up some of the ‘loose ends’ on the files that he has neatly arranged across his desk.

There is no time in which teamwork is more important than the hours immediately preceding and following the funeral. Because the Cairns funeral is a Catholic mass, the family will leave for church from the funeral home rather than meeting at the church before the funeral service. As such, both the funeral home and the church must be prepared in advance to receive the family and their guests. Chris asks Paul and I to load the flowers which are going to be placed on the altar at the front of the church in the flower van along with the “No Parking – Funeral” signs and the reserved seating markers for the family and the pallbearers. Once everything is loaded into the van we will drive to the church and begin setting up for the 11 a.m. service. Bob and Dave remain at the funeral home waiting for the family to arrive.

Before carrying the flowers into the church we distribute the “No Parking” signs on the road for the full length of the block in front of the church. By arriving early we are hoping to prevent anyone from parking on the street in front of the church as it is space that will be needed for the cars traveling from the funeral home in procession to the church. The procession this morning will include the lead car, the hearse, a limousine and four family or pallbearer vehicles and will occupy nearly the full length of the street in front of the church.



Inside the church, we place the flowers on either side of the altar where they can be seen by the family. We are careful to arrange the flowers so that they do not hinder Father Curtin as he goes up and down the stairs during the funeral mass for the procession, Eucharist and the recession. We place the “Reserved for Family” markers on the first four rows of pews on the left side of the aisle before reserving the first two rows on the right side of the aisle for the pallbearers. Before returning to the funeral home, we lay out the pall, a large cloth embroidered with a cross that will drape the casket during the funeral mass, by opening it completely and then laying it over the last pew on the left side. Leaving the pall this way will allow the funeral home staff escorting the casket to lift the pall up and drape it over the top of the casket in the correct configuration. We take one last cursory look around the church and then we head back to the funeral home.

While we are waiting for the Cairns family to arrive, Chris takes a call from Karen, the wife of Jake Gorman who was killed in the traffic accident. Karen is upset because she does not see memorial cards or a guest book listed on her contract. Bob is certain that both were offered to her and remembers Karen’s friend Liz telling her that the cards and book were too expensive and suggesting that they would get their own guest register book. Karen is insistent that the cards and book were never offered. Now is not the time to become confrontational with Karen by pointing out that her friend interfered, albeit with good intentions, during the arrangements. Instead, Chris backpedals and offers her the book and memorial cards with no additional charge. Karen tells Chris that she is very concerned that there will be a large crowd and that the back visiting room might be too small. Chris offers her the chapel instead of the visitation room and assures her that

someone will be at the door to organize people so they can pass through the receiving line if necessary. When Chris hangs up the phone he comments: “Sometimes you have to be diplomatic. The customer should always think they are right even when they are wrong.”

The limousine arrives with the Cairns family. Within a few minutes, they are joined by their friends who will be acting as the pallbearers. Fifteen minutes before we leave for church, Chris will go into the chapel and suggest that everyone take a few minutes to say their final good-byes before the casket is closed. At Marlatt’s each family member is given the opportunity to approach the casket one final time before it will be closed. Chris and Bob walk down the center aisle to the casket, pause and then move forward to close and lock the casket. The small bronze cross which has been inside the casket is placed on top towards the foot end of the casket. The floral spray on the casket is removed and set aside as it will not be used during the mass while the casket is covered with the pall. The pallbearers are asked to congregate at the back of the chapel while the casket is turned and brought down the aisle head first so that when it is taken out of the coach at the church, it will lead in feet first. Before asking the remaining family members to go to the limousine or their vehicles, Chris reviews with them one more time the course of events that will happen when the procession arrives at the church. As soon as I open the doors to the chapel, I go out and open the door of the hearse and then stop the traffic in both directions until the casket has been placed inside. Paul will stop the traffic when Chris is ready to lead the procession to the church.

As a group we travel very slowly along the street until we are in front of the church. While the pallbearers are being gathered and given their instructions, Bob carries

the “church truck” to the vestibule of the church. Chris stands with the immediate family to ensure that they are the first to enter the church behind the casket. It is much easier to organize family members, especially if they need assistance, outside the church than once they have entered the church. As the coach door is opened and the pallbearers step into place, I prepare to stop the traffic passing by the church to allow the casket to be removed from the hearse. The traffic remains stopped until the casket has entered the church. At every funeral, a funeral home staff person is positioned at the head and foot of the casket to assist the pallbearers should they need help with carrying the casket. At St. Augustine’s Church the funeral home staff help carry the casket up the stairs and into the vestibule of the building. Once inside, the casket is placed on the church truck and the pallbearers are asked to step back

The funeral mass commences when Father Curtin and the altar children walk down the center aisle to meet the casket and welcome the deceased and the mourners into the church. Father Curtin sprinkles the casket with holy water, a reminder of the saving power of the water of baptism in Catholic doctrine. He refers to the deceased by name, saying “In the waters of baptism Mary died with Christ and rose with him to a new life. May she now share with him in the eternal glory.” (Krissman 1989:81). Death is linked to the idea of resurrection which excludes the deceased from the world of the living while at the same time integrating them among the dead (Hertz 1960:48). At St. Augustine’s Church, the pall is placed on the casket by the funeral home staff. In some other Catholic churches, the pall may be placed by family members, friends or the priest. According to Father Curtin, the use of the pall to cover the casket signifies that all are equal in the eyes

of God (James 2:1-9). Father Curtin and the altar children precede the casket down the center aisle. The casket is positioned at the front of the church by the funeral home staff.

Father Curtin prefers to use the funeral home staff rather than members of the community to bring the casket and the family members in and out of the church. Most but not all priests agree with Father Curtin. Jessica Mitford cites Father James Connolly, a Roman Catholic priest from Bellingham Center, Massachusetts, who expressed great concern “over the role to which mortuary personnel seek to supplant the role of the parishioner” (Mitford 1998:171). In contrast, Father Curtin believes the funeral directors and their staff are a valuable asset at the church because “they are professionals trained to assist the family prior to the mass and again during the recessional.” He confessed to me that without the funeral home staff, he was not sure that he would be able to find members of the church who would be able to come and assist the family or who would take the responsibility of placing the casket for the funeral mass. According to Bob, who has had a working association with the priests at St. Augustine’s Church spanning more than thirty years, the relationship between the clergy and the funeral directors of Marlatt’s has always been amicable and based on mutual respect for their respective role in working with bereaved families.

It is important to both the clergy and the funeral director that they sustain a good working relationship. In a survey of 50 local clergy conducted as part of my fieldwork, members of the clergy indicated that the working relationship between the clergy and the funeral director is excellent. One clergy member confided in me that in more than 30 years in the ministry he could think of only one incident in which a conflict arose and that

was of a personal nature rather than a professional disagreement. Today, the role of the clergy, whether Protestant or Catholic, is clearly distinct from that of the funeral director. Funeral directors facilitate the organizational structure of the funeral as a performance and members of the clergy facilitate the liturgy and ritual of the funeral service.

As the casket passes by the members of the Catholic Women's League, who are standing along the aisle with lit blue candles in honor of their member who has died, the soloist sings the hymn *On Eagle's Wings*. Music is an integral part of the funeral rite and is used, according to Father Curtin, to uplift the mourners and strengthen the solidarity of the community who join together in faith.

Once the casket has come to rest at the front of the church and the family and pall bearers have been seated, Chris places the large Easter candle at the end of the casket. The Easter candle recalls the Easter vigil and "reminds the faithful of Christ's undying presence among them, his victory over sin and death and their share in that victory by virtue of their initiation" (Krisman 1989:10). Two funeral staff members are now on either side of the casket. They pause, genuflect and then depart along the outer aisles of the church.

The funeral mass is approximately 45 minutes in length. This is not idle time for Marlatt's staff members. One staff person remains at the church in case of an emergency and the others return to the funeral home. The flowers which were left behind in the funeral home chapel are packed into the flower van, as is the spray which will be taken to the cemetery. Paul has already organized the flowers into two groupings for us, flowers being taken into the reception hall and flowers which will go to the cemetery groupings.

He has removed the cards and placed them in the envelope along with the other documents including donation cards, the remaining memorial cards and the register book in the box which Chris will give to the family following the interment when they return to the church for the reception.

During the Cairns funeral service, the casket arrives for Mrs. Elgin. Casketing will have to wait until we return following the committal service at the cemetery. It is time to return to the church. Bob and I take the flower van and carry the flowers into St. Augustine's reception hall before parking on the side street. The flower van needs to leave inconspicuously for the cemetery once the casket has been placed in the hearse as the van will lead the procession to the graveside.

Father Curtin has finished both the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist by the time we return to the back of the church where we remain until the conclusion of the mass. There is no eulogy given during the funeral mass, whose purpose, according to official Catholic teachings, is to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the "gift of life which has been returned to God, the author of life and death" (Krisman 1989:3). The mass reaffirms the belief that though separated from the living, the dead are still a part of the community and will benefit from their prayers and intercession. Father Curtin believes through the signs, symbols and the celebration of the funeral rites care for both the soul of the deceased and for the bereaved.

Before the casket is moved toward the back of the church, Father Curtin approaches the casket where he invites the community to pray once again before they go their separate ways. As the community prays, the four funeral home staff members

quietly walk along the outside aisles, approaching the altar. Once Father Curtin blesses the casket for the second time using incense, Chris moves the large Easter candle to the side; Dave and Cal pivot the casket around for the recession; Bob asks the pallbearers to step out with him; and Chris asks the family to join him as they process out of the church behind the casket and Father Curtin. While everyone moves into place, the soloist and the fellowship of the church sing the song of farewell, the Song of the Angels, is sung. This rite marks the beginning of the recession in which Father Curtin says the prayer of commendation<sup>16</sup>. The casket moves slowly down the aisle, between the blue candles of the Women's League which have been relit. When the casket reaches the back doors of the church, the pall is carefully removed so that the crucifix which has been placed on the top of the casket is not disturbed. The pallbearers lift the casket from the church truck and carry it to the hearse. The family follows the casket to the hearse before returning to their vehicles for the procession to the cemetery.

While the family and friends who are going to the cemetery return to their vehicles, Bob and I leave in the flower van. The distance between the church and the cemetery is not great, so it is important that we leave almost immediately once the casket has been placed in the hearse. Arriving at the cemetery, we quickly find the family plot as it is the only grave which has been opened today. The casket spray is placed to one side of the grave, out of the way of the pallbearers and the other two arrangements are placed at the head of the grave. Bob returns to the van because he will lead the procession into the cemetery having chosen the best route taking into consideration the

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<sup>16</sup> The prayer of commendation commends or entrusts the soul into the hands of God.

number of cars expected and the distance to the grave. Once the cars have parked the pallbearers return to their position at the back of the coach awaiting their instructions. The family remains in the limousine until Chris has inspected the grave and gives a nod to signal that he is ready. Once everyone has gathered behind the family, the casket is removed from the hearse and carried to the grave by the pallbearers where they place it on the lowering device. Father Curtin waits at the graveside. The rite of committal is the conclusion of the funeral rite in which as the body is committed to its resting place and “the community expresses hope that, with all those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of resurrection” (Krisman 1989: 108). The final commendation at the graveside concludes with an invitation to prayer which is said by those gathered immediately before Father Curtin sprinkles the casket and the cross with holy water for the final time. At the conclusion of the committal service, Chris removes the cross from the top of the casket and hands it to Father Curtin, who then blesses the cross before giving it to the family, symbolically marking the final transition, the incorporation of the dead into the invisible society of the faithful departed.

Most families find the sight of the casket resting on the bars of the lowering device painful and do not wish to see the casket lowered into the ground. Sociologist Tony Walter suggests that the act of lowering the casket brings the bereaved face to face with the reality of death (Walter 1990:125). The choice to lower the casket in public can be made right up to the time the family leaves the cemetery<sup>17</sup>. The Cairns family has chosen not to have the casket lowered in their presence. On behalf of the family, Chris

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<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork only one bereaved family changed their mind before leaving the cemetery and returned to the graveside to lower the casket.



invites their friends to take a flower from the spray and place it on the casket before leaving. Chris offers the flowers to the family first, and they lead the way by placing them on the casket. Others follow, some stopping to bid farewell, others placing the flower and walking away silently. Everyone has been invited to return to the church hall for a time of fellowship and refreshment. The act of eating together at the meal following the funeral will serve as a way to reincorporate the family into the community of the living.

Chris and Father Curtin return to the church ahead of the family, who linger in the cemetery following the committal. Dave will remain behind with the hearse until the family and their friends have left the cemetery and the cemetery workers arrive to lower the casket and fill in the grave. Bob and I prepare to return to the funeral home where there is work to be done in preparation for the Elgin visitation which is being held at their church.

Chris meets briefly with the Cairns family at St. Augustine's to give them their "Alderwoods box" in which he has placed ten copies of the death certificate; extra memorial cards; the guest register book; thank you cards; donation cards; and the cards which have been removed from the flowers. Chris reminds the Cairns that Marnie, will be calling later in the week to book an appointment time for their "aftercare". The aftercare program is overseen by the two pre-planners at Marlatt's. Marnie and Ron meet with families to assist them with post-death forms for government pensions as well as explaining the procedure to cancel the deceased's driver's license, credit cards and bank accounts. It is a complimentary service for families which saves them time and spending

money at their lawyer's office. Aftercare is also used as a way to open the door to the idea of pre-arranging. Family members who have experienced the chaos of making arrangements at need often consider pre-arranging their own funeral as a way of decreasing the emotional and financial demands which will be made on their loved ones.

**Afternoon:**

There is not a lot of time between arriving back at the funeral home and the time when we have to leave to set up the Elgin family visitation at the Christian Reformed Church in Flamborough, a rural area outside Dundas, which is approximately 20 minutes drive from Marlatt's. The phone rings as Chris comes through the door. He comes down to the prep room where Bob is positioning Mrs. Elgin in the casket and tells us this last phone call was from Mrs. Elgin's daughter, Rachel. She has told Chris that her mother was very particular about her appearance and that she would never go out in public without her makeup applied perfectly. For this reason, Rachel has instructed Chris to "apply as much makeup as necessary" to make "Mom" look as they remembered her, even if that means "making her look like a mannequin". Chris and Bob consider this request as one of the most unusual requests they have had from a family member. They have made what they perceive to be a considerable effort to restore Mrs. Elgin's face to a natural likeness. Apparently the concept of 'natural likeness' means different things to different people. There is always a sense of collusion between the funeral director and the family with the goal of "producing a meaningful and recognizable social being" (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999: 126). Chris and Bob begin to touch up areas on Mrs. Elgin's

face that they might otherwise have left untouched. When they are finished, Mrs. Elgin has been transformed, given a healthier, more familiar look. Sociologist, Jacque-Lynn Folton suggests that the “embalmed face of the dead can appear mask like and more beautiful in death than in life” (Folton 1995:77). In a culture which places a high value on personal appearance, particularly on health and youth, the appearance of a person in death is becoming increasingly important. As soon as Chris is satisfied with Mrs. Elgin’s face and hands, the casket is closed and taken upstairs to be placed in the hearse. Bob packs a small box of cosmetics, lipstick and brushes for application, should it be necessary for him to touch up Mrs. Elgin’s features at any time before the funeral.

The time is 12:30 p.m. No time for lunch or a break before leaving for the Christian Reformed Church. Paul is busy loading the flowers into the van along with flower stands of various sizes and heights, and one picture board. Chris places the box containing the memorial cards and donation cards as well as the guest register packed in the Alderwoods box which will be taken with us to the church. After one final check to make sure that a church truck has been placed in the hearse, it is time to leave for the church in order to be set up for 1 p.m., an hour prior to the visitation.

Chris has divided the staff into two teams for the afternoon. The first will go to the church and set up the visitation with Chris and remain there for the afternoon. The second team will remain at the funeral home and prepare the funeral home for the Gorman’s evening visitation. There will also be one funeral home staff member who will act as a “runner”, starting at the funeral home and then later coming to the church to assist with the visitation. Immediately upon his return, Chris plans to casket Mr. Gorman and

then take him upstairs to the chapel where the visitation will be held. It is a busy afternoon at the church and at the funeral home.

Chris assigns me to go with the “away” team to the church. Visitations are not frequently held in churches because it is difficult to set up an area that is conducive for family to socialize with their guests. In this instance however, the family has requested that the visitations for their mother be held at the local Christian Reformed church because it was a focal point in her life, and also in their own lives. When their father died five years ago, the visitation was also held in the church hall.

As we arrive at the church, Rev. Doran, the minister, comes out to greet us and introduces us to his administrative assistant, Martha. From the time they arrive at the church, the minister always takes the role of leading the funeral directors and their staff, in all matters which concern the visitation and the funeral.

Before bringing the casket into the building, Bob goes inside with Rev. Doran to get an idea of the amount of space available for setting up. The church hall is a spacious room with large windows on one side. It is bounded by a wall that divides the hall from the chapel on the other side. Rev. Doran has already begun organizing the room by setting out several long tables which can be used for pictures and family memorabilia on one side of the room. On the other side of the room, he has placed three large round tables and chairs where guests can sit and chat. Rev. Doran suggests that we might want to rearrange the space once we bring the casket into the room in order to allow the family and their guests to move easily around the various areas of the room.

Bob backs the hearse up closer to the door so that we have less distance to move the casket. The door space is very tight for bringing the casket through into the church hall. Chris gently reminds all of us that although the skin on our fingers can be replaced, gouged wood on the casket cannot. Preserving the casket is our priority. We barely make it through the doorway with the casket and it is a relief once we are inside. Bob and Chris wheel the casket across the room and angle it in the corner close to a window which will provide some natural lighting as well as the artificial fluorescent ceiling lights. The presentation of the casket is very important. It cannot appear to have been “just dropped off” but should suggest that it was placed carefully paying attention to even the smallest details such as the direction in which the wheels are oriented.

Next we begin carrying in the flowers which we place at either end of the casket. Since there are many flowers, we decide to use the window ledges and some of the tables for flower arrangements which have been sent by friends rather than crowding the family pieces which we have placed around the casket.

Once the Elgin family arrives, Rachel, the daughter who is in charge of the funeral arrangements, approaches the open casket with Chris. It is clear from her facial expression that she is unsure of what she should expect to see but that she is both relieved and happy about her mother’s appearance. “Her makeup is perfect. This is just how my mother would want to be seen by her friends.” Rachel tells Chris that she cannot believe how good her mother looks considering the circumstances of her death. Chris’ proud moment is short lived however for another daughter, Sarah, approaches the casket, gasps, and then in tears tells Chris that her mother looks “dreadfully dead”. Despite Chris’ best

efforts to remove the signs of damage from the recent illness and autopsy and to recreate the image desired by the family, there really is no way to disguise the fact that Mrs. Elgin is lying in repose in a casket. What remains of Mrs. Elgin is the shell to which signs of her individuality have been reattached through embalming, clothes and cosmetics. She has become “frozen in time because the self is silent” (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:132).

The open space in the room is already filling up and so far only family members have arrived. Boxes of family albums and framed pictures are being carried in and placed around the room on the tables. Several picture boards have been made and are placed on the easels we have positioned close to the tables being used for the family albums.

When all the family members have arrived, Rev. Doran gathers them together for a few minutes of prayer. As well, he wants to talk with them about the visitation and their role in receiving comfort from friends. At the funeral home, it is unusual to find a minister or priest spending time with the family in the visitation room prior to the visitation even when the family is affiliated with the church. Most often the clergy meet with family members at the family home. Some clergy also choose to come to the funeral home during the visitation to offer emotional support to the bereaved family. With the exception of the Catholic families, prayers are not usually said during the visitation.

Before concluding his prayers, Rev. Doran addresses the family, reminding them that they are not alone in their grief. Every visitor who comes to pay their respects is also grieving the loss of a friend. He suggests that although they have had several days to absorb the reality of their loss, for many visitors, the grief is new and raw. The minister

concludes with a prayer in which he asks God to give everyone, family and friends, the strength and courage which will be needed over the next days and weeks and to bless them with His love in their time of need. As the prayers conclude, Rev. Doran signals Chris with a nod to indicate that he has finished preparing the family to greet their guests.

Back at Marlatt's the funeral home team is waiting for Chris to arrive so Mr. Gorman can be casketed. The chapel has been straightened and vacuumed again to freshen it up following this morning's family gathering before the mass. The register book and memorial cards have been placed on the desk. Paul has begun to arrange the flowers at the front of the chapel. Karen has brought in baseball and hockey memorabilia which will be placed on and near the casket. Jake is such a fan that he has been dressed in a New York Yankees baseball shirt. The use of familiar clothes makes the unfamiliar corpse seem less alien (cf. Bradbury 1999:189) The CDs which Karen brought to the funeral home have been loaded into the player for tonight's visitation. Noticeably missing from the chapel are the Catholic cross, candles and kneeler which have not been placed at the request of Jake's wife. Karen describes her deceased husband as a "lapsed" Catholic who never attended church. Her choice of Bev, the chaplain at The Villa, to perform the service rather than Father Curtin reflects this attitude toward the Catholic church.

As Mike is getting ready to leave the funeral home and join us at the Christian Reformed Church hall, Chris takes another new call. The name and scant information are added to the already crowded board: Pearson, Catholic, mass, burial. The Pearson family wants the visitation and the funeral as soon as possible. Depending on Father Curtin's schedule, that could mean visitation tomorrow, funeral the next day. The time is 3:00

p.m. The Pearson family will be in to make arrangements at 4:00 p.m. Paul will remain in the front office to answer the phone while Chris goes downstairs to his office to begin preparing for the Pearson family.

When Mike arrives at the church hall and tells us about the new call, we think he is pulling our leg. We had just been joking about what would happen if we got another call and there was no space available to write it on the board. “How would we know where we should be in the organized chaos?” Mike tells us that we have five calls on the board and have been notified of an impending sixth.

By the time we finish the afternoon visitation at the Christian Reformed Church and straighten the room for the evening visitation, Mrs. Pearson’s body has been brought to the funeral home by the “removal service” and Chris is meeting with the Pearson family.

The Pearson family are practicing Catholics. James, the son of the deceased, tells Chris that they will want two visitations prior to the funeral mass at the church. Usually, a Catholic family has a single hour visitation in the chapel just prior to leaving in the procession for the church. Chris explains to the Pearsons that this desired arrangement will not be possible because there is already a family in the chapel for visitation, and more importantly the two funerals will be running concurrently. Neither funeral can be pushed forward in time. It is impossible to delay the Pearson funeral to a later time in the day because the cemetery requires the burial to be completed by noon on a Saturday. Although the cemetery is open for visitors every day, the cemetery staff work only until noon on Saturday and are not available on Sunday. The Gorman funeral is also facing



time constraints as the crematorium staff has agreed to wait an extra hour beyond their normal Saturday noon closing hour for our arrival. While the Pearson family would have liked the opportunity to have the extra hour in the chapel, they understand the constraints and agree to meet at the church where the funeral procession will form. Because the Gorman family has been offered the use of the chapel as a concession, and as a precaution in case of unexpected numbers of visitors, there is no other option for the Pearson family but to use the back visitation room regardless of the number of visitors they are expecting. Several years earlier when their father died, the family had used the same back room for the visitation. Perhaps returning to the room with their mother will give them a sense of security and comfort.

It is now 5:00 p.m., just enough time to have a quick bite to eat before the evening visitation. This evening, Bob and Paul will return to the Christian Reformed Church and Mike and I will stay at the funeral home with Chris for the Gorman visitation. Bob is quite relieved that he will be at the church hall and will therefore have no further interaction with the Gorman family. Whatever impression he has left with them, the Gorman family certainly have left a negative impression on Bob. It is very unusual to hear him talk negatively about a family or about what has transpired during the meeting when the funeral arrangements were made. Bob often says that making arrangements is like the old adage, “Too many cooks in the kitchen spoils the broth”. The more people in the arrangement room, the less likely they are to agree and ultimately someone walks away unhappy. This was certainly the case for the Gorman family. In spite of, or maybe because of the problems encountered during the arrangements, everyone is determined to

make sure that the visitation goes well tonight. Despite the difficulties during the arrangement, this visitation will be no different than any other visitation. As always, the goal is to ensure that the visitation runs smoothly and more importantly, that the needs of the family are met.

**Evening:**

Bob and Paul leave for the Christian Reformed Church at 6 p.m. so they will arrive ahead of the family. I put out the signs in front of the funeral home which will direct friends of the Gorman family to the chapel. Mike will stand at the front door and be responsible for the phones and donation cards. I will stand at the chapel door and be responsible for overseeing the family and their friends. The plan is to form a receiving line inside the chapel and extending through the double doors of the chapel across the front of the funeral home onto the sidewalk, if necessary.

Meanwhile, Scott arrives from Cambridge to embalm Mrs. Pearson for Chris. All the available staff are busy with funeral visitations and Chris, who is at the helm and coordinating the teams does not have the two to three hours needed to devote to the prep room. We tease Scott, telling him that he has become our invisible staff member, “the ghost of the prep room”, and welcome him onto the team. He tells us the pleasure is all his and then, heads into the “pit” where he dons his yellow apron, rolls up his sleeves and gets down to work. This is the last we see of Scott until 9:00 p.m. when he next emerges.

Karen Gorman, her stepdaughter Jackie and several family friends arrive at 6:15 p.m. Chris, as always, is upstairs to greet them and walks with them into the chapel. The

silence in the chapel as they approach the casket is almost unbearable. Karen is riveted to the spot, her eyes focus on Jake's body lying in the casket dressed in his baseball shirt. There is an audible gasp and then tears when Jackie, for the first time, catches a glimpse of her father. Their friends are speechless, stunned into silence for the first time in two days. There are no words to express what everyone is feeling at that moment. Grief seems to hang silently around their shoulders. It is as if everyone is afraid to show their emotions, to cry. Instead, they stand or sit lost in their own thoughts.

Forty-five minutes remain before the visitation begins. Chris suggests that they take their time and sit in the chapel quietly without interruption. I am to remain at the chapel doors in case there is anything that needs to be done for the family. The distance between the front and the back of the chapel is great enough that I will not intrude on their private space, but close enough for me to recognize immediately if they require assistance. As the minutes go by, I can see their discomfort beginning to ease slightly. The family members begin to talk among themselves quietly. Ten minutes before the visitation is scheduled to begin, as a group they go out through the side door of the chapel for a smoke to relieve the tension. It is not uncommon for family members to feel the need to need to relieve the tension they are feeling by leaving the visitation room for brief periods of time. Bereaved family members who smoke will go often outside for a cigarette whereas those who drink coffee will head downstairs to the lounge and the coffee machine. Friends are beginning to arrive at the front door of the chapel, but Karen isn't quite ready yet to see anyone. I tell her guests that the family needs just a few more minutes. Everyone understands and waits patiently on the front lawn. Some are smoking,

some drinking coffee from Tim Horton's cups and some are chatting with acquaintances. There is a tension in the air. Several people ask me whether the casket is open or closed. Others want to know what they should say to Karen when they enter the visitation room, and one woman asks me if I know of a way to keep from crying so she won't upset the family. Truthfully, I reply that there are no right words and unfortunately, there is no magic trick to prevent heartfelt tears.

Visitation is usually busy at the beginning and then trails off as the two hours pass. Tonight is the first of three visitations during which people will have an opportunity to offer their condolences, so it may not be as busy as it would be if there were only one or two visitations. The chapel can accommodate a large number of people and allows the family more space to move around at the front so they do not feel smothered by their visitors.

Initially a receiving line forms at the front of the chapel which includes Karen, Jackie, and Keith, Jake's younger brother. Over time, family members leave the line and begin to circulate among their friends. This makes it very difficult for people who have been patiently waiting in line to reach the family, only to discover that the person to whom they want to offer their condolences is not there. When this happens, visitors begin to come to the back of the chapel to inquire whether I know where to find the specific family member. While it is my responsibility to know what is happening in the room, it is impossible to keep track of the whereabouts of every family member, at all times. They don't check in with us when they go outside or use the washrooms or downstairs for a coffee. At this point, I have several options, I could re-form the

receiving line and give a sense of order; disband the receiving line and let people meet and greet randomly, or find a middle ground which encourages the family to remain at the front of the chapel where they can be easily found for visitors. The last option seems most agreeable to Karen, who is our main concern, so I bring several of the padded chairs to the front of the casket should the family want to sit rather than stand. This strategy resolves the problem of finding the family inside the chapel.

It is an evening of tears mixed with laughter as people hug and exchange stories about Jake with one another. There is a brief lull in the visitation toward the end of the evening which allows Karen, Jackie and Keith to begin to unwind and prepare to leave for the night. Visitation is scheduled to conclude at 9:00 p.m. but the hour comes and goes and the family and their close friends remain seated in the chapel which is otherwise deserted. I hear Paul come through the back door, returning from the Christian Reformed Church hall visitation. Chris has come upstairs from his office several times to check and now comes into the chapel to speak briefly with Karen. He wants to ensure that the evening has run smoothly and if there are any problems that might need to be dealt with during the next day's visitation. Karen is pleased but relieved to have the first visitation completed. Before leaving, Karen and Jackie spend a few minutes beside the casket saying good-bye to Jake. When she turns to leave, Karen thanks me for seeing her through the evening and Chris for his help and concern.

It has been another long day: one funeral, three visitations, two at church, one at the funeral home, and a new call arranged. Tomorrow will come early for everyone as both teams need to be back at the funeral home for 8:00 a.m. to be at the Christian

Reformed Church for 9:00 a.m. Once there, we will need to move the casket and flowers from the church hall into the chapel as there is an hour of visitation in the chapel prior to the service. The time is 10:00 p.m. when we begin the nightly ritual of closing the funeral home. At 10:30 p.m. Chris finally signs over the lines for the night.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **DAY 7**

### **FRIDAY**

#### **The Day in Preview**

Over the past several chapters I have shown the ways in which funeral directors are able to resacralize or culturalize the body of the deceased through the process of embalming, ritually transforming the corpse from something which is decaying and polluting into a guest who has an appropriate place among the living. As well, I have demonstrated how many funerary practices serve simultaneously to both tame death and contribute to its hidden character. I have argued that the choices made by consumers of funeral services are motivated by the personal desire of the bereaved to fulfill cultural ideals of what is right and meaningful rather than the result of pressure from funeral directors to purchase goods and services. Finally, I have shown the complementary relationship between the clergy and the funeral director whose roles intersect for the benefit of the bereaved and dead.

On Friday, the seventh day of the ethnography, we will focus on the funeral as a rite of passage for the deceased, the soul and the bereaved (van Gennep 1960, Hertz 1960). The Elgin funeral takes place at the Christian Reformed Church where the deceased and her family are well known. Similar to the Cairns' funeral which took place

at St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church, this funeral will follow a traditional liturgy which concludes with a graveside committal.

Very little academic attention has been focused on funerary ritual in the contemporary Western world (Davies 2002; Heinz 1999, Walter 1990). In contrast, some attention has been paid to the work of the funeral director (Mitford 1963, 1998, Pine 1975, Howarth 1996; Emke 1999, Laderman 1999, 2003). More recently there has been growing attention to the corpse and its relationship with the bereaved (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999; Bradbury 1999).

In the previous days of the ethnography, we have observed funerals taking place in a number of different settings including at the graveside, in a Catholic church and in the funeral home chapel. Despite the differences in the front stages, there are common features which unite these funerals together with the funeral which takes place in the ethnography today and with all funerals. Funerals are ceremonially repetitive but are individually singular, attesting the loss of one particular life (Pine 1975:36). They are at the same time universal and yet unique (Walter 1990:135).

Hertz identifies three principal actors in death rituals, the deceased, the soul and the bereaved, all of whom are making a transition from one group to another with the help of a ritual specialist (Hertz 1960:80). In contemporary North America, the ritual specialists who work with the dead and the bereaved are the clergy and the funeral director. I argue that these roles are not mutually exclusive but that these professionals work together for the welfare of the deceased and the bereaved.



As we have observed, every funeral has social, spiritual, psychological, physical and economic aspects which must be attended to, often by means of ritual words or actions (Walter: 1990:39). Rituals, including funeral ritual, are stylized, formal, repetitive and often stereotyped (Rappaport 1979:440; Heinz 1999:133, 137). Rituals and the symbols used within them are a means of expression which allow the performer and the audience to make sense of the world (Meyerhoff 1984:176). When a family like the Elgins and the Cairns choose the traditional liturgy of an official religious institution such as the Catholic Church or the Christian Reformed Church, they embrace the use of symbols such as the cross to explore the imponderable mysteries of life and death (Walter 1990:171). As well, ritual separates us from everyday roles and statuses. Thus, funeral rituals allow mourners to assume their role (Heniz 1999:137). The space where ritual occurs also becomes marked off as a special space. Geertz writes that in a ritual “the world as lived and the world imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world” (Geertz 1973:112). Through the mourning and funeral rituals of the church, the reality of death as an end is merged with the hope of an afterlife.

By means of funeral and mourning rituals the deceased and the bereaved are moved into and through a transitional period so that the deceased can be incorporated into the community of the dead and the bereaved reincorporated among the living (van Gennep 1960:12,147). In today’s ethnography we will continue to observe that the movement of the deceased and the bereaved occurs on spiritual, social and physical planes.

Funeral rituals require that the deceased and the bereaved be moved not only spiritually and socially but also physically into and out of the liminal period which occurs between the time of death and the funeral (van Gennep 1960:147, Walter 1990:132). The deceased is first moved onto the front stage of either the church or the funeral home chapel. The bereaved must also travel in order to take their place as both the audience and as the performers in the wings. At the conclusion of the funeral, the deceased moves from the chapel to the hearse which waits to take the corpse to the cemetery or crematorium. The bereaved follow closely behind the casket. Walter suggests that physical aspects such as carrying the casket, the procession in and out of the chapel and the procession to the grave are a central part of the funeral proceedings (Walter 1990:167). For Mrs. Elgin, the journey will end at the cemetery; but her family must journey home following the committal service. As we have seen, when a family chooses cremation, the crematorium is another stop on the way to a final resting place.

In *Death and the Right Hand*, Robert Hertz writes that funeral rites serve three purposes: to provide a final resting place for the human remains; to ensure that the soul finds peace and to free the living from the obligation of mourning (Hertz 1960:48). Heinz suggests that funeral rituals also provide an opportunity to publicly express beliefs about life and death (Heinz 1999:49,138). A funeral

provides an experience in which a person can face the reality of what has happened, let memory become a part of the process of grieving and in the experience, express honest feelings, accept community support that is freely proffered and attempt to place death in the context of meaning acceptable to the individual experiencing the trauma of separation (Heinz 1999: 133).

In my experience, friends and acquaintances play an important role in the funeral process when they come to offer support to the bereaved during visitations as well as at the funeral service itself. Psychologist Joyce Brothers offers five reasons why funerals are important: they provide the bereaved with a time to confront their loss; a funeral serves as a moment of clarity about the bereaved's future status; the funeral is a statement about how much a life mattered and shows appreciation for the life lost; and finally it is a time of absolution that provides the opportunity to meet religious or spiritual obligations (Brothers quoted by Laderman 2003:111).

In contemporary North America, the word "funeral" has taken on many different meanings. For example, when funeral directors refer to the funeral, they may also be referring to the funeral process, which they consider to span the time between death and committal (Pine 1975:99). Sociologist Ivan Emke (1999) recently compared the perspectives of the various categories of people who participate in funeral ritual in order to discover their understanding of the purpose of a funeral. He writes that the bereaved feel the purpose of a funeral is to gain closure as a part of their grief work. It is a time for them to pay their last respects and to celebrate the life of the deceased. The bereaved often feel that it is a required ritual that must be completed and at times endured (Emke 1999:11). I argue that the choices which bereaved family members make are motivated by their desire to fulfill cultural ideals of what is meaningful and fitting for the dead. As we have seen previously on Day 4, with the Dumoulin family, what is right for the bereaved may be quite different from the pre-arranged choice of the deceased. In my experience, families often arrange a funeral service in a certain manner because it was

“what is done” in the tradition of their family. The Elgin funeral which takes place in today’s ethnography is similar in every respect to the funeral which was held for their father a number of years earlier.

In Emke’s study (1999), the clergy state that a funeral allows the family to grieve their loss, gain closure, and to give thanks for the deceased’s life. As well, Emke found that some clerics see the funeral as an opportunity for them to give comfort to the bereaved and to a lesser degree to remind those assembled of God and the afterlife (Emke 1999:11). The Elgin family has been affiliated with this particular church for more than forty years, and they are regular churchgoers. As in the previous funerals in which families had close ties to a church, we will observe a sense of familiarity in the words of the minister when he speaks of the deceased as well as when he addresses the family and the community. The clerics who responded to my questionnaire remarked that unless they were well acquainted with the deceased and the family, they were unlikely to focus on the fate of the soul. Rather, they place more emphasis on the life of the deceased and offering a message of hope to the bereaved. Furthermore, most clerics in my study claim that the purpose of the contemporary funeral is the celebration of the deceased individual’s life with the bereaved. Funerals are for the living.

According to Emke, funeral directors also believe that the funeral is intended to help the family cope with their grief and to show respect for the deceased. However, Emke remarks that in contrast to the bereaved and the clergy, it is only the funeral director who considers the funeral in terms of their business (Emke 1999:18). My experience at the Marlatt Funeral Home is that funeral directors genuinely believe in the

value of the funeral as a way for families to cope with the loss of a loved one. Regardless of their personal feelings about the value of the funeral, I did not find that funeral directors pressured bereaved family members to make choices which served to benefit the business ahead of the family.

Following the Elgin funeral, we will observe two very different types of visitations which both reflect the personal taste and spirituality of the Gorman and Pearson families. As we observe their choices being played out on the stage, we will continue to become aware that death is very visible and very real to the families and friends who are spending time together. Although we have seen that the ravages of death can be temporarily hidden through embalming, we will continue to see that death is not denied.

**Night:** No new calls have been received during the night.

**Day:**

Five calls on the board: a funeral at church at 11 a.m., two afternoon visitations, two evening visitations, both “in house”.

Chris is at the funeral home by 7:30 a.m. The rest of us arrive just before 8:15 a.m. At the end of the visitation the previous evening at the Christian Reformed Church we left the casket and flowers rather than bringing them back to the funeral home for the night. Regardless of the location, setting up for a visitation or a funeral is a non public process

(Pine 1975: 117). It requires a considerable amount of effort to plan, coordinate and orchestrate the hour of visitation as well as the funeral. These plans take into account the number of people who must be physically moved into and out of the chapel including the deceased, family, clergy and guests.

Chris wants to arrive well before the family so he can check that the makeup on Mrs. Elgin's face does not require some additional touching up. Like other artists, Chris takes pride in his ability to create an artifact which will be admired by those who view it. The viewing of the deceased by the bereaved family members as well as their friends affords the funeral director an opportunity to show off their skills (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 2000:130).

As a group we leave for the church in the lead car, the coach and the flower van at 9 a.m. All three vehicles which will be needed for the procession to the cemetery at the conclusion of the funeral must be parked at the church according to their function. The hearse and lead car must be parked at the main door of the church in order to receive the casket from the pallbearers. The flower van will be parked closer to a service entrance so that the assigned staff members can carry out the flowers which will be taken to the cemetery immediately following the funeral. The flower van will depart for the cemetery before the hearse and lead car. This arrangement ensures that the flowers are placed at the head of the grave before the procession arrives and that there is a minimal amount of activity once the family arrives.

When we arrive at the Christian Reformed church, we immediately position the casket in the chapel. The lighting in the chapel is quite different from that in the reception

hall. As he inspects Mrs. Elgin's face, Bob is concerned that her "makeup" will need some touching up. He explains to me that autopsied bodies often do not hold embalming well and touchups are expected regardless of the skill of the embalmer. Bob brings the cosmetic kit into the chapel and begins to make the needed adjustments

We begin moving the flowers which we previously had placed around the casket in the hall for the visitation into the chapel. We take care to position them so that they do not obstruct the movement of the casket or the path of the minister and speakers who will be standing behind and to the side of the casket. The flowers which have been sent by the immediate family are placed at the head and foot of the casket. One floral arrangement has been moved several times during the visitation and now we must tactfully find a place where it can be seen but "not seen" at the request of family. The problematic flower arrangement has been sent by Kim, the ex-wife of Gary, one of the sons. As one family member told me, no one ever really liked Kim, especially not Mrs. Elgin, so the family is very surprised that Kim chose to send a very large and obviously expensive bouquet in their mother's memory. On the fourth attempt to place the flowers at the front and to the side of the chapel, Rachel decides they should be taken away from the altar and placed discreetly at the side of the chapel. Rachel and Gary agree that the flowers are definitely not going to the cemetery nor are they to be tagged for the reception hall. I am so relieved to put the flowers down that I am no longer even curious what the family's intentions might be for the flowers following the funeral. If Kim should attend the funeral, she will be pleased to see her flower arrangement displayed. Apparently flowers, like obituary notices can bring out family dynamics, for better or worse.

The rest of the family begins to arrive in groups. Chris is waiting for Rachel to finish organizing the flower arrangements with me, so he can go over some final details concerning the funeral with her and Rev. Doran before the hour of visiting begins. Rev. Doran tells Chris and Rachel that half an hour before the funeral, he would like the family to say good-bye to Mrs. Elgin so that they can meet with him for fifteen minutes of prayer prior to processing into the chapel for the funeral. Chris inquires whether Rev. Doran would like the casket to be closed at that time or if it can remain open until immediately before the service for the sake of friends who did not have the opportunity to come for the visitation. Rachel believes the casket should stay open as long as possible and Rev. Doran is happy to abide by her decision.

The chapel is ready for the visitation and the service. We take our positions at the front door to greet guests and offer order of service booklets which the church secretary has prepared. The visitation time passes quickly. The chapel is almost completely filled to capacity with friends from the local community that have come to show their support for the bereaved and to share their sadness by attending Mrs. Elgin's funeral. Fifteen minutes before the service, Rev. Doran asks us to gather the remaining family members and bring them to the lounge where he is meeting with them for a short prayer service before the funeral.

Rev Doran, with Chris, leads the family into the chapel. As Rev. Doran takes his place at the pulpit, Chris seats the family in the section reserved for them in the first five rows across the front of the chapel which have been reserved for them.



The funeral service begins with a prayer of welcome for those who have joined with the family to say farewell to Mrs. Elgin. Mrs. Elgin has had a long relationship with the church and is well known in the local community. Rev. Doran speaks about her as an old friend. He is comfortable retelling the story of her life and her relationship with her family. The funeral liturgy this morning draws heavily on the concept of faith and hope in the face of death. “It is both a time of mourning and a time of celebration. “We mourn the loss of a mother, a sister and a friend but at the same time we celebrate and give thanks.” Like Protestant funerals more generally, this service follows the model outlined by Gorer and Walter, in providing emotional support for the bereaved as well as making a last statement about the deceased (Gorer 1965:68, Walter 1990:97, 1994:159).

As Walter (1990:111) points out, the main purpose of any funeral is to acknowledge that something significant has happened, a human life had ended. Rachel delivers the eulogy about her mother, faltering with emotion. She apologizes for her tears. Public displays of grief can be awkward for the bereaved as well as their guests whether they occur during a visitation or the funeral. According to Walter, in much of the Anglophone world, the open expression of grief is “regulated, controlled, patrolled and policed” (Walter:1994: 20,120). This allows the mourners to hint at what they are feeling without overtly displaying their emotions which their guest’s might find distressing. Without clear guidelines as to how and when a mourner should express feelings, the bereaved often attempt to self regulate their grief according to perceived social norms of behavior (Gorer 1965:139, Walter 1994:124, 1998:120). Rachel returns to her seat as two grandchildren go to the dais to share their memories about their grandmother.

As the funeral service draws to a conclusion, Rev. Doran suggest that everyone join together and sing the concluding hymn which was a favorite of Mrs. Elgin, “How Great Thou Art”.

During the service Chris drives up to the cemetery because he wants to check the exact location of the grave. The cemetery is located no more than five minutes from the church. Placing the flowers around the grave before the procession arrives allows the staff to attend to the family at the cemetery. In deciding which direction to approach the grave, Chris takes into consideration the number of vehicles in the procession from the church to the cemetery. Anticipating the need to organize parking, and placing a staff person at a fork in the cemetery road will prevent unnecessary confusion for the drivers in the procession. While Chris is at the cemetery, Bob repositions the hearse closer to the front doors of the church. Chris arrives back from the cemetery well before the funeral reaches the concluding hymn. He tells Dave and I the location of the grave and explains which route he wants to follow into the cemetery. Because the location of the grave is known by Chris who will lead the funeral procession, Paul and I will direct the traffic in the cemetery so that it is distributed down the two internal roads which branch off close to the grave site.

Chris, Paul, Bob and Brian enter and wait at the back of the chapel until the conclusion of the final hymn before going to the front. They stop briefly in front of the casket to pay their respects and then wait while Chris instructs the family’s guests concerning the procession to the cemetery and informs them of the location of the reception to follow. Chris asks the pallbearers to step into the aisle. They proceed with

Bob to the back of the chapel where I am waiting to hand them the white pallbearer's gloves. Paul and Brian begin to turn the casket so it can be pushed down the aisle behind Rev. Doran once the pallbearers are in place. Chris asks everyone in the chapel to "please stand and follow the family from the chapel." As soon as Chris sees that all his staff are in position, he is ready to begin the procession. He subtly nods toward me, signaling that I should open the chapel doors before proceeding to the outside doors. As the space between the doors is very narrow and Chris remembers our difficulty coming into the church, he decides that the pallbearers will walk to the door with the casket on the church truck and then line up outside the doors. Chris, Bob, Paul and Brian will actually guide the casket through the doors, then pass it back to the pallbearers who will place it inside the hearse. Although this arrangement seems awkward, when the casket is leaving the church, no one will be aware of the problem with the narrow doors except for the funeral home staff.

As soon as the casket has been placed inside the hearse and the doors closed, Paul and I begin carrying the flowers out of the chapel and loading them into the flower van. It requires several trips before we can leave for the cemetery.

It is not difficult for Paul and I to locate the grave site as we enter the cemetery by looking for a large mound of dirt which has been hidden from view as much as possible by a layer of green artificial turf. Many other cemeteries completely remove the dirt from the grave site leaving it pristine in appearance. The grave is surrounded by boards to keep the ground stable. These are also covered by artificial turf to keep mourners from getting their feet dirty. The grave, like the prep room, is a part of the backstage area where

mourners rarely find themselves. The reality, that this six foot deep gaping hole will soon receive the body of Mrs. Elgin, is almost totally obscured by the faux grass and the lifting device which cover it.

We are not surprised to find that several people who decided not to join the procession from the church have already parked near the grave. Paul explains that we need the space for the lead car, hearse and limousine and asks them to move their vehicles further down the cemetery road. Before they move their cars, Paul makes sure that none of the passengers will have a problem walking the extra distance. One lady indicates that the walk will be difficult and he assists her from the car. Meanwhile, I have placed almost all the flowers at the side and head of the grave. Paul brings the casket spray and places it at the end of the side of the grave. The placement of the flowers is important because they must be visible but not where the pallbearers carrying the casket might stumble over them. Chris will center the casket spray on the top of the casket after the pallbearers place it on the lowering device.

From a distance I can see the flashing light which has been place on top of the car leading the procession to the cemetery. Large funerals can be a logistical nightmare in the cemetery but today we are able to double park cars on the cemetery road so that no one needs to walk a long distance for the committal service. The family waits in the limousine until all the cars have been parked and the pallbearers and Rev. Doran are standing at the back door of the hearse. The family also waits in the limousine until Chris and Bob have checked the gravesite to identify any possible problems which might impede the procession. Occasionally, the procession is hindered by shrubs or headstones

which make accessing the gravesite difficult. Today, it is an unobstructed walk from the coach to the grave. Chris and Brian assist the family from the limousine. Chris explains to the family that once the casket is removed from the coach, they will follow it with him to the grave. At the back of the coach, Bob is giving the pallbearers their instructions:

Gentlemen, pass the casket out of the coach, hand over hand. You will be facing away from the coach to walk in the procession to the grave. We will follow behind the minister. When we reach the grave, carefully step up onto the platform, face the grave and place the casket on the lifting device. The funeral home staff will assist you with carrying the casket during the procession to the grave.

Paul and Brian prepare to step in toward the casket. Paul will lead the foot of the casket and Brian will take the head end. As soon as Chris sees that the family and pallbearers are in place, he looks to Rev. Doran and then subtly nods to Bob that the procession can begin. The coach door is opened and the casket begins to make its final journey to the grave.

Rev. Doran. waits to begin the committal service until he sees that the friends of the Elgin family have moved close enough to hear him. He reiterates the words which he spoke during the funeral about Mrs. Elgin's life. After reciting the Twenty-third Psalm, he passes Chris the Bible and leans down to take a handful of dirt. Rev. Doran crumbles the dirt making the sign of the cross on the casket as he commits Mrs. Elgin's soul to God and her body to the ground. He asks everyone to join him in reciting the Lord's Prayer with which he concludes the committal service. The moment of silence following the prayer is broken as Chris announces that the family would like anyone who wishes to come forward and place a flower on the casket. The first flowers are placed by Rachel

and her family. One by one family members and friends come forward to lay a flower on the casket and pay their respects before leaving the gravesite. The casket remains on the lowering device but is not lowered. For many families, burial is no longer an important part of the funeral ritual (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:208).

Some people take the opportunity to visit the graves of other family members or friends who are buried close by the grave. Others proceed directly to their car. Chris escorts Rev. Doran back to the lead car and they immediately leave for the church. Only the family remains at the grave. The body has reached its final resting place but the family still has some distance to go before being re-incorporated among the living. Individually and as a group, the Elgin family must separate themselves from their mother's body which rests in the casket. This is a difficult time for all families. Death becomes real at the cemetery. There are no more visitations to be shared with the deceased and friends. Once the casket is lowered, the dead make the final transition from the world of the living and can now be incorporated into the community of the dead. The grave physically separates the dead from the living (van Gennep 1960: 149). The Elgin family, seated in the limousine, takes one final look at the grave before they depart for the church reception. Bob and I remain at the grave site waiting for the cemetery staff to arrive and lower the casket before we return to the funeral home.

Chris and Paul return immediately to the funeral home from the church to finish setting up for the Pearson visitation in the backroom. This afternoon there will be two visitations running concurrently; the first visitation for the Pearson family in the back room and the second visitation for the Gorman family in the chapel.

**Afternoon:**

The time is 12:15 p.m. While we were at church, the casket has been delivered by Batesville. As well, Bonnie, the hairdresser has come in to Marlatt's to arrange Mrs. Pearson's hair. Chris will finish applying makeup to her face and her hands once she has been placed into the casket. The Pearson family will be arriving at 1 p.m. for their first visitation. Although Chris is on a tight schedule, he doesn't rush while putting on the finishing touches. How Mrs. Pearson looks when her children first see her and how closely she can be made to resemble the photo they have provided is very important. Chris takes great care and pride in creating a lasting memory of Mrs. Pearson in the way her children have chosen to remember her.

Everything is in place when the casket is brought into the room. The front stage is complete when the casket is centered between the cross, kneeler and candles. Other props including pictures, knitted sweaters and quilts made by Mrs. Pearson will be added by the family prior to the visitation. It is 12:45 p.m., fifteen minutes until the family arrives – time to light the candles. There might be time for a quick coffee.

The Pearson family arrives and brings with them the picture boards they have created as well as several family albums. Once they have been able to spend some time with their mother alone in the visitation room, we will help the family set the pictures and albums on tables and create a space for Mrs. Pearson's handiwork.

At 1:30 p.m. Paul places a sign on the sidewalk directing the friends of the Gorman family to the chapel with the hope of decreasing confusion for visitors from both families since there are two visitations taking place this afternoon. Melissa, the

granddaughter of Mrs. Pearson asks me if I can put a sign out for her grandmother as well because she thinks we are favoring the other family. I explain to her that it is really a matter of giving directions so their family will not be disturbed by visitors cutting through the funeral home on the way to the chapel. I am sure she isn't convinced but she accepts my answer without further discussion.

Visitations begin for both families at 2 p.m. Initially, Paul takes charge of the main funeral home doors and I take charge of the chapel doors so the Gorman family will see someone familiar waiting for them. Consistency in staffing is reassuring for many families not only during the visitation but also at the funeral. It is not uncommon at a visitation for family members to ask if they will see us at the funeral the next day. Whenever possible, Chris tries to maintain consistency in regard to the staff working directly with the family. This is a part of what he refers to as a seamless approach to funeral service which enables the family to make the transition through the early stage of mourning which begins with making the funeral arrangement. Chris believes that consistency of staffing allows family members to build a rapport with the staff. It also gives them a sense that some things are remaining the same around them despite the major changes that bereavement entails. Families are more likely to approach staff members with whom they are acquainted than to approach new staff. At a time when communication between family and staff is very important, consistency in staffing is the ideal situation. As Pine has suggested, offering personal service to families is particularly important in the community funeral home setting (Pine 1975:74). At Marlatt's, funerals are scheduled by taking into consideration the wishes of the family, the availability of the



clergy and the hours of operation for the cemetery. Staff are scheduled and rescheduled according to the needs of the family for the entire funeral process. It is not uncommon for Chris or Dave to make a special trip into the funeral home on their day off in order to lead a funeral if they are the arranging director working with the family.

At 3 p.m. Paul comes to relieve me in the chapel so that I can have a few hours off before the evening visitation. Paul has not worked with the Gorman family as he was at the church during their first visitation. I indicate to Paul who the principal actors are, sharing information about Karen and Sharon. Discreetly I point out the one set of friends who were a problem during the arrangements with Bob and in the previous visitation. Communicating information between team members is important when a changeover occurs during a visitation so that the change appears to the family to be seamless. I take Paul and introduce him to Karen, telling her that I am leaving for a while, but will be back in tonight. Karen is obviously pleased that I have taken the time to introduce her to Paul rather than just leaving the chapel.

Second visitations often take on a more relaxed atmosphere as the family becomes accustomed to their new role as mourners. If the decline in the number of trips out of the chapel for a smoke is any indication, Karen is definitely much less stressed than last night in her new role. Both Karen and Sharon are spending more time near Jake, bringing friends to see him in the casket. Jake's body, which his wife and daughter initially found shocking, has become a place where his family can spend time and continue to have a meaningful relationship with him. As Mary Bradbury suggests, the body serves as the

point in which individuals “can articulate their emotions, thoughts, practices and beliefs about death” (Bradbury 1999:118).

Scott and Chris have “tamed” the violent manner of Jake’s death through embalming and reconstruction (Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:15; Laderman 2003:22). In addition, by dressing Jake in his favorite clothing the social presence he enjoyed during his life is superficially reconstructed complete with the signs by which he was known when he was alive. The violent manner of his real death has been carefully hidden and transformed into a fictionalized image of what Karen and Sharon want to see and to which they can relate (Bradbury 1999:126; Hallam, Hockey and Howarth 1999:133.). At times I think Karen is amused by the look on people’s face when they see Jake dressed in his baseball shirt and jeans, his cap placed beside him. When I glance over at the casket, I notice that Karen has placed Jake’s sunglasses on his face; other times, they are back hanging off the pocket on his t-shirt. Karen smiles and nods at me as if the two of us are sharing a private joke.

### **Evening:**

I return to the funeral home at 6:15 p.m. At 6:30 p.m. Chris goes over the evening assignments, remarking that he is “swamped with paperwork and will be downstairs in his office.” Regardless of the amount of work waiting for him, Chris greets both families at the beginning of the evening visitation. He leaves Mike to oversee the front doors of the funeral home and the Pearson family. I return to the front doors of the chapel and the Gorman family. Chris briefly acknowledges my comment that it is unfortunate that we

could not change the visitation rooms since the Pearson family received many more guests during the afternoon visitation than the Gorman family. As well, I am sure the Pearson family would have appreciated the extra space in the chapel, especially when Father Curtin comes for the evening prayers. Obviously the rooms cannot be changed at this late date but I feel the visitation room assignments are regrettable, particularly because the Pearson family is well known in the local community and Mrs. Pearson has been a very active member of St. Augustine's Catholic Church until very recently. Chris doesn't agree with my point of view. He sees the assignment of rooms as a matter of giving priority to the family that called first. Nonetheless, we both know that the chapel was offered as a concession to Karen who originally intended to use the larger visitation room in the funeral home.

Karen and Sharon arrive only five minutes before visitation is scheduled to begin. We chat briefly at the door about the afternoon visitation. Karen tells me that it was not as busy as she had thought it would be but that she is expecting a "large crowd" tonight. Karen also tells me that close to the end of the visitation, Bev, the chaplain performing the funeral, briefly stopped by to spend a little more time with Karen and Sharon. Karen speaks highly of Bev's compassion and insights in helping her arrange Jake's funeral so that the funeral ritual reflects Jake's life as well as acknowledging the spiritual needs of Karen, Sharon and Jim (Davies 2002: 224). Bev has spoken with her several times since their initial meeting as well as spending time with Karen at the funeral home this afternoon.

Karen asks me if it is possible to turn up the volume of the music during the visitation without disturbing the other family. The CDs are some of Jake's favorites. I assure her that it is not a problem as we have turned off the speakers in the main part of the funeral home. As well, I can close the door between the chapel and the funeral home. Karen tells me that Jake loved this music, the louder the better. The chapel will be rocking this evening to the beat of Led Zeppelin, The Who, Black Sabbath and The Rolling Stones.

From the first visitation to this visitation the mood has changed considerably. The hushed tones have been replaced by the sounds of laughter as stories are exchanged between friends and family. It is unusual to have three visitations because many bereaved family members find the visitations emotionally and physically draining. Most families choose to have one or two visitations. Recently families have started to choose to have only one hour of visitation directly before the funeral.

During the visitation, frequently the funeral home staff members observe a reversal of roles as the mourners become the ones offering comfort to their visitors. It was not uncommon to see friends of Karen and Jake burst into tears when they approached Karen to offer their condolences. Without hesitation, Karen would reach out and hug and console the individual on the loss of their friend or workmate.

Tonight, Jake's mother joins Karen, her granddaughter Sharon and her other son, Jim at the visitation for the first time. She is a frail elderly woman accompanied by a friend and is escorted in Jim. He seats her at the front of the chapel where she will greet her friends. I introduce myself to Mrs. Gorman and let her know that I am available

should she want anything and tell her that I will check with her from time to time. She is most gracious in her thanks, taking my hand in hers. She smiles appreciatively when I tell her that Bob will be in to offer his condolences later in the evening.

By 8:30 p.m. the chapel is empty except for the casket, four visitors and Jake's mother with her companion. Outside on the front lawn there are thirty or more people talking and smoking or just catching a breath of fresh air. Mrs. Gorman would like to join them outside as she would like to spend some time with Karen and her granddaughter, Sharon and their friends. Karen initially declines when I offer to bring chairs out for them to sit on, saying it is too much trouble. I know Mrs. Gorman is going to need one before too long, so I bring two, giving Karen the option of sitting or standing. The two women, wife and mother, sit and chat together as visitors go into the chapel, say their last goodbyes to Jake and return to hug Karen before they leave.

Chris is busy with the Pearson family in the back visitation room going over details for tomorrow's funeral. Making sure the instructions for the morning are clear is very important because family members will be coming directly to the church rather than meeting at the funeral home and traveling in a procession with the hearse. Chris takes down the information that he needs concerning vehicles which will be in the procession from the church to the cemetery, the names of the pallbearers and which flowers the Pearsons would like to have placed on the altar for the funeral mass. Chris suggests that Mrs. Pearson's children and grandchildren remain a few minutes longer to say their last goodbyes at the side of the coffin before leaving the funeral home. He will remove the

cross from inside the casket before he closes the casket. Chris secures the cross at the foot end of the casket where it will rest until Father Curtin blesses it at the committal.

Chris comes down the stairs into the chapel to speak to Karen about tomorrow's chapel service, only to discover an empty chapel. When Chris sees Karen and Mrs. Gorman are engrossed in their conversation outside, he tells me to come and get him when Mrs. Gorman leaves and Karen returns to the chapel. Jim suggests to Mrs. Gorman that they should leave as it has been a long and tiring day for her. Mrs. Gorman returns briefly one more time to the side of her son's casket. While his mother says goodbye to Jake, Jim goes from row to row in the chapel, randomly placing small bottles of bubble liquid on the pews. He tells me that these will be used tomorrow during the funeral service but doesn't explain their significance. Once Jim and Mrs. Gorman leave, Karen and Sharon come back into the chapel and sit in front of the casket lost in their thoughts. Jake's music continues to play in the background.

When they rise and prepare to leave for the evening Chris joins them and begins to explain how the morning will unfold. He asks Karen if she has an idea of how many immediate family members will be attending the funeral so he can reserve seating for them as well as for the pallbearers. Karen replies that she thinks several hundred will be attending the funeral. Her thoughts are obviously focusing on how many non family mourners will be coming and where they will be seated rather than on the question Chris has asked her. The conversation is at cross purposes, Chris needs certain information but Karen is preoccupied with other matters. Chris repeatedly assures her that there will be seating for everyone as the chapel holds 200 people and chairs can be placed along the

periphery. Moreover, any overflow guests can hear the funeral from the visitation rooms. When Chris doesn't make progress on the family numbers, he moves the discussion from seating to the flowers. He asks Karen if she has any thoughts about which flowers she would like to send with the casket to the crematorium. If Chris is tired and frustrated, he does not reveal it, his voice is carefully modulated and he sustains an aura of calm .

Karen knows that she wants the floral spray from the casket and a small nosegay that is at her husband's side to accompany him. The other flowers can remain at the funeral home. Chris assures Karen that there is no rush to pick them up after the funeral and she can return for them later in the day or on the following day. He tells her there is a memorial service planned for Sunday afternoon and that it would help if she could plan her arrival at the funeral home either before or after, whichever is more convenient. Mike comes to speak to Chris, who then excuses himself briefly.

While Chris is out of the room, Karen turns to me and says "Chris must think I am really stupid because I just couldn't get what he was saying about the seating. My mind is just everywhere and I can't seem to focus on anything." This is not surprising considering the shock she has experienced from Jake's sudden death and the fatigue of grief which has overtaken her. I reassure Karen that Chris does not think she is stupid at all, and that he understands there have been so many things for her to deal with in the past four days that everything must seem like a blur. Karen relaxes a little when I tell her that Chris does funerals all the time and that he really doesn't expect her, as a novice, to always have an immediate answer to his questions. Chris is accustomed to reviewing details more than once with family members. In fact he expects to repeat himself which is

why he takes his time and avoids rushing families when giving instructions or asking questions.

By the time Chris returns, Karen has had enough time to clear her head of her other concerns and focus on the question of rows which need to be reserved. Karen calculates they will require the first five rows for family and two rows for pallbearers who will want to sit with their family. As well, Karen tells Chris that she would prefer to return to the funeral home to pick up the flowers in the morning rather than after the reception. Karen must make one last decision this evening. Chris asks her to consider whether she wants the casket open before the service or would she would like Chris to close it tonight with only her and Sharon present. Karen decides that she would like to have some private time with Jake in the morning before their friends arrive but that she would like to close the casket in private rather than publicly. Sharon asks Chris if she should take the teddy bear which she had placed in the crook of Jake's arm out of the casket now or in the morning. Chris tells her that it is her choice: if Sharon takes it out in the morning but does not want to hold it during the funeral service, he will set it aside for her. Chris and I walk Karen and Sharon to the chapel doors. Chris reassures them one more time before they leave. He knows that families often worry about the logistics of the funeral despite the fact that it is the responsibility of the funeral home staff to ensure that the proceedings move smoothly and seamlessly.

It is after 10 p.m. when we begin turning off the lights in the chapel. Vacuuming will wait until the morning. Chris tells me that when he excused himself from the chapel, it was to take a new call. The family is scheduled to come to the funeral home tomorrow



afternoon after the two funerals have been completed. Another very long day: one funeral, two sets of visitation, and one new call.

Looking ahead to tomorrow, we realize that Saturday will also be busy with two concurrent funerals in the morning and another family coming in the afternoon to make funeral arrangements. Both funeral teams will be at the funeral home by 8:30 a.m. One team will begin setting up for the mass at St. Augustine's church. The other team will begin by putting vacuuming and tidying the chapel before setting up the additional seats along the periphery of the chapel.

The night ritual concludes as Chris turns on the outside lights and locks the back door of the funeral home. Fifteen hours after his arrival, it is finally time for Chris to go home to his family, leaving the funeral home behind.

## CHAPTER 11

### DAY 8

### SATURDAY

#### **The Day in Preview:**

This is the final day of the ethnography. The day allows us to follow through to the conclusion of the Gorman funeral in the funeral home chapel. The chapel has been one of the most useful and important additions to the Marlatt Funeral Home. With its stained glass windows and rows of pews, the chapel has significant cultural value for bereaved families regardless of their religious affiliation (Laderman 2002:6).

Looking back at Day 5, we will recall that Joe Gorman, the deceased, was a nominal Catholic, who chose not to attend Mass in recent years. His wife Karen, at the time of making the funeral arrangements claimed to have no affiliation with an organized church. Karen wanted to have a secular funeral ceremony to honour the life of Joe but was at a loss about who might lead the service. As we have previously seen, funeral directors are frequently asked to suggest or find a cleric, chaplain or celebrant for non-affiliated families (Garces-Foley 2003:288). In this capacity, funeral directors mediate between the clerics of official religious institutions and the bereaved family's demands for new ritual elements such as music and poetry from outside the domain of institutional religion. We have also observed how the roles of the funeral director and the clergy are

not mutually exclusive but that rather both these actors are involved in the planning and execution of the funeral ceremony. In my experience, funeral directors often ask the family to think about the type of service they want before meeting with the clergy. The complementary role of the funeral director and clergy is crucial for non affiliated families who are relying heavily on these ritual specialists to assist them in creating new and meaningful funerary rituals.

On Day 7 we focused on what role ritual plays in funeral ceremonies, the participants and how they understand the purpose of the funeral in a traditional religious institution. Today, we will continue to focus on funeral ritual but will turn our attention to funerals of non affiliated families and the creation of new funeral rituals.

A humanist or life centered funeral such as the Gorman funeral acknowledges the death of the deceased by celebrating the individuality of the deceased during their life (Davies 1999: 224). Tony Walter describes life centered funerals as a secular version of the Protestant funeral which focuses on giving thanks for the life of the individual (Walter 1998:219). Life centered funerals are more personal than the traditional funeral liturgies of official religious institutions which typically give thanks for the life of the deceased as well as proclaiming Christian hope for the salvation of the soul. The religious liturgy expresses the universality of life and death but fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of a particular death (Walter 1998:220).

A common expression which is often heard at the funeral home is “funerals are for the living” by which funeral directors mean that one of the tasks of any funeral is to assist mourners in beginning their grief work (Heinz 1999:132). In contrast, Tony Walter

argues the purpose of a funeral is to dispose of the corpse and to release the soul rather than providing therapy for the living (Walter 1994:179). According to Walter, a funeral is about the humanity of the deceased and should not be considered as a form of grief therapy (Walter 1990:68; 1994:178). Uniting these two positions, Howard Raether, quoted by Thomas Lynch, says that funerals “serve the living by caring for the dead” (Lynch 2000:170).

One problem which faces every unaffiliated family that chooses to arrange a funeral service is finding a venue which speaks to their level of spirituality (Garces-Foley 2002:88). Walter suggests that funeral directors encourage families to choose traditional services because it streamlines the process (1999:135). In my experience, non affiliated families will choose to use the traditional funeral liturgy of an official religious institution such as the Anglican or United Church because it provides them with a familiar and comfortable venue for the funeral ceremony (Bibby 2002:28). Heinz (1999:26) argues that North Americans have become passive in their role in organizing funerals. In contrast, authors such as Walter (1990), Prothero (2002) and Davies (2002) suggest that families are taking a more active role in planning and participating in the funeral ceremony. In my experience, families frequently choose selections of music or poetry which they find meaningful to add to the traditional liturgy. Other families, like the Gorman family, may choose to arrange a secular life centered funeral ceremony. This will allow them to choose whatever ritual elements they want and to insert them into the funeral ceremony where appropriate. Many of the elements of contemporary funerals blur the boundary between the secular and religious, blending traditional and new ritual

elements. Garces-Foley notes that funerals for the unaffiliated frequently contain non-scriptural readings and secular music but that these funerals are rarely entirely secular or lacking in religious or spiritual meaning (Garces-Foley 2002:294). By paying close attention to the lyrics of the music played and the poems which are read during the Gorman funeral, we will find direct reference to angels. This observation supports Bibby's assertion that many people continue to subscribe to a number of beliefs including the existence of angels and heaven as a way of clarifying their belief in a life after death (Bibby 2002:94). As well, when we observe Bev, the chaplain performing the Gorman funeral, we find that she draws on themes found in the music and literature which Joe, the deceased, enjoyed during his life. Funerals for the unaffiliated provide the bereaved with an opportunity to express their personal beliefs about life and death (Garces-Foley 2002:290; Davies 1999). According to Garces-Foley, what makes the funeral ceremony personal and meaningful for the bereaved are the frequent allusions to the life of the deceased which can be made by the clergy, family members and friends (Garces-Foley 2002: 294). During the Gorman funeral, the eulogy is delivered by the brother of the deceased. As well, Bev asks if anyone in the congregation would like to come forward and share their thoughts and memories about Joe in what is referred to as a shared eulogy (Garces-Foley 294).

The clerics and chaplains who perform secular funerals often find themselves feeling conflicted between their personal beliefs about God and wanting to create a meaningful ritual for the family (Garces-Foley 2002: 296). As we will see in the following ethnography, Bev, the chaplain performing the Gorman funeral struggles with

the family's request for the total omission of references to God. Bev has performed many funerals for unaffiliated families and admits that it is not unusual for a family to request that she avoid references to Christology, but most families do not mind at the very least, to have the soul of the deceased commended to the care of God (Garces-Foley 2002:296). The Gorman funeral is unusual in this respect. My experience has been that unaffiliated families tend to rely on the suggestions of the clergy rather than attempting to create a totally new funeral ceremony. In fact, most unaffiliated funerals draw on common beliefs which are universalistic, non sectarian, and "vaguely" Christian (Garces-Foley 2002: 301).

During my fieldwork the percentage of totally secular funerals for unaffiliated families numbered five from a sample pool of several hundred funerals and memorial services. Catherine Garces-Foley observes that although unaffiliated families are not bound by a tie to tradition, they show a strong degree of uniformity in their choices (Garces-Foley 2002:298). She suggests that the underlying cause for the lack of creativity is twofold. First, the emotional burden of grief depletes families of the energy or desire to be creative. Second, there is little time between death and planning the funeral (Garces-Foley 2002:299). In my experience, bereaved family members prefer to put their efforts in other areas of the funeral process, such as creating elaborate picture boards or draping the casket with personal items that belonged to the deceased as a way of personalization. As well, families are often prepared to suggest favourite songs, poems or even biblical readings such as the Twenty- Third Psalm, which can be added to the more traditional funeral liturgy in an effort to personalize the funeral ceremony. When we

observe the Gorman funeral, we do not find the traditional format or liturgy for the funeral service which includes several biblical readings followed by the cleric's message or sermon, nor do we find any prayers or words of committal. However, we do find that rather than creating a totally new ceremony for themselves, the Gorman family has relied upon Bev, the chaplain, to create a funeral ceremony which is tailored to meet their spiritual needs.

As previously mentioned, during my fieldwork, only five families created life centered funeral ceremonies which they performed themselves without the assistance of a cleric for leadership. All of these families relied on the technical ability of the funeral directors to assist them with the more technical "behind the scenes" aspects of the performance such as operating video or sound equipment (Garces-Foley 2002:293; Pine 197:146). Four of the five families chose a memorial service format for their service. None of these families had either a cleric or a celebrant present for the proceedings. Each of the services was created by the family to reflect the life of the deceased as well as their relationship. The fifth family chose a funeral with the deceased present which concluded at the cemetery. During that particular funeral service, a son acted as the Master of Ceremonies, a friend of the family read a biblical passage that he felt was appropriate and another son and the widow performed the two eulogies. The family requested that the funeral director read the traditional words of committal at the cemetery as they felt it would be too difficult for them to enact this part of the ritual.

As we look back at the past few days of the ethnography and observe the funerals in today's ethnography, we become more attentive to how funerary rites frame our

understanding of and responses to death whether a funeral ceremony utilizes a traditional liturgy, is a blend of old and new rituals or is based only on secular patterns of funeral themes.

**Night:** No new calls are received during the night.

**Morning:**

The number of names on the board is holding at three – Pearson and Gorman, the two funerals which will be held this morning and James, whose arrangements are pending. The family will be in later in the afternoon to meet with Chris. The file sits waiting on Chris' desk to be completed.

Chris and Bob have been at the funeral home since 7:30 a.m. Timing is even more important this morning. The two funerals are slightly staggered in time, the Mass beginning half an hour before the funeral service in the Marlatt chapel. When I arrive at the funeral home at 8:15 a.m., I find Chris and Bob at the back door chatting about the division of labor. Chris has already assigned staff to both teams and put our names on the board to indicate whether we are assigned to the chapel or church funeral. The lead director for each service will further divide the roles to include overseeing the pallbearers and the casket. The team which is going to the church has one extra person assigned because Chris and Bob believe that four team members are necessary for every church service. By 8:30 a.m. the remaining five staff members have arrived and the day officially begins.



The lead car and the hearse are washed in preparation for the funeral mass at St. Augustine's Church which is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. Both are parked behind the funeral home rather than in the front. This morning the casket will be taken from the back visitation room to the hearse by the funeral home staff rather than from the chapel. The second hearse arrives from our 'sister funeral home', located in downtown Hamilton and is parked at the front of the funeral home.

Because of the close proximity of St. Augustine's church to the funeral home, only the flowers which are being placed upon the altar are taken to the church prior to the funeral. Paul takes the two arrangements which the family has chosen for the altar to the church and then returns to the funeral home so the remaining flowers can be loaded into the van. This morning, the flowers will be taken to church at the same time as the procession because the 'away' team will not be able to return during the mass. In the visitation room Bob removes the casket spray and places the crucifix on the lower end of the casket. Mrs. Pearson's casket is wheeled on the church truck to the hearse which is waiting at the back door. Chris has placed the remaining memorial cards into an envelope which he puts inside the Alderwoods box the family will receive following the committal. The Alderwoods box is placed on the back seat of the lead car. Before the procession leaves for church, Chris double checks with Bob that he has the burial permit for the cemetery. The time is 9:15 a.m.; 15 minutes before the Gorman family will arrive at the funeral home, 30 minutes before the Pearson family will meet outside St. Augustine's church and 45 minutes before the procession into the church which marks the beginning of the funeral mass.

In contrast to the Protestant churches in the area, at St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church, there is no visitation in the church prior to the funeral service. According to Father Curtin, the church has never been the place for death. The only exception is when the church is used for the solemn visitation of the community as it pays respect to a priest who has died. The role of the church is worship and to perform the rites which "welcome the community ...to restore itself at the milestones of life and death" (Ariès 1981:599). The more secular aspects of death, the visitation or wake, were always held outside the church, in the family home and more recently in the funeral home.

Chris and Paul begin to arrange the extra seats which the Gorman family believe will be needed for the funeral. The morning of a funeral is often a very anxious time for family members. By having the chairs in place, Chris can decrease the amount of last minute commotion in the chapel before the funeral service. The chapel will hold 175 people comfortably and with the addition of the folding chairs, a maximum of 200 people. On the rare occasions when there have been more than 200 people, extra seating is available in the funeral home and guests can hear (but not see) the funeral service. During my fieldwork, there has been only one instance, the funeral for a 19 year old boy who died in a car accident, in which the chapel has not been able to accommodate the number of guests attending the funeral. At Marlatt's funeral services in the funeral home chapel far outnumber the services which are performed in churches. Gary Laderman suggests that the chapel is the most important architectural innovation of the funeral industry because it has allowed the funeral home to become an all purpose establishment

(Laderman 2003: 26). The Marlatt chapel provides a comforting ritually constructed space where the bereaved and their guests attending the funeral can participate in last passage rituals (Heinz 1999:170).

I begin to place the small bottles of liquid bubbles which the family has brought in to be used during the funeral. After making sure that the immediate family will each have a bottle, I scatter the remaining bottles along the seats of the pews for non-family guests.

An hour before the service, friends have already begun to gather outside the funeral home chapel. Karen and Sharon enter the chapel through the side door avoiding their friends who are waiting at the main doors of the chapel. Karen tells me that they would like a few minutes for themselves before having to face everyone this morning. As the front doors of the chapel have not been unlocked yet, providing some private time for Karen and Sharon with Jake's body can easily be arranged. As Jake's mother and brother, Jim, have yet to arrive, Chris suggests that he keep their guests waiting outside until the entire family has had some quiet time in the chapel. Karen thanks Chris as she takes a seat near the casket. Outside, Chris explains that the family has asked for their consideration in allowing them some time alone in the chapel. He instructs me that only family is to be allowed into the chapel until Karen decides to open the chapel to guests. Suddenly everyone is family, perhaps not close family but family and I find myself going into the chapel to ask Karen for permission to allow individuals to join her. Karen identifies a short list of close family members and friends that she would like to join her. Among this list is Jake's first wife Jeanette, who is Sharon's mother, and Jeannette's parents. The group of people who are standing around Jake's casket has grown so large

that the casket has disappeared from sight. Karen asks me if it is possible to close the casket while only the family is in the chapel. I assure her that is possible, telling Karen that I will immediately pass her wishes on to Chris.

Closing the casket is always a stressful and often tearful time for family members. For some families, closing the casket is the ritual act which brings the bereaved face to face with the reality and finality of death. Together, Karen and Sharon approach the casket, their heads down, shoulders hunched. One at a time, they lean over Jake and kiss his forehead. Sharon asks Chris if she should take the teddy bear out of the casket before it is closed. Chris tells her that it is her choice, if she leaves the teddy bear inside the casket, it will go with her father to the crematorium. Sharon decides to remove the teddy bear and returns to her seat clutching it in her hand. Jim assists his mother from her seat and together they approach the casket. Mrs. Gorman is very unsteady on her feet as she approaches and is visibly shaking as she stands beside the casket containing her younger son's body. The last people to approach the casket are Jeanette, Jake's first wife and Lisa, the friend who came with Karen when she made the funeral arrangements. The chapel is silent as the casket is closed and the spray repositioned on top of the casket. Karen nods to Chris that she is ready for us to open the chapel doors for their guests.

The chapel begins to fill up with guests. Many have been to the chapel during the visitation and warmly greet me at the chapel door as if we were friends. One or two stop to chat about Jake and to inquire how Karen and Sharon are managing. Others are attending only the funeral and stop at the chapel doors to ask whether the casket is still open. They seem to be relieved to discover that the casket has been closed this morning.

A woman asks me if it is possible for the casket to be reopened as she was unable to attend the visitations. I feel badly that she will not be able to see Jake, something which seems to be important to her. I explain to her that the family had asked that the casket be closed in a private moment rather than in front of their guests and that it cannot be reopened.

From the back of the chapel I can see Karen going in and out of the side doors, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied with Sharon or Lisa. The chapel has become crowded with people and loud with voices straining to be heard in conversations. I am concerned that Karen is feeling very overwhelmed and might need some quiet time away from the noise and commotion. I nod to Paul that I am leaving the door and he comes to replace me so that I can find Karen and offer her some respite from the chaos, in the clergy office or the main office of the funeral home. Karen is on the verge of tears when I find her in the back parking lot. The first thing she does is throw her arms around me and hug me and I hug her back. Randy McCormick, a funeral director from Vancouver, once told me that there are four things to remember about dealing with grief – tears, touch, talk and time (personal discussion with Randy McCormick). He says that in the first days all people can do with any certainty is to shed tears. Crying is best if you have someone to hold because touch is reassuring that we are cared about and safe. Furthermore, he suggests that funeral directors be good listeners and allow bereaved family members to talk because in his opinion, “talking with a good listener is more healing than any magic potion in a bottle”( personal discussion with Randy McCormick). Unfortunately, there have been complaints lodged against funeral home professionals for sexual harassment by

bereaved family members. The industry's response has been to hold discussion groups about sexual harassment and to draw the line at not "reaching out and touching" family members of the opposite sex. Bob suggests that it is proper to wait for a bereaved family member to reach their hand out first and that a funeral professional never offers to hug. Of course Bob cautions that discretion is an absolute in every situation, that there is no blanket rule which can cover all situations. Today, I reach back to Karen and offer her my shoulder to cry on and suggest she might benefit from a quiet place in the funeral home. As we are about to go back into the chapel, Jake's first wife approaches Karen to offer her condolences. There is no need for me to remain with the two women. Before leaving, I tell Karen that if she wants a quiet space, to give me a nod and I will be happy to settle her with anyone she chooses to join her in either the clergy or funeral home office.

Bev, the chaplain performing the funeral service meets me at the front door of the chapel. After exchanging greetings, I give her some of the details about the visitations over the past two days. Bev has met with the entire family once. As well she has spoken with Karen on the phone several times since the initial meeting as she tries to get a sense of direction for the funeral and a feeling for the family dynamics<sup>18</sup>. Any information I can share with her will help her put the finishing touches on this morning's funeral service. Many of the funerals which Bev performs at Marlatt's as well as at other local funeral home are for unaffiliated families like the Gorman family.

Bev tells me that this is a very difficult funeral for her to prepare and that she has done a lot of soul searching as a result. I inquire whether it is because Jake was a young

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the role of the clergy or celebrants with unaffiliated families see; Garces-Foley 2003: 293-296; Heinz 1999:133-140; Walter 1990:218-230

person in comparison to most of the funerals she performs. Bev has struggled with finding the words to express a sense of spirituality without bringing God or prayer into the framework of the funeral. In her discussions with Karen, Bev has tried to find if there was a sense of God in their lives before the accident. She says that many bereaved families who do not attend church continue to talk about heaven and angels. Bibby suggests that many Canadians subscribe to a number of beliefs which help them to clarify their ideas about life after death (Bibby 2003: 170). Furthermore, he observes that since 1980 there has been no decline in the number of Canadians who want funerals carried out for them by a religious specialist whether it is a member of the clergy or a chaplain (Bibby 2003 128, Huntington and Metcalf 1991:213). In the end, Bev says the funeral must be shaped and molded into what will be meaningful for the family (Garces-Foley 2003:288).

Donald Heinz suggests that funerals are “custom made in the way that automobiles are” and that as a result “our funerals have transformed an important rite of personal passage into an impersonal rite of impassivity” (Heinz 1999:26). My experience during fieldwork was that most funerals are no longer “cookie cutter” affairs which are theologically focused and which draw upon religious themes. Instead, there has been a shift toward funerals which are personalized by the bereaved family members who choose music and readings as well as creating new rituals which are meaningful to them. Bereaved individuals are constructing new meanings about death and the afterlife. Bev asks family members, “What do you want the service to look like so that you remember you were there?” According to sociologist Tony Walter the funeral has changed from a

rite performed for the dead into a rite which brings comfort to the living (Walter 1990: 97). The life centered funeral service, like the funeral Bev has prepared for the Gorman family focuses on the life, character and relationships of the deceased rather than on either God or secular philosophy (Walter 1990:219).

As the service time nears, Karen asks me if I think it would be acceptable for her have Jake's first wife, Margaret, sit with her and Sharon in the front row. I think Karen is looking for validation for the decision which she has already made. I tell her that I think it can only be beneficial for Sharon to have the support of the two most important women in her life at a time when she most needs to feel loved. Karen is happy with my response and tells me that was exactly what she was thinking. While Karen returns to her seat in the first row of the pews, I relay the decision to Chris and Bev as this is information that they will both want to know prior to the service. While Chris goes to speak to Karen, Sharon and Margaret, Bev makes some last minute adjustments to her notes. Paul walks among the guests and asks them to please take their seats. A handful of smokers remain outside the doors of the chapel and I inform them that the service will be beginning in two minutes so they need to "butt out" and join us in the chapel. There is an eerie silence in the chapel as the CD plays one final tune.

Chris asks everyone to please stand as Bev enters the chapel from the clergy office. Bev stops briefly before the casket and pays her respects before stepping up to the dais. Bev welcomes everyone as they come to "bid farewell to one with whom they have shared life, love and friendship." She tells them "these are difficult moments for everyone, there are many unanswered questions. Together we will remember Jake as a



husband, father, son, brother and friend.” There is strength to be found in coming together, to remember, to laugh and cry as a community which has lost a member (Durkheim 1912: 401).

The funeral service continues with a candle lighting ceremony which is performed by Sharon and Karen. As Bev calls the two women forward to light the candles, she tells those who cannot see, that the candle is in the center of three elephants which form a circle. She says:

The circle of life has ended for Jake but that it is my hope that the light of his life will be your guide as you continue on in your circle of life. May the light of his life shine brightly in your hearts and in your homes.

Before continuing, Bev invites everyone to think of a moment when Jake made them smile or laugh, or shared a joke and suggests that they hold onto these memories and keep telling the stories because that is a way to keep Jake alive in their hearts.

Jake’s brother Jim is invited to the dais by Bev to deliver the eulogy. In funerals for the unaffiliated the main focus is on the eulogy which is often delivered by a family member or friend (Garces-Foley 2003:294). Jim opens his remarks by asking everyone who has a container of bubbles to open the container and blow some bubbles in the air. There is a ripple of nervous laughter as the containers are opened. Within seconds the sunlight in the chapel catches the delicate colors of the bubbles. “Look at the bubbles and remember Jake or “Grape”, as we often called him” says Jim. “Bubbles are fun, light, some large, some small as they float and then settle and leave a small mark. That is life-Jake’s life. Here for a short while, leaving a small mark on those left behind.” The remainder of the eulogy focuses on memories Jim has about growing up as the ‘big’

brother. He recalls some of the many childhood pranks and dares which made growing up in Dundas, “interesting”. Before concluding, Jim addresses Sharon, who Jim says was the deepest love that Jake had ever known. Sharon’s birth had a profound impact on Jake and for the first time he found direction in his life. There was nothing that Jake enjoyed more than spending time with Sharon from the moment of her birth until the time of his death. Jim tells Sharon that her father was very proud of her academic achievements as she prepared for college in the coming year. He was equally proud of her choices in life and the importance she placed on her family and family time. Turning to Karen and Margaret, he speaks of enduring loves. Margaret was Jake’s first love, a childhood sweetheart and Karen, who became his ‘mature’ love as a grown man. Stepping away from the microphone to wipe away tears, he tells Jake that he was loved and will always be remembered.

Bev thanks Jim for his insightful words and for sharing his memories with everyone present. Before returning to her own thoughts, Bev invites anyone in the community who might wish to add their own memories or thoughts about Jake to come forward to the dais. The room is silent. Bev never rushes through an invitation to speak because she realizes that it sometimes takes a few minutes for people to gather their thoughts and their courage to speak in a public forum. This morning the silence lingers and no one comes forward to speak. Undaunted, Bev carries on without missing a beat by adding a little more about Jake’s life that she has learned from her discussions with the family members.

She says

You have shared your sadness today, but there were also sad time for Jake, the death of his father is one of those time. Jake loved his dad. May you find comfort knowing that although Jake's death was unexpected, giving you no time to prepare your heart, he is now at peace and once again together with his Dad. It was at the time of his dad's death that the song we will listen to became meaningful. As the song is played, I invite you in the quietness of your own hearts to remember .. to laugh... to give thanks for .. to cry .. to imagine, across the clouds, his shadow flies.”

The song “Learning to Fly” by Pink Floyd booms out of the speakers into the quiet chapel. The poignant words capture the attention of everyone in the chapel.

Into the distance, a ribbon of black  
Stretched to the point of no turning back  
A flight of fancy on a windswept field  
Standing alone my senses reeled  
A fatal attraction is holding me fast  
How can I escape this irresistible grasp?

Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies  
Tongue-tied and twisted just an earthbound misfit, I

Ice is forming on the tips of my wings  
Unheeded warnings, I thought I thought of everything  
No navigator to find my way home  
Unladen, empty and turned to stone

A soul intention, that's learning to fly  
Condition grounded but determined to try  
Can't keep my eyes from the circling skies  
Tongue-tied and twisted just an earthbound misfit, I

Above the planet on a wing and a prayer,  
My grubby halo, a vapour trail in the empty air  
Across the clouds I see my shadow fly  
Out of the corner of my watering eye  
A dream unthreatened by the morning light

Could blow this soul\_right through the roof of the night

There's no sensation to compare with this  
Suspended animation, a state of bliss  
Can't keep my mind from the circling skies  
Tongue-tied and twisted just an earthbound misfit, I.  
(Pink Floyd 1987)

The music finishes playing. Bev gazes around the chapel, pauses briefly  
before she begins her concluding remarks. Bev says,

When a stone is dropped into water, it quickly disappears  
from sight, but it leaves behind a series of ripples that  
broaden and reach out across the water. In the same way the  
impact of one's life leaves behind an influence that will  
ripple out and reach the lives of many others. Jake's life has  
rippled out and touched yours. Although he may be  
physically out of sight, all that he ever meant to you, he still  
can be. He will be with you in spirit, encouraging you to  
live life to the fullest and make the most of every  
opportunity.

The funeral service concludes with a poem rather than the more traditional words of the  
committal. Standing in front of the casket, Bev says "May the light of his life be your  
guide and inspiration today and always" before she reads the poem which Karen chose to  
include on the memorial cards,

Goodbye my friends,  
My life is past,  
I loved you all to  
My very last.

Weep not for me,  
But courage take,  
Love each other,  
For my sake.

For those you love,  
Don't go away.

They walk beside you  
Every day.

Chris walks up to the front of the chapel where he makes the closing announcements, “Cremation will follow the funeral service; friends are invited to join the family for a time of refreshment and fellowship at the Innsbrook Restaurant, maps are available at the backdoor.” He asks those acting as pallbearers to step into the aisle. Dave joins the pallbearers to give them directions before they walk as a group to the back of the chapel where they will wait for the casket. Chris asks everyone in the chapel to please stand and follow the family from the chapel. During the announcements, the flower spray is removed from the top of the casket and turned the casket toward the chapel doors. Following Bev, the casket passes by the family. Chris leads Karen, Sharon, and Margaret and the rest of the family behind the casket in the recession. As they pass between the rows of their friends, people reach out to hug and offer their condolences. The doors of the chapel are open and the sunshine streams in on the casket. I have opened the doors of the hearse and watch until I see the casket being lifted before stopping the traffic. Once the casket has been placed into the hearse, Mike takes his place and prepares to slowly drive away from the funeral home. He waits for Chris to give him the signal that the family is ready, having taken a final few moments to say goodbye. This will be the last time Karen and Sharon will see the casket containing Jake’s body as they will not be going to the crematorium.

When a cremation follows the funeral service, whether the casket is driven away or remains in the chapel after the family processes out of the chapel, the casket is always removed from the sight of bereaved family members or their guests as soon after the

service as possible. There is a sense of closure which is gained by moving away from the casket whether it is in the chapel, at the cemetery, or watching the hearse drive away with the casket. The funeral moves the deceased and the bereaved emotionally and physically; it is a rite of passage (Walter 1999:167; Heinz 1999:180). Most funeral directors believe that the casket should be moved to save the family from “backsliding in their grief” which may happen if they can still view the casket as being present among them. According to Dave, it is no different than when a family leaves the casket at the graveside in our trust. The casket is lowered before the family returns and in the instance of cremation to follow, it is removed from the chapel as if it had gone to the crematorium.

Chris’s nod is almost imperceptible and the hearse pulls away slowly from the curb. Mike drives very slowly as he makes the turn at the corner and continues slowly until he is out of sight of the funeral home. On this occasion, since it is a rental casket, Mike will take the casket for a half hour drive before returning to the funeral home in order that the liner insert in which Jake has been placed in the casket can be removed prior to going to the crematorium.

Family and friends remain on the sidewalk talking. The longer everyone remains outside the chapel, the lighter the mood becomes. It is as if a great weight has been lifted from their shoulders now that the funeral has concluded and the casket has left the funeral home. Many family friends come up to Bev and tell her how much they were touched by her words. Bev has personalized Jake’s funeral and made it meaningful for those who attended by making frequent allusions to Jake’s life, (Garces-Foley 2003:294; Davies 2002: 224).

Bev and I remain at the chapel doors chatting and watching people. It seems that a great weight has been lifted from Bev's shoulders as well as from the family now that the funeral is over. Bev confides in me that this was one of the few times when she has not asked the community to join in prayer or to find comfort in the words of the Twenty-third psalm. I comment to her that although Karen believed that God did not play a role in their lives, the words of the Pink Floyd song in which Jake found so much meaning after his father's death suggests a belief in a spiritual life, or at least the belief in a soul. Songs such as Learning to Fly and poems such as Goodbye blur the lines between what is considered to be secular and religious. Garces-Foley suggests that unaffiliated families want a broader message which is more humanistic than theistic (Garces-Foley 2003 296). The primary role of funeral services for the unaffiliated like the one Bev conducted for Jake's family is to help the bereaved begin the healing process by means of self expression through the funeral ritual (Garces-Foley 2003:296, Davies 2002:224, 228).

Karen approaches me at the chapel doors to inquire where she might find Chris as she would like to speak to him very briefly. I inquire if there is something that I can do but Karen says "No, I really need Chris or another funeral director." I ask her to wait at the chapel doors while I find him. I suspect that he is downstairs in his office beginning to prepare for his meeting with the "new call" family which is scheduled for later in the afternoon. Chris is as puzzled as I am about what Karen wants to talk to him about. Together we return to the chapel and Karen. As we approach her, Karen asks if there is somewhere a little more private where they could talk. Chris suggests the clergy office which is adjacent to the chapel. Karen takes a bottle of Labbatt's Blue beer out of a paper

bag from within her purse and asks Chris if it would be possible to place it into the casket before it goes to the crematorium. Karen tells him that she didn't want to put it into the casket with Jake while it was open in the chapel. I can see the laughter in Chris's eyes as he tells Karen that it won't be a problem placing into the casket. While Karen is with Chris, he suggests that she not worry about taking the flowers with her now. Instead, he suggests that she choose one piece that she particularly likes and leaves the rest until tomorrow when there is less commotion and she can return for the flowers. Karen asks if there is a nursing home where she might be able to send some of the flowers as there are too many to take to her home. Chris tells Karen that St. Joseph's Villa, where Bev is the chaplain, is always happy to receive flower arrangements which can be taken apart and then distributed to patient's rooms and to the dining areas. Karen says that she will come back to the funeral home either later in the day or tomorrow to choose which flowers to send so the flowers will still be fresh when we take them to the Villa. Karen shakes Chris' hand and reaches over and gives me a big hug as she tells Chris that she doesn't know how she would have survived the days of the visitation leading up to the funeral without my help. I feel really good about the compliment, which Chris follows up later on by telling me that I had done a great job working with a family which initially had proven to be very difficult.

Mike returns with the hearse containing Jake's body and parks outside the backdoor of the funeral home. Chris makes sure that the parking lot is empty of guests before we carry Jake's casket back into the chapel. The chapel is set up with a second church truck. Dave unscrews the end of the casket so that we can transfer the casket liner



containing Jake's body from the rental casket onto the second church truck. As we open the top of the casket we breathe in a pungent sweet fragrance which is not typical of an embalmed body. We begin to realize that the bottle of beer is not the only thing which will be accompanying Jake to the crematorium. Dave begins to laugh as he finds a "reefer" that someone has placed beside Jake's hand. We wonder how it was missed during the closing of the casket. It seems that Jake has many of the things which featured in his life: baseball cap, beer, deck of cards and a reefer in the casket as he travels to his final destination, the crematorium. The lid is placed on top and secured with pegs. The casket is labeled with Jake's name and the name of the funeral home. A new liner is inserted into the rental casket, the satin affixed around the edges of the casket so that it is ready to be returned to the showroom and used again by another family.

Moments after the arrival of Mike with the hearse, the away team which was at St. Augustine's Church returned from the mausoleum at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery where Mrs. Pearson's body has been entombed. The mausoleum is a special building for the purpose of entombment. It is blessed by the Bishop and is located on the grounds of the cemetery. Entombment is an option for individuals who do not wish to have either an earth burial or cremation. Father Curtin performs the final committal at the mausoleum with the family present. The casket is carried by the pallbearers into the mausoleum where it is placed on the church truck for the commendation. At the time of the committal, the casket is carried to the crypt and placed inside. The drape is drawn across to symbolize the finality of the moment. After the family departs, a staff member from the mausoleum will replace the wall closure which is inscribed and then seal it. Not many

families choose entombment as an alternative to burial because of the difference in cost. A crypt can cost more than five times the cost of a burial plot, with an average price of a \$12,000 per crypt. The price for entombment varies according to the location of the crypt within the mausoleum and whether the front of the crypt is made of marble, granite or bronze. Mrs. Pearson's body has been entombed in a double crypt in which her husband was placed ten years previously.

It has been a busy morning for both teams. The board has now been cleared of all the names which have become so familiar during the week and a new name is added. Before going our separate ways, everyone goes to the coffee lounge for coffee and a donut and a little "down time". We exchange reports on our morning, with the prize going to the bottle of beer and reefer story. Chris excuses himself as he has paperwork to put together for the new family who will be arriving at the funeral home later in the afternoon. He thanks everyone for their hard work. As soon as we finish our coffee, we begin tidying the funeral home, putting away flower stands from the chapel and vacuuming the hall and visitation room.

It has been a busy week but when the new family walks through the front door, they will be met by Chris who will be as compassionate and caring as if this family was the first bereaved family to arrive eight days ago.

## **PART 3**

### **LAST WORDS**

#### **CHAPTER 12**

##### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP**

“Death Becomes Them: A Funeral Home Ethnography” is one of the few ethnographic studies of funeral practices in contemporary North America. This study focuses on the work of the funeral director and the relationships which exist between the director and the dead, bereaved and clergy. Throughout the ethnography multiple voices can be heard, but the dominant voice is that of the funeral director. This is an interpretative ethnography which is based on an extended period of participant observation drawing theory from anthropology, sociology and religious studies.

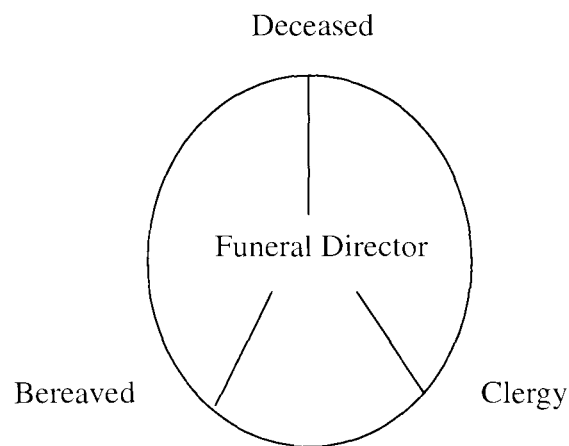
Tedlock suggests that participant observation enables the fieldworker to “reconstruct the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, scientist and native, self and other, as mutually constituent, rather than seeing it as an unbridgeable opposition” (Tedlock 1991:71). During my time in the field, I attempted to balance the emic and etic understandings of funeral service and ritual through participant observation and informal interviews with clergy and funeral directors. A questionnaire sent to fifty local clergy was followed by formal interviews with eight clerics who are representative of the various denominations serving the Dundas population. Informal discussions were

held with family members. An ideal research study would have involved extensive interviewing of the bereaved. At the time, this approach was not possible owing to ethical considerations. Without adequate access to bereaved family members, the focus of my research became the funeral directors, their work and their relationship with the dead, bereaved and clergy in the funeral performance. Further research focusing on the bereaved during the funeral service period would provide a useful complement to the present study.

Throughout the fieldwork and writing period I attempted to maintain a clear vision of the project, making note of discordant voices, and instances in which ritual may have been dysfunctional. As Geertz (1973 ) and Rosaldo (1989 ) have demonstrated, funeral ritual does not always promote a harmonious outcome for the bereaved. Discerning whether a ritual is functional or dysfunctional depends on the viewpoint of the positioned subject. From the researcher's perspective on the sidelines, it appears that funeral ritual at Marlatt's supports the needs of the bereaved and the deceased by moving them through the liminal period of the rite of passage. It is very difficult to ascertain from informal discussion whether the bereaved perceive funeral ritual and service as harmonious or discordant. From the perspective of the funeral director and the clergy, however, the funeral rituals I observed were successful. Further evidence for this perception is provided by the high ratings given the funeral home in a questionnaire filled out by bereaved families in the month following the funeral, at the request of Marlatt's staff.

The week which is portrayed in my ethnography is based on a real week in the funeral home and illustrates many facets of funeral service. "Death Becomes Them" is an

example of an experimental ethnographic writing style which provides a literary and humanistic portrait of the period of time between death and committal. It is my intention to evoke a sense of what it is to be a funeral director who is a member of a community funeral home. The focus of research is on the specialists - funeral directors – who are the “caretakers” of the dead and the bereaved from the time of death until the time of committal, either by burial or cremation. The role of the funeral director has evolved into a pivotal point in the relationship between the dead, the bereaved and the clergy which can be seen in the following depiction. As illustrated in Figure I (below), I position the funeral director at the hub of a continuous circle, placing the bereaved, the deceased and clergy at points on the continuum. The funeral director acts as a mediator between these individuals from his or her central position.



(Figure 1)

My ethnography contributes to the social scientific understanding of funerary ritual by elucidating the differences between the community and cosmopolitan models of funeral home bureaucracy highlighted by Vanderlyne Pine (1975). These models are

independent of whether a funeral home is corporately or independently owned. Rather they relate to types of bureaucracies and their impact on those working and using the funeral home. Pine's models build on previous sociological theories including Durkheim's (1933) concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity and Tönnies (1887) description of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. During the period of my fieldwork, the Marlatt funeral home operated under the community model until the time of its purchase by SCI when it was converted to the cosmopolitan model. Had my fieldwork been carried out in a cosmopolitan model funeral home, my observations would have been very different

In participant-observation fieldwork, the possibility always exists of becoming too close to the research subjects, or "going native" and losing the researcher's critical distance. Aware of this possibility, I was careful to look for discordant or problematic incidents during my fieldwork. However, I did not observe questionable care of the deceased nor did I observe ongoing problems in the relationships between the funeral directors and the bereaved families or clergy. Funeral service at the Marlatt Funeral Home ran smoothly on a daily basis even when the home was at or beyond capacity in the number of calls. From my position as an observer of the funeral directors, bereaved and the deceased, the performances of funeral service and ritual were successful. However, I am aware of incidents at other funeral homes in the Dundas area during my fieldwork when funeral service and ritual did not run smoothly. In one instance two bodies were confused when they were being taken from the morgue at the same facility, which resulted in the wrong body being cremated. Most problems at funeral homes are far less

extreme and involve complaints by family members about details of service. For example some people I encountered claimed that they were unfamiliar with the funeral home staff working with them on the day of the funeral, or that the hearse pulled away too quickly from the curb as it left for the crematorium. Considering my fieldwork in retrospect, it is possible that, relative to Marlatt's, the funeral homes which would not allow me access for participant observation research may have had more problems that they wished to conceal. Based on my observations, cosmopolitan funeral are less effective at producing ritual performances that are satisfying to all participants than community model funeral homes.

Following Geertz's "thick" description, I have attempted in this ethnography to show how meaning is constructed in the face of death in contemporary North America, given that the commercial establishments, non denominational funeral chapels, have become the primary context for the performance of rituals associated with death. "Death Becomes Them: A Funeral Home Ethnography" contributes to the body of current knowledge on two levels. First, it is a record of what actually happens in the context of one Canadian funeral home. Although my findings may not be generalizable to all North American funeral homes, they are useful for understanding other funeral homes which utilize the community model. Second, on a more general level, this ethnography provides insight into the cultural construction of death in North America. The ethnographic materials presented here provide the foundation for further questions about the nature of funeral service, ritual and ideas about death in contemporary North America.

## **DRAWING ON THE PAST AND PRESENT TO PREDICT THE FUTURE**

Several months before I completed my fieldwork, the staff at the Marlatt Funeral Home received information indicating that their parent corporation, Alderwoods, was holding discussions with Service Corporation International (S.C.I.). The details of the possible merger were kept secret from the funeral directors and para-funeral staff until the merger had been completed. In the meantime, discussion among staff members in the coffee lounge often focused on speculation about the future of their jobs, the differing business policies of the two corporations, and the impact these changes would have on the families which the Marlatt Funeral Home serves. Since the merger took place, in November 2006, many changes have taken place.

Throughout this ethnography, I have been careful to avoid distinguishing between corporate and independent funeral home ownership. Rather, I have chosen to follow the distinction made by Vanderlyne Pine (1975) which identifies funeral homes as either utilizing a personal service or cosmopolitan bureaucratic model (Pine 1975:30-33). Personal service or community funeral homes are those which serve a localized or specific community, have a simple bureaucratic organization in which several funeral directors work together on most funerals and in which there is no clear differentiation of duties among directors. This type of funeral home performs approximately a 100 calls per year (Pine 1975:65). In contrast, Pine describes cosmopolitan funeral homes as serving a larger metropolitan area, having a more complex bureaucratic organization which



includes managerial positions, workday managers, funeral counselors who make arrangements, embalmers and funeral directors who conduct funerals. In this type of funeral home, staff persons are specialists in their work area (Pine 1975:66). A further difference lies in their relationship with the community they serve. Community funeral directors believe that community participation is vital to the success of the funeral home; their reputation in the community is their most valuable asset (Pine 1975:77). As we have seen in the ethnography, the Marlatt Funeral Home follows the community funeral home model even though it was corporately owned by the Alderwoods Group until November 2006.

Very little academic literature focuses on funeral corporations because corporate ownership was rare in the 1970s. Jessica Mitford (1963) does not mention corporate ownership in her first edition of *The American Way of Death*. As noted above, Pine (1975) describes funeral home ownership according to the type of approach used by the funeral home in its relationship with the bereaved and the community at large rather distinguishing between independent or corporate ownership. In his book, *Funerals and How to Improve Them*, sociologist Tony Walter does not mention the development of funeral corporations in either England or America (1990). In her discussion about the new trends and changes in the funeral industry, Mitford remarks that one of the most significant changes in the funeral industry in recent times has been the emergence of international corporations which are leaving “their imprint on every facet of the industry” (Mitford 1998:188). According to Mitford by 1984, SCI was the “undisputed giant of the funeral industry” (Mitford 1998:188). Historian Gary Laderman (2002) writes that three

big corporations had emerged in America by the mid 1990s: S.C.I., Alderwoods (the former Loewen Group) and the Stewart Group. In Canada, the Arbor Corporation rather than the Stewart Group was the third funeral home corporation to begin buying independent funeral homes in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1995, S.C.I. owned 1500 funeral homes in Canada and the United States, capturing approximately 20% of the funeral market (Laderman 2002:182, S.C.I. Management 2008). Four years later, in 1999, S.C.I. introduced to North America the first transcontinental brand of death care services and products, which it termed “Dignity” care ([www.dignitymemorial.com](http://www.dignitymemorial.com)). Although a new concept in North America, the concept of national branding is commonplace in overseas markets ([www.dignitymemorial.com](http://www.dignitymemorial.com)). According to the Dignity Memorial website, the use of the brand name Dignity, allows S.C.I. to market a product which represented “value, quality, integrity and uncompromising standards of service from coast to coast” ([www.dignitymemorial.com](http://www.dignitymemorial.com)). Between 2002 and 2006, S.C.I. reduced its debt and increased its cash flow and operated at a profit. On November 28, 2006, operating from a position of strength, S.C.I. purchased more than 600 additional funeral homes and cemeteries from the Alderwoods Corporation including the Marlatt Funeral Homes in Dundas and Hamilton, Ontario ([www.sci-corp.com](http://www.sci-corp.com)). As of March 2007, S.C.I.’s affiliates were operating more than 1,800 funeral homes and cemeteries in 45 states and 8 Canadian provinces. According to Tom Ryan, the president and chief executive officer of S.C.I., the merger allows more families to have access to enhanced benefit packages which include assistance in booking the best available fares for bereaved family members who must travel to attend a funeral; 100% service guarantee to assure high quality care;

transferability of prearranged funeral contracts to any sister firm in either Canada or the United States and access to the Dignity Memorial grief management library of pamphlets and videotapes ([www.sci-corp.com](http://www.sci-corp.com)).

In her book “*The American Way of Death Revisited*”, Mitford suggests that consumers are often unaware that an independent funeral home has been purchased by a corporation because the name of the acquired funeral home does not change and frequently, the former owner remains at the funeral home as the manager (Mitford 1990:191). To the unsuspecting consumer, the funeral home appears to carry on its business as usual. As well, Mitford is highly critical of the S.C.I. policies of clustering activities (Mitford 1998:188). In the funeral industry, clustering is the centralization of services such as embalming, centralized billing and maintaining a central depot for vehicle. One designated funeral home becomes responsible for embalming, dressing and casketing the deceased who is subsequently delivered to the appropriate funeral home for the visitation. Clustering also includes the centralization of services including engraving and flowers. Her criticisms are twofold. First, families are unaware that their loved one has been taken to another facility for embalming and second, the savings arising from clustering are not being passed on to the consumer (Mitford 1998:191).

### **Changes at Marlatts**

I believe there is value in revisiting the Marlatt Funeral Home with the intention of looking at the changes instituted as a direct result of the acquisition of the funeral home

by the SCI funeral home system. I am particularly interested in assessing the validity of Mitford's accusations.

Within months of the S.C.I. announcement, Chris, the manager at the Marlatt Funeral Home in Dundas, made his own announcement. Having completed negotiations to purchase a funeral home approximately an hour's distance from Dundas, he has decided to leave the corporate funeral home to join the ranks of independent funeral home owners. Following an advertised search for a new manager, Chris was replaced by a much less experienced manager. The rest of the Marlatt Funeral Home "team" remained in place and highly visible to the families who chose to use their services.

The burgundy sign in front of the building which advertised the Marlatt Funeral Home and Cremation Center as a subsidiary of the Alderwoods Group was changed to the black sign associated with S.C.I. funeral homes. The Marlatt name, which had been a part of the purchase agreement between the Loewen Group and later the Alderwoods Group and the Marlatt family, was bought by S.C.I. Were it not for the change in the color of the sign, it is possible that families might not have inquired about other changes which were taking place at the funeral home. Funeral home staff who were asked about the change in the sign informed individuals that the funeral home had been purchased by S.C.I. The name S.C.I. is not familiar to consumers, who in general recognize the brandname "Dignity Memorial". One bereaved family member reportedly joked that Marlatt's had been purchased by the "Texas robbers" but chose in spite of this change to finalize the funeral his deceased family member had pre-arranged at Marlatt's as it had been planned. Recently, other families have inquired if Marlatt's is now owned by a

“firm located in Texas”. On the surface, as Jessica Mitford suggests, things remained the same and business continued “as usual”. Individuals who had pre-arranged funerals and memorials with Marlatt’s were notified by mail of the change of ownership and offered the opportunity to transfer their arrangements to another funeral home. Only a very small percentage chose to take their business elsewhere.

Internally, there were more changes which were invisible to the consumers of funeral goods and services. As we observed in the ethnography, Marlatt’s had a “stable” of vehicles which were maintained in its garage for the use of the funeral home. These vehicles included the lead car, a funeral hearse and a van which served both for “removals” and carrying flowers to the cemetery. On occasions when a limousine was used by the bereaved family, it was obtained from one of the sister funeral homes in the region. It is a policy of S.C.I. to centralize or cluster which “reduces overhead costs by sharing resources” among its funeral homes ([www.sci-corp.com](http://www.sci-corp.com)). The hearse no longer sits in the garage but has been placed among those made available through a leasing company which supplies vehicles and drivers to all of the S.C.I. funeral homes. The reaction of the staff was one of dismay. As we saw in the ethnography, Marlatt staff members regard themselves as a part of a personal service team which works together for the benefit of the family and the deceased (Pine 1975:102). One of their concerns about the centralization of vehicles was their ability to perform as a team and provide seamless service. In a community funeral home, it is not uncommon to find the same funeral director who has met with the family to make the funeral arrangements, also caring for the deceased and to be standing at the door welcoming guests during visitation (Pine 1975:97). In contrast,

Pine suggests that in the cosmopolitan funeral home model, the bereaved frequently meet with practitioners whose activity is geared towards performing specialized tasks such as arranging or directing (Pine 1975:123). Recently at Marlatt's a family complained that over the course of making arrangements, one day of visitation and the funeral ceremony at the church, they passed through the hands of seven individuals, including three funeral directors. The bereaved family complained that at times "they felt lost and were confused about who was overseeing the family at the funeral home". They felt this confusion added to their discomfort and left them feeling "unsettled". As a result of the complaint, the funeral home staff has attempted to limit the number of new team members and has requested to draw only on the pool of drivers who have worked on a regular basis with the Dundas team.

At the time of writing, the staff of Marlatt's in Hamilton had been informed that they will no longer be using their "prep room" but rather that all embalming will be done in the "central prep" at a distant funeral home. The funeral directors at Marlatt's in Dundas will continue to do their own embalming, dressing, makeup and casketing. Central prep is a problematic issue for many funeral directors who prefer to do their own embalming which allows them to have personal control over the condition of the body being presented to the family at the time of viewing. As we observed in the ethnography, the way that the deceased appears to the family is a source of pride for the funeral director (Pine 1975:135). We have also observed that families collaborate with the funeral director in deciding how they would like the deceased to be presented to their guests on the front stage of the funeral home (Bradbury 1999: 130; Pine 1975:142). This type of

cooperation is possible when the funeral director working with the family has access to the body of the deceased during the embalming process. One funeral director remarked that another problem with central prep is that the lighting in the funeral home is different from that of the prep room and makeup frequently needs to be applied according to the amount of natural light and type of artificial lighting. Jessica Mitford's grievance concerning central prep is supported by the fact that bereaved families are not made aware that their loved one will be cared for at a funeral home other than the one at which they have made their arrangements.

As well, Mitford states that the savings which are supposed to be the result of clustering activities are not being passed on to the bereaved families (Mitford 1998:191). She claims that funeral plans include the basic services and overhead costs, and questions whether discounting plans are not simply another way of pressuring bereaved families to purchase more goods and services than they might require or desired in order to get a discount (Mitford 1998:198). Funeral directors are encouraged to sell "Mem" plans to families. The plans include an allowance for the casket or urn, flowers, a selection of stationary, a video of pictures of the deceased chosen by the family which is played during the visitation, an ongoing "Mem" website with pictures for online condolences as well as an accompanying album. By purchasing the "Mem" package, a family can save a substantial amount of money in comparison to purchasing each item individually. The drawback for families is that they cannot make any changes to the package by eliminating goods or services they do not wish to purchase. Most families at the Marlatt Funeral Home do not choose to purchase the "Mem" package, preferring to spend according to

their personal tastes and needs. A comparison of funeral home prices made by one bereaved family since the takeover showed that Marlatt's was \$2,500 more than the independent funeral home competitor which is located down the road in Dundas. When asked by the client to justify the difference in price, the funeral director suggested that Marlatts has a spacious non- denominational chapel which will seat 200 people whereas the competition continues to place folding chairs in their larger visitation room. As this particular family was affiliated with the local Catholic Church, they had no interest in the chapel. Ultimately the funeral director was forced to "price match" the competition in order to "clinch the deal". In a discussion about individuals who shop for the best price, the same funeral director commented that people believe that funeral homes owned by corporations should be like *Walmart* stores which buy in bulk and pass the savings on to the consumer by lowering their prices on merchandise. Following the takeover, prices for caskets were lowered while the prices on intangibles such as the services offered by the funeral director were raised. During the period of my fieldwork, consumers would occasionally question the price of a casket or urn but rarely would they question the cost assigned to services for the care of the deceased such as embalming. Laderman has observed that even though the number of funerals performed by S.C.I. decreased in 2001, their profits continued to increase (Laderman 2002:186). S.C.I. attributes this outcome to the sale of their foreign funeral homes as well as to changes in their marketing and sales practices ([www.sci-corp.com](http://www.sci-corp.com)). Others, including many funeral directors, attribute it to fees which are known as "cover charges" for services including the use of vehicles or preparation services (Mitford 1998:198). Centralization has been a "boon and a bust"



according to one Marlatt's director when families choose to purchase flowers through the funeral home. Previously, the funeral home ordered flowers for families from local florists passing on whatever discount they received to the family. The directors believe that there should be some reciprocity among the local businesses, particularly as the funeral home relies on the community to support them when a death occurs. In the past year, S.C.I. has centralized the purchase of flowers to one florist who is able to serve all of the affiliated funeral homes in the Hamilton area. This florist offers a discount to S.C.I. which is passed on to the bereaved family. When a family does not choose a flower package, however, the funeral directors at Marlatt's continue to suggest the name of several local florists who can accommodate the family with reasonable prices and good service.

In the time since the takeover, there has been an increase in the amount of literature available to families and their guests in the funeral home. The response to the strategic placement of brochures, videotapes and booklets which offer advice to those coping with the loss of a loved one has been extremely poor, according to the Marlatt Funeral Home staff. The brochures are highly visible but as one funeral director commented, they are simply "dust collectors". A suggestion was made that appropriate brochures could be included in each aftercare package so that family members who might have been oblivious to them could have the opportunity to review them at a less stressful time than during the visitation or following the funeral. An alternative suggestion was to pack the brochures into the "Dignity" bag that each family receives either prior to or at the time of making the funeral arrangements. As we saw in the ethnography, educating

the bereaved about North American deathways has become the responsibility of the funeral director. In contemporary North America we have seen that funeral directors are considered to have special insight and knowledge about what can, should and must be done following a death legally as well as religiously (Pine 1975:37). At Marlatt's, bereaved family members and their friends continue to seek information directly from the funeral directors and para-funeral home staff on matters concerning decorum and ritual rather than reaching for the pamphlets or videos. Across North America, death education has become progressively more important in the role of the funeral director as the number of families who are unaffiliated with official religious institutions continues to increase. As well, as the age at death continues to increase, many bereaved individuals have little or no experience in matters pertaining to death. S.C.I. has several community out-reach programs in place but not yet instituted through Marlatt's Dundas which focus on safety for seniors. One of the roles of the pre-planner, as we saw in the ethnography, is to teach individuals so that they have the knowledge to make wise choices when they pre-arrange their final care. One of the features of pre-arranging which is particularly appealing to many people is the ability to transfer their arrangements to another funeral home at any time. Although Tom Ryan suggests that this is a unique feature of S.C.I. funeral homes, it is actually available from all funeral homes.

Looking at the Marlatt Funeral Home more than a year after the takeover by S.C.I., we can see that there have been many more transformations than simply changing the sign in the front of the funeral home. The funeral home gardens remain pristine and the vehicles gleam in the sun. Behind the scenes, in the backstage area, however, the staff

struggle with many of the changes made by administrators who seemingly have little knowledge or concern about the community which is being served by the Marlatt Funeral Home staff. This situation leaves the staff feeling disadvantaged when it comes to providing seamless service to families as well as remaining competitive in the deathcare marketplace. The transition from the community service model towards the cosmopolitan model has not been easy transition for the staff at the Marlatt Funeral Home. In the board rooms of S.C.I., discussions focus on profit margins and market share in contrast to the discussions occurring on the backstage of the funeral home which focus on providing good service for bereaved families. The Marlatt funeral directors realize that it is only a matter of time before they become a part of centralized embalming and are forced to join the rotation of funeral directors through several funeral homes. In the same way family members who saw seven different funeral home staff over two days felt disconnected, the funeral directors believe that central embalming and the rotation of staff among the funeral homes will disconnect them from the families and the deceased. In their opinion, it is the relationship which develops between the funeral director and the family which allows them to perform their role as mediators between the living and the dead. The Marlatt funeral home staff fear that when the dead are removed from their care, and the family passes through specialized staff members during the funeral process that their role will become that of a funeral facilitator rather than as a mediator. Despite pressure from the S.C.I. administration encouraging the Marlatt funeral home staff to adapt to the cosmopolitan model of funeral service, they continue to perform their role as mediators

and ritual specialists on behalf of the bereaved and the dead utilizing the personal service model which was established by J.B. Marlatt.

### **Predicting the Future**

The call for change in the funeral industry and in contemporary funerary ritual has been documented by many authors including Walter (1990, 1994, 1998), Laderman (2003), Mitford (1963, 1998) and Davies (2002). As we saw in the ethnography, social and cultural developments facing the funeral industry, including increased age at death, geographical mobility, the decline of the nuclear family and consumerism have had a great impact on the choices which consumers make about the type of funeral ceremony as well as the type of final disposition for the body (Laderman 2003:144, Prothero 2002:3; 178). As the ethnography shows, there is a growing trend away from traditional values. Contemporary consumers of funeral services are adapting older traditions to meet their personal emotional and spiritual needs (Garces-Foley 2002:297). In the ethnography we observed that bereaved families who have no affiliation to organized religious institutions almost always rely on the funeral director to assist them with the planning process by personalizing the visitation and customizing the funeral ceremony. We have seen how funeral directors in this capacity act as mediators between the bereaved family and official religious ritual leaders (Laderman 2003: 180; 2002:288). The funeral industry attempts to change with the times in order to meet the changing social and cultural values of their clientele (Laderman 2003:147).

### **The New Consumer**

American author and funeral director Michael Kubasak believes that funeral service is at “a crossroads when working with the new consumer” (personal communication). The new consumer’s views on how to process a death are changing. Denise Coultas, a funeral director and bereavement counselor in the United States writes that for many individuals, death has become an “inconvenience” which must be dealt with quickly, efficiently and in a cost effective manner (personal communication). In the past, consumers sought out funeral directors for guidance as to what they needed to or should do following a death. Contemporary consumers want to do their funerals their way, and may have no interest in the “funeral director’s version” of what a funeral should be (personal communication).

### **New Methods of Disposition**

New consumers no longer consistently choose a traditional funeral to ritually remove their dead from community of the living. Instead, they may or may not choose to have a memorial service following the cremation of the corpse. As the numbers of cremations continue to climb each month, it certainly appears that cremation will be the way of the future. In contemporary North America, the rate of cremation is predicted to reach 50% or greater by the year 2010 (Cronin 1996:11). Nonetheless, with more than fifty years of funeral directing experience supporting his opinion, Marlatt’s director Bob Amm believes that traditional funerals will continue to exist in a limited way for certain ethnic groups, public figures of distinction, military personnel, as well as for police and firefighters who will be recognized and honoured with a public funeral. He suggests that

“celebration of life” memorial services with an hour of visitation and which are followed by a time of fellowship are becoming the norm at many funeral homes including the Marlatt Funeral Home (personal communication).

A little more than a hundred years ago, cremation was introduced as a new method for the disposal of a corpse for individuals who did not choose either ground burial or entombment (Prothero 2001:15; Cronin 1996:11). Recently new methods of disposal including resomation (alkaline hydrolysis), green burial, and burial at sea have been made available to consumers in a number of communities across North America. In contrast to cremation which relies on heat to destroy the body, resomation is a water based process which involves “dissolving the body in a hot, pressurized steel chamber” (Parmalee April 2008:44). Resomation is considered by its supporters to be even more environmentally friendly than cremation because it uses less power and is free from emissions. The process is currently being used at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota as well as at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida (Parmalee April 2008:44). Licensing applications for the use of resomation units have been made in several other states. To date, the process has not been approved in Canada.

Individuals who are concerned about leaving their carbon footprint behind following their death are beginning to inquire about ecologically friendly or green burials. A truly green funeral involves wrapping the corpse in a sheet and placing it directly into the ground (Parmalee 2008:24). Because most states and provinces require a body to be placed in a container for burial, funeral homes that are offering green burials place the non-embalmed body into a biodegradable wood or cardboard casket which is free from

preservatives and metal. Although green burials sound new, they have been used for many centuries by members of the Jewish community. Supporters of green burials are currently pursuing the purchase of natural burial grounds either as a part of a traditional cemetery or as independent cemetery which will restrict its usage to only environmentally friendly burials. According to New York funeral home owner Paul MacPherson, consumers choose a green burial because “it’s a continuation of their lifestyle, not because they are saving money” (Parmalee 2008:30).

Following the lead of consumers in England who have started a trend of opting for a wooded funeral service and burial, there is a growing movement in the United States demanding natural burial areas in forests. According to Kimberly Campbell, the owner and manager of Memorial Ecosystems in South Carolina, the goal of a natural burial area is threefold: the dead give their body back to enrich the earth; a natural preserve is created for the living to visit and the land is protected from development (Parmalee 2008: 34). Canadian consumers are beginning to inquire about green funerals according to Jan Nichols, president and C.E.O. of Bay Gardens Funeral Homes in Hamilton, Ontario. He believes that as people become more concerned with the environment they will increasingly choose green burial (personal communication).

Another innovative green method for the disposal of a cremated corpse is the Neptune Society’s memorial reef program which is located off the coast of Miami, Florida (Parmalee 2008:42). According to Jerry Norman, president of the Neptune Society, the reef is a “new way for people to love and honour their loved ones in a beautiful setting that reaffirms life” (Parmalee 2008:42). In contrast to burial of the

cremated remains in a cemetery or placing them in a vault which adds to the carbon footprint, the Neptune Society believes that over time the memorial reef will become a living reef of marine life and coral which holds the cremated remains of those placed in the underwater crypt. Currently the Neptune Society operates in ten American states serving approximately 50, 000 families a year. The services of the Neptune Society are currently not available in any Canadian provinces. Canadians who choose to submerge rather than inter, encrypt or scatter their ashes may do so by taking the cremains to one of the locations in the United States.

Over the past century, consumers of funeral services in North America have moved from earth burial as the only method for the disposal of a corpse to the choice of interment, entombment, cremation, resomation, green burial and being placed in a submerged crypt in the sea. The choices which the “new consumer” will make in the future will increasingly reflect what is meaningful to those who are pre-arranging their funeral ceremony and to the bereaved. Michael Kubasek suggests that funeral directors in the future will do more than arrange and direct funerals. He suggests that they will become “good-bye” specialists who work with bereaved family members to “create new memories” so that when the family leaves the funeral home they will take with them the new memories they have created in acknowledging a life which has ended (personal correspondence). As funerals become progressively less structured by religious institutions and more open to the interpretation of the bereaved, funeral directors will be called upon more than ever as ritual specialists to balance the domains of spirituality, emotion and personal taste as funeral consumers are likely to move further away from the



traditional liturgies of official religious institutions towards ceremonies which reflect their personality and lifestyle.

### **Corporate and Independent Funeral Homes**

In the years since Jessica Mitford revisited death in America (1998), a large number of independent funeral homes have been purchased by funeral service corporations such as S.C.I., Alderwoods and Arbor. In contemporary North America, there is a growing trend for independent funeral home owners to sell their funeral homes only to an individual rather than a corporation. The owner of the other funeral home in Dundas, an independent, refused to sell to S.C.I. Instead the owner received less money by selling to a funeral director who would remain independent. There exists a growing tension between independent funeral home owners and the funeral corporations. This tension is apparent in the fact that funeral corporations no longer participate in the Ontario Funeral Service Association. Independent funeral homes have worked hard to distinguish themselves from the growing number of corporately owned funeral homes found in most cities in North America by striving to offer “personalized service” and by visibly participating in community affairs (Laderman 2003: 189; Pine 1975:74).

In a recent survey of funeral directors and funeral service students which I conducted as a part of my fieldwork, there was resounding support for the independent funeral home<sup>19</sup>. More than 80% of the funeral service students responded that they would

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<sup>19</sup> The sample was drawn from 89 funeral service students at Humber College in Toronto at the conclusion of the first year of the course, prior to commencing the internship year in which they work in a funeral home. The licensed directors, which were a much smaller sample of 30, were drawn from Humber College

prefer to work for an independent funeral home owner because they believed they would have more opportunities to work directly with families from the beginning to the end of the funeral process. Most respondents indicated they would prefer the personal service or community funeral home model over that of the cosmopolitan model which they frequently identified with corporate funeral homes. Licensed funeral directors who responded to the survey agreed with Randy McCormick, a retired funeral director from a family owned funeral home in Coquitlam, British Columbia, who writes that “independent funeral homes are as much a part of the future of the profession as they have been the backbone of the profession in the past” (personal communication). When I questioned funeral directors concerning the future look of the independent funeral home, funeral directors recognized the need for change in areas including pricing of services, increased types of services available, online arrangements, more relaxed social environments for visitation, implementing modern technology which is available for the bereaved family and their guests and a more “hands on approach” to death education in the community ( R.Amm, S. Hessey, M.Kubasak, R. McCormick, J. Smolenski, personal communication). As well, they suggested that one of the advantages which the independent funeral home has over the corporately owned funeral home is that funeral directors are sensitive to the changing needs of their clients and can make changes in services and goods offered without head office approval. According to Gary Laderman, the interest of the independent funeral home owner is in providing good service and helping a family through a difficult period of time (Laderman 2003:189). Furthermore he

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Funeral Service instructors, funeral directors at the Marlatt Funeral Homes as well as funeral directors working in centers across Canada and the United States.

states that the big difference between independent and corporate funeral homes is that the bereaved receive personalized service from the independent whereas corporate funeral homes process bereaved families on an “assembly line” (Laderman 2003:189).

In this ethnography I have argued that funeral directors balance the domains of spirituality, emotion, ethnicity, personal taste and commerce. In contrast Jessica Mitford (1963, 1998) repeatedly accuses funeral directors of financially taking advantage of the bereaved and cites numerous trade magazines which purportedly instruct funeral directors about how to manipulate their clientele (Mitford 1963:135,224; 1998:599; Laderman 2003:84). British sociologist, Tony Walter expresses a similar view of the American funeral industry writing “in America, funerals are much more of a rip off than in Europe” (1990:82). Furthermore, Walter suggests that the problem with funerals is not that they cost too much but that the bereaved family must pay anything at all for the care of the deceased loved one (Walter 1990:80). In his discussion about the work of funeral directors, Pine does not mention the financial aspect of the position other than to state that the role of the funeral director also includes “the business tasks of handling merchandise sales and the economic interests which arise because of the overall combination of arrangements” (Pine 1975:145).

Bay Gardens, a recently opened, independently owned funeral home in the Hamilton area exemplifies many of the innovations which will become more common in funeral homes as a response to the demands being made by consumers for bright, airy visitation rooms which resemble the lobby of a hotel rather than the warmth of the family room at home. The new independent funeral home closely follows the community

funeral home model. Funeral directors are directly responsible to the family they are working with and are available to them for the duration of the family's time at the funeral home. Embalming is done on site. Several small visitation rooms are available for those families who opt for direct cremation so that if they choose to do so, they can spend a period of time with the deceased even though the body has not been embalmed and has had no cosmetic or restoration services have been applied. The C.E.O. is highly visible in the community as he sits on the board of a number of charities including the local hospice. Most of the funeral directors working at the new independent funeral home have either grown up in the Hamilton area or have worked locally for a long period of time and are well known and visible at community affairs. Marlatt funeral director Bob Amm believes that reasonable pricing and good community attention are vital to sustaining a funeral home's clientele (personal communication). In contrast to the prices charged by local corporately owned funeral homes, Bay Gardens provides the same goods and services for substantially less money for both traditional and memorial services. According to their managing director, they do a better job than the corporate facilities because their focus is on helping families create the funeral.

In contemporary North America, caring for the dead is a multimillion dollar business which is based upon the purchase of goods and services by bereaved consumers from funeral directors. Yet, other than the criticisms of the cost of funerals previously mentioned, very little has been written about the business aspect of the funeral industry ([www.sci-corp.com](http://www.sci-corp.com) financial report 2007). The articles in the trade journals and on internet sites such as Funeral Watch, Funeral Service Insider, or [www.katesboylston.com](http://www.katesboylston.com))

sponsored by the American Funeral Director (Kates-Boyln publishers) and the independent Connecting Director site ([www.connectingdirectors.com](http://www.connectingdirectors.com)) offer interesting articles which focus on current social trends in funeral ceremonies and business practices. Since 2007, podcasts and interactive internet programs focusing on various aspects of funeral business practice have become an alternative to attending seminars for many funeral directors.

### **The Internet and the Funeral Service Industry**

In November 2007, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a United Nations agency for information and telecommunication technologies reported that the use of the Internet between 2000 and 2007 had grown at a remarkable rate of 73%, second only to the rise of over 100% in the United States ([www.itu.int](http://www.itu.int)). In March 2008, the same agency reported that 83% of the Canadian population is using the Internet and has access to the worldwide web ([www.unsystems.org](http://www.unsystems.org); [www.itu.int](http://www.itu.int)). The Web provides consumers with access not only to information about dying and death, funeral homes, bereavement literature and advertising, but also the ability to purchase goods such as caskets and urns, cemetery plots and even funerals without ever leaving their home.

Some but not all funeral directors regard the Internet as the way of the future for making arrangements. The online market is changing almost daily according to Randy McCormick, (personal communication). He believes that funeral home owners must be aware of the needs of the public and that the survival of funeral homes may depend upon being able to meet those needs. In 2007, Nancy Bush and Sue Krustopf created the

website *MyWonderfulLife.com* as a way to offer individuals a way of expressing their personal wishes about what they want to take place at their funeral. *MyWonderfulLife* is an independent company which is not a subsidiary of any funeral home or funeral service corporation. The account which interested individuals create allows them to identify the people in their life who need to be notified of the death and will subsequently carry out the deceased's wishes. Important information which bereaved family members will need to know when they make the arrangements for the funeral or memorial ceremony, including music and writings, favourite memories and meaningful possessions, photographs, as well as the desired final disposition of the deceased's body, can be recorded (Bush and Krustopf 2007). Not only will pre-arrangements online become more commonplace but Randy McCormick remarks that the funeral industry needs to be prepared to "leave itself open to the possibilities of online arrangements ... full online arrangements with no interaction" ([www.connectingdirectors.com](http://www.connectingdirectors.com)). As we observed in the ethnography, the role of the funeral director is to assist the bereaved in fulfilling their personal ideals of what is meaningful, without prejudice and regardless of the personal opinions or beliefs of the funeral director.

Gary Laderman writes that the Web opened possibilities for the living to manage their relations with the dead by means of online obituaries, as well as funeral and memorial sites (Laderman 2003:210). Many funeral directors are suspicious of real time video transmissions of funerals and memorial ceremonies and argue about the value of attending the service in order to create last memories and to provide community support for the bereaved. An alternative method of connecting people and creating memories is

the memorial webpage. I recently surveyed the funeral homes in the Hamilton region and discovered a webpage for every funeral home. The Marlatt Funeral Home homepage provides viewers, regardless of their geographical location, with options including an introduction to the funeral home and the services it provides, contact information and directions. The website also lists the names of the recently deceased persons being cared for at the funeral home, times of visitation, as well as the location of the funeral ceremony. Friends of the bereaved and deceased can also sign and leave a message on the online condolence book by clicking on the name of the deceased. In an era when great distances often separate friends and family, the online condolence book allows individuals to send a message which is received immediately. Another recent innovation is memorial sites which can be permanently maintained and added to by the family. Some sites, such as the “Mem” site used by the Marlatt Funeral Home (and all S.C.I. affiliates) allow the family the opportunity to purchase a permanent virtual memorial which they can personally manage or a short term online memorial for a period of several weeks following the death.

As well, the Web serves other purposes for the funeral industry, having become a social networking tool which allows funeral directors to communicate with one another to discuss trends, business practices, share ideas, engage in discussion and answer questions. In his exploration of the “final frontiers” of the funeral industry, Gary Laderman observed that the Web is a place where funeral directors can “showcase their services and place their name before a global community”(Laderman 2003:209). Ryan Thogmartin, the coordinator of Connecting Directors ([www.connectingdirectors.com](http://www.connectingdirectors.com)), a new and

innovative online meeting place for funeral directors as well as others associated with funeral services, believes that the Internet is an important part of the future of the funeral industry and that its use by funeral directors will continue to expand to meet the needs of the consumers of funeral services who turn to the Web as a source of information as well as a marketplace (personal communication). Online seminars such as those conducted by Robin Heppell, a funeral home management consultant and fourth generation funeral director, are used to assist other funeral directors and funeral home owners to incorporate “innovative management strategies and funeral technologies” (Heppell 2007 ).

The use of the Web in funeral service is a recent innovation but one which is growing and reshaping itself constantly to meet the social and cultural demands of its clientele as well as its professional membership.

### **Death Becomes Them**

In the past one hundred years, the funeral industry, like the community it seeks to serve, has undergone rapid change. Funeral directors have emerged as professionals in response to the growing need for specialists who can interact compassionately with the bereaved and tend to the requirements of dealing with the dead (Pine 1975:28). The role of the funeral director is “a set of actions which revolve around numerous activities” which include the care of the deceased and advising, counseling and consoling the bereaved (Pine 1975:145). In contemporary North America the role of the funeral director has been extended beyond the door of the funeral home. This enhanced role includes



death education in local communities as well as providing information for consumers who have access to funeral home websites on the World Wide Web.

In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s when authors such as Jessica Mitford (1963), Leroy Brown (1959) and Vanderlyne Pine (1975) wrote about the funeral industry, all present day funeral homes fall under government regulation. As Jessica Mitford (1998) observed when she revisited American deathways, there has been a dramatic increase in in the number of funeral homes which are owned by corporations. The Marlatt Funeral Home, once a family owned funeral home was owned by the Loewen Corporation and subsequently the Alderwoods Corporation until 2007 when it was purchased by Service Corporation International. Like many funeral homes, it remains non-denominational and serves a very diverse religious and ethnic population, offering a complete range of services including embalming, direct cremation, funerals, memorials and graveside committals. Although Mitford did not understand what North American consumers wanted, she predicted quite accurately the negative impact on consumers of corporations which choose to follow the cosmopolitan rather than the personal service or community funeral home model of service (Pine 1975).

The number of choices available to consumers of funeral services has expanded dramatically since the 1963 when Jessica Mitford spoke out in favour of simplifying funeral ritual. In contemporary North America, the possible combinations of funerary ritual and methods of dispositions far exceed the traditional funeral and burial described by Mitford (1963) and Walter (1990). The choices which are being made by the consumers of funeral services are not as simple as Jessica Mitford suggests. As we have

observed, funeral directors are not duping or misleading their clients. Nor are funeral directors pressuring the bereaved to spend more money on funerary good and services to assuage their guilty consciences or as a way of expressing their love for the deceased. Rather, we see from this ethnography that the goods and services chosen by the bereaved at need are similar in terms of cost and elaboration to those which have been pre-arranged and pre-paid. As well this ethnography reveals that the bereaved make choices, including the choice to augment pre-arranged services in order to create a funerary ritual which will be personally meaningful as well as fulfilling cultural ideals. Funeral directors, as ritual experts, make suggestions to assist family members in their choices. The role of the funeral director is to facilitate these choices during the funeral or memorial ceremony and in the disposition of the deceased's body.

Another aspect of the work of the funeral director is the care and final disposition of the dead human body. Through embalming and other ritual acts, the funeral director resacralizes and culturalizes the body of the deceased, transforming the corpse from something which is decaying and polluting into a guest who has an appropriate place among the living. Paradoxically, the process of embalming and other funerary practices both tame and yet simultaneously contribute to the hidden nature of death. Rather than seeing death in contemporary North America as being characterized exclusively by the denial of death as suggested by Ariès (1981) or by the revival of death which is suggested by Walter (1994), I suggest that both processes are happening concurrently. As we

observed in the ethnography, death is transformed and neutralized by the processes of embalming and cremation but it is not denied by the bereaved.

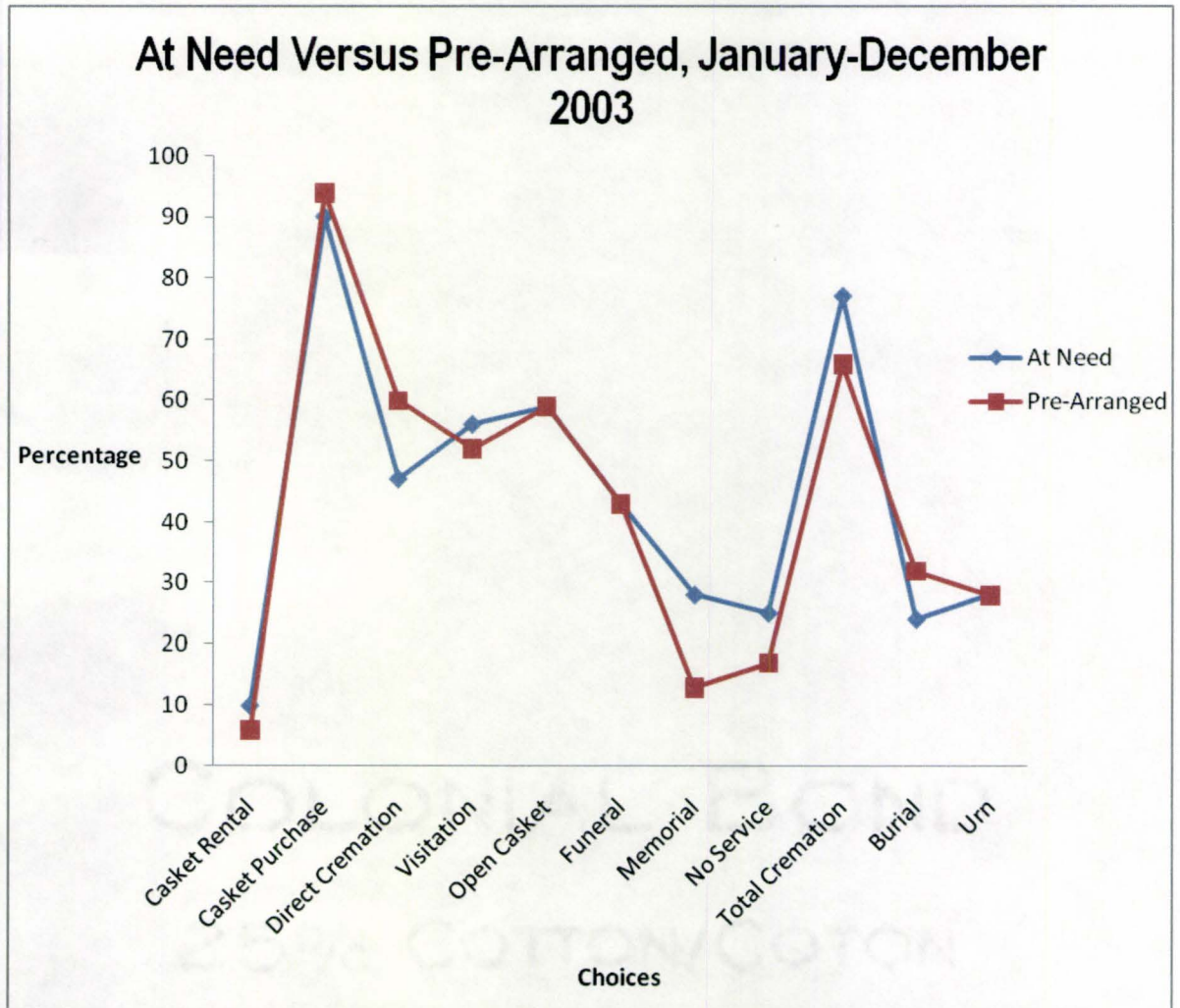
Funeral directors have been criticized by writers such as Ariès (1981), Mitford (1963, 1998) and Heinz (1999) for having taken over the role of the clergy in funeral ritual. As the number of number of families who are not affiliated with an official religious institution continues to grow, funeral ritual has become progressively less structured and more open to creative interpretation by the bereaved. As a result, funeral directors frequently mediate between the traditional liturgy of official religious institutions and the popular spirituality of the bereaved. As we observed in the ethnography, this popular spirituality often includes demands by the bereaved for new ritual elements such as music and poetry from outside the domain of traditional institutional religion. We have observed that what lends authenticity to a rite depends on the meanings understood by the participants (Bradbury 1999:188). In contemporary North America, the roles of the funeral director and the clergy can no longer be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather these two professionals work together for the benefit of the bereaved and the dead.

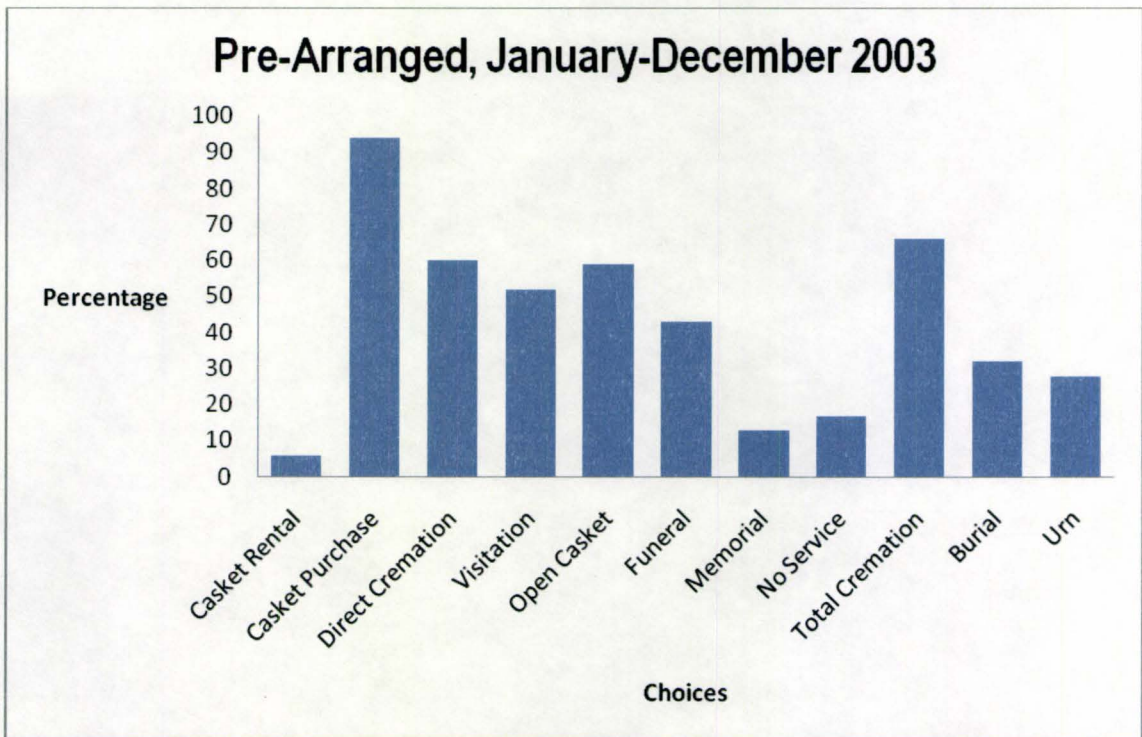
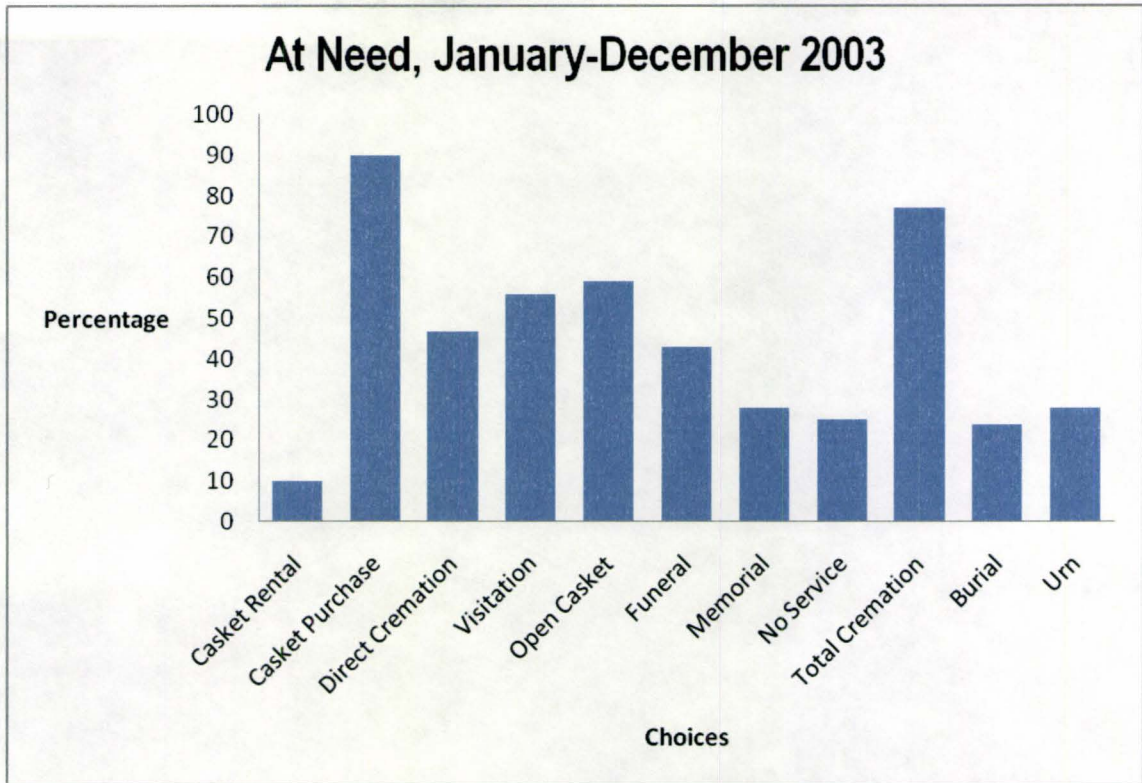
The funeral industry continues to evolve to meet the needs of the community it serves. Nonetheless, several constants remain. When a death occurs, three actors step onto the stage: the deceased, the bereaved and the ritual specialists who assist both living and dead through their rites of passage. In contemporary North America, it is funeral directors who perform this complicated role of mediator balancing the domains of

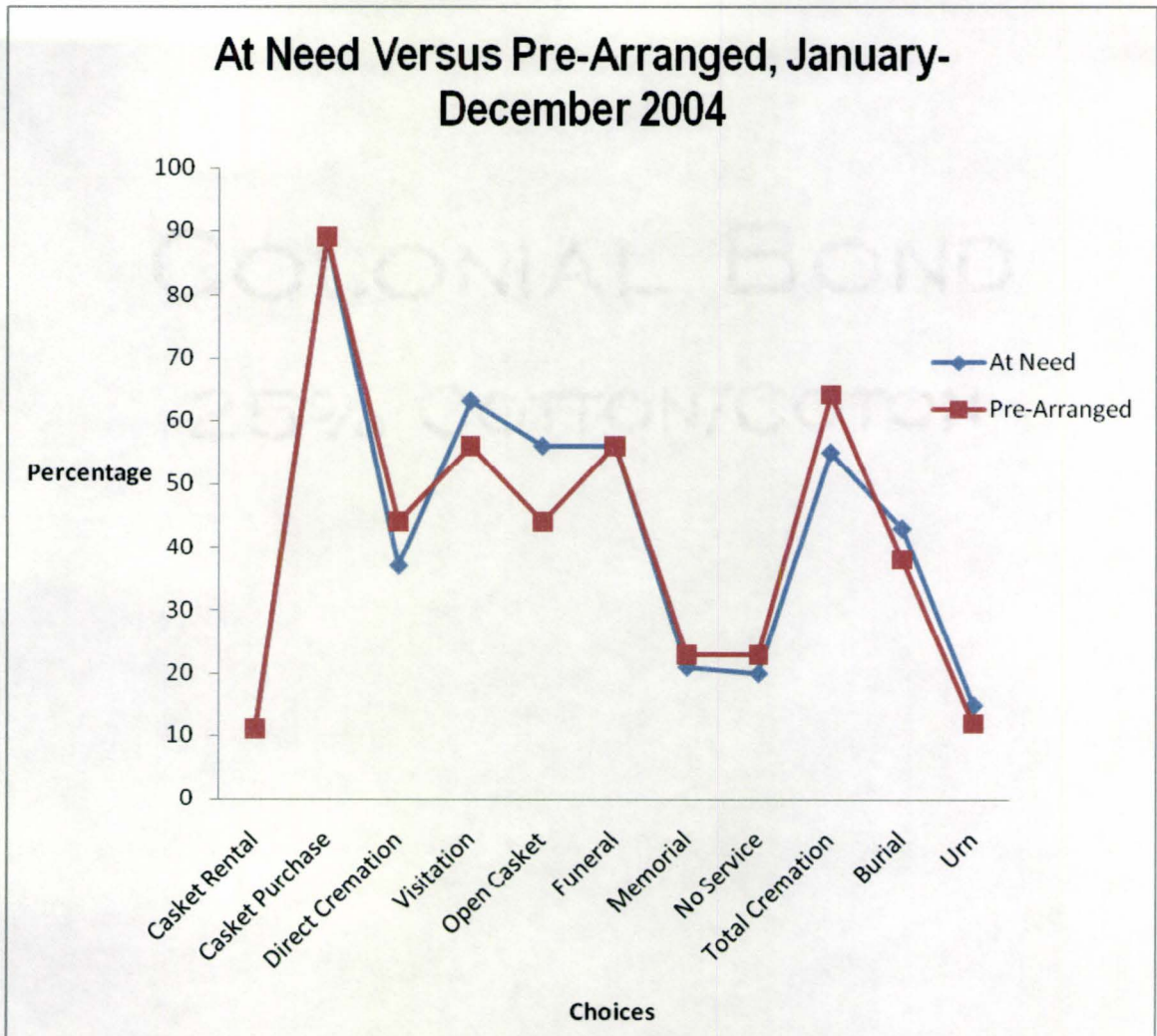
spirituality, emotion, personal taste, institutionalized religion, ethnicity and commerce while attending to the specific needs of the living and those of the deceased.

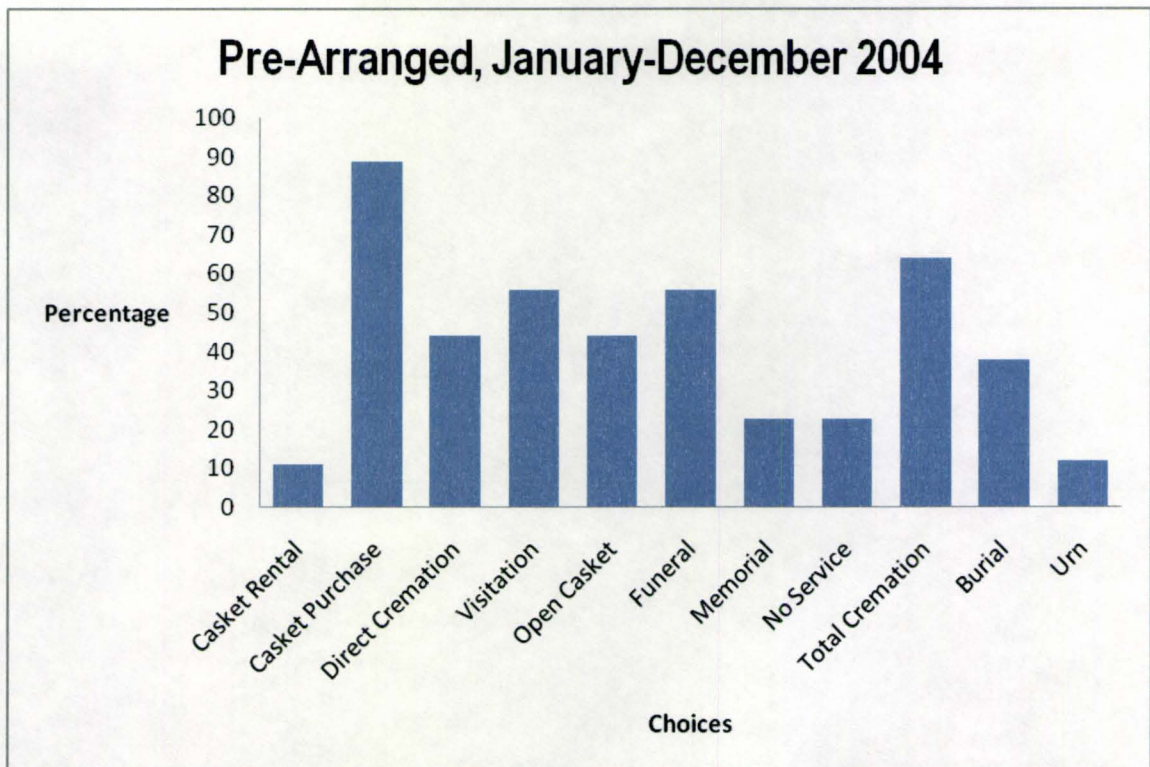
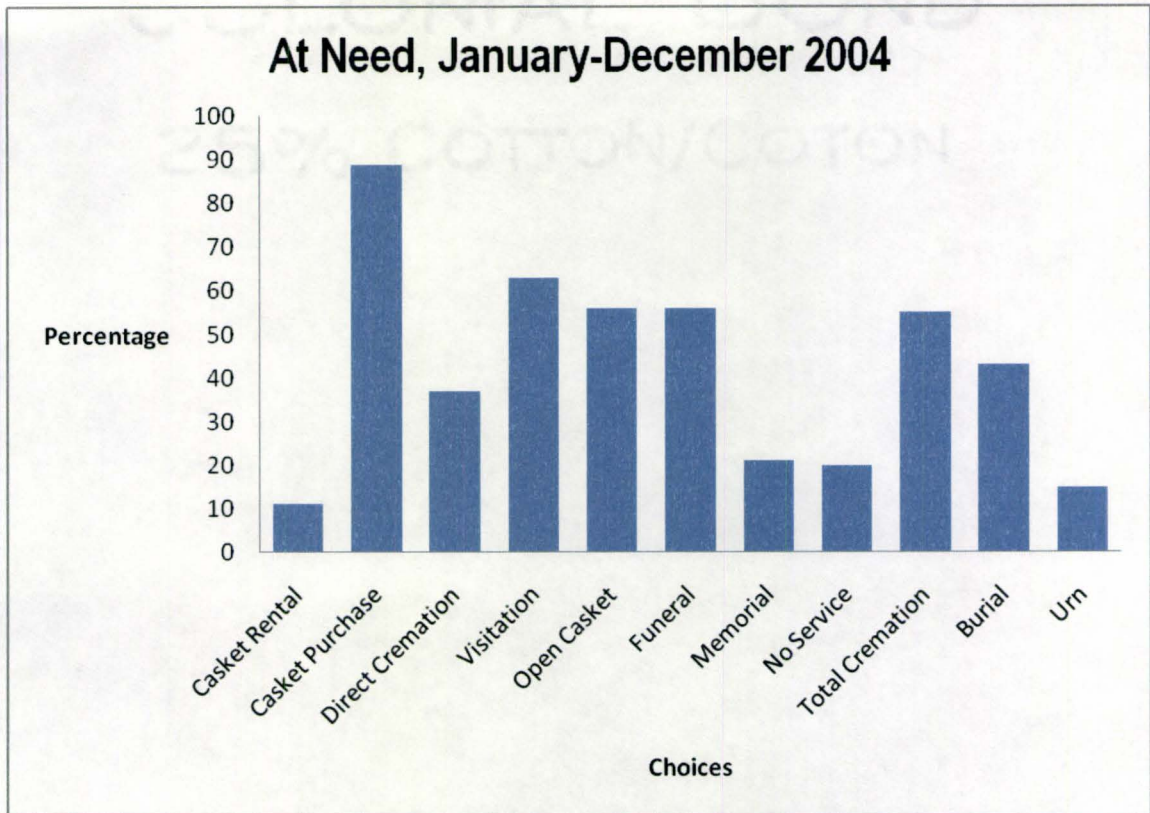
### APPENDIX I

#### Consumer's Choices: At Need vs. Pre-Arranged 2003-2005

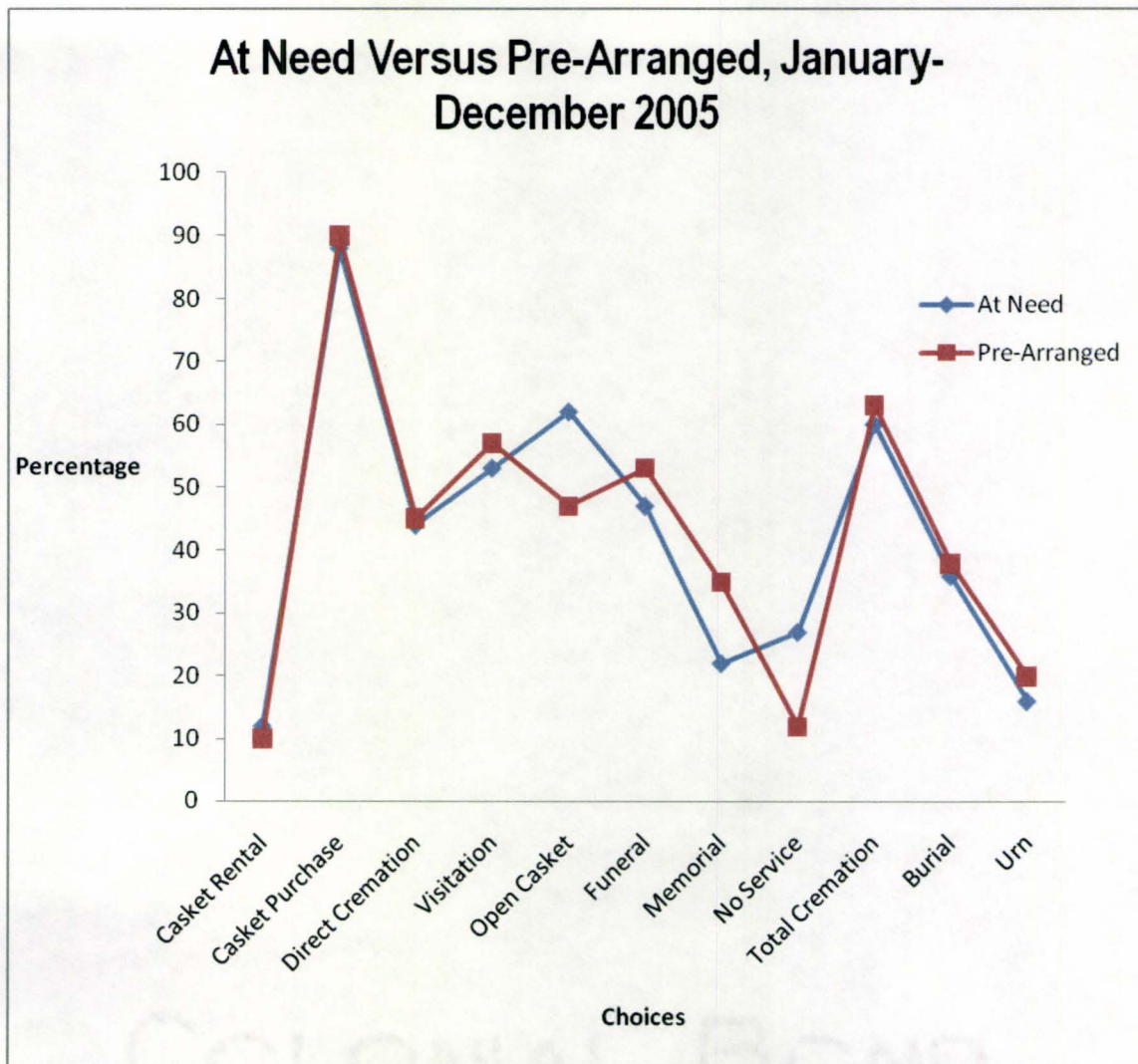




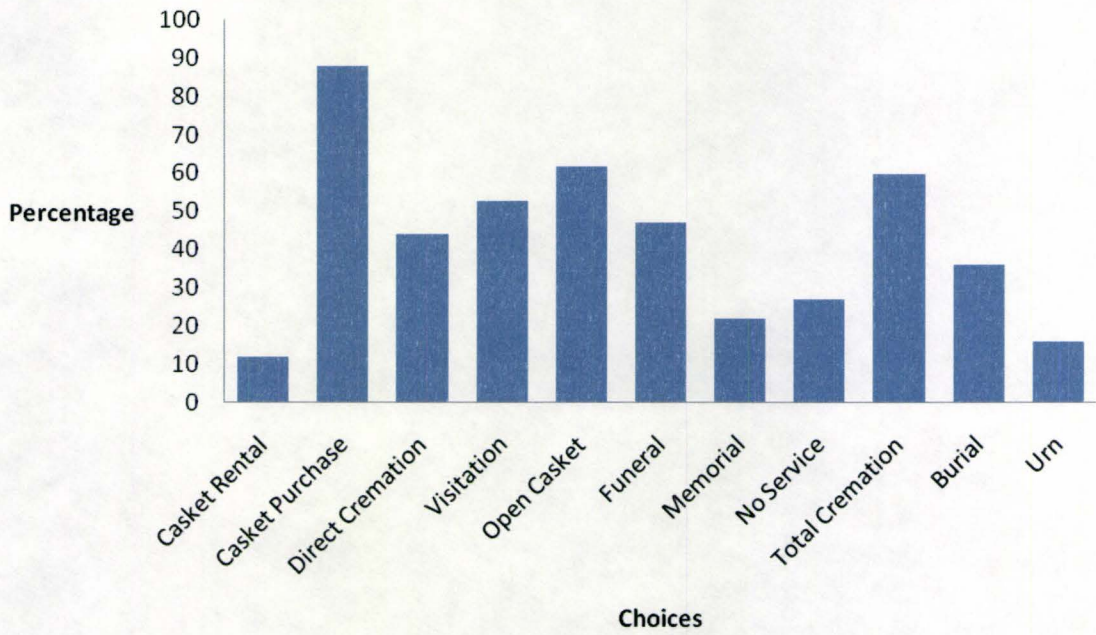




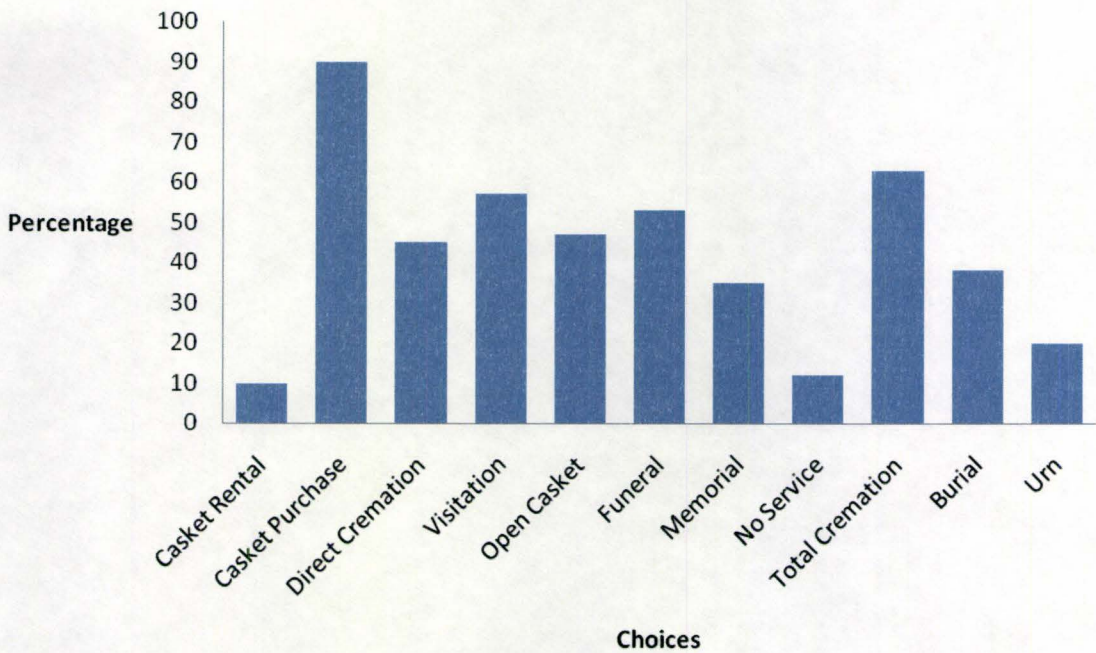




### At Need, January-December 2005

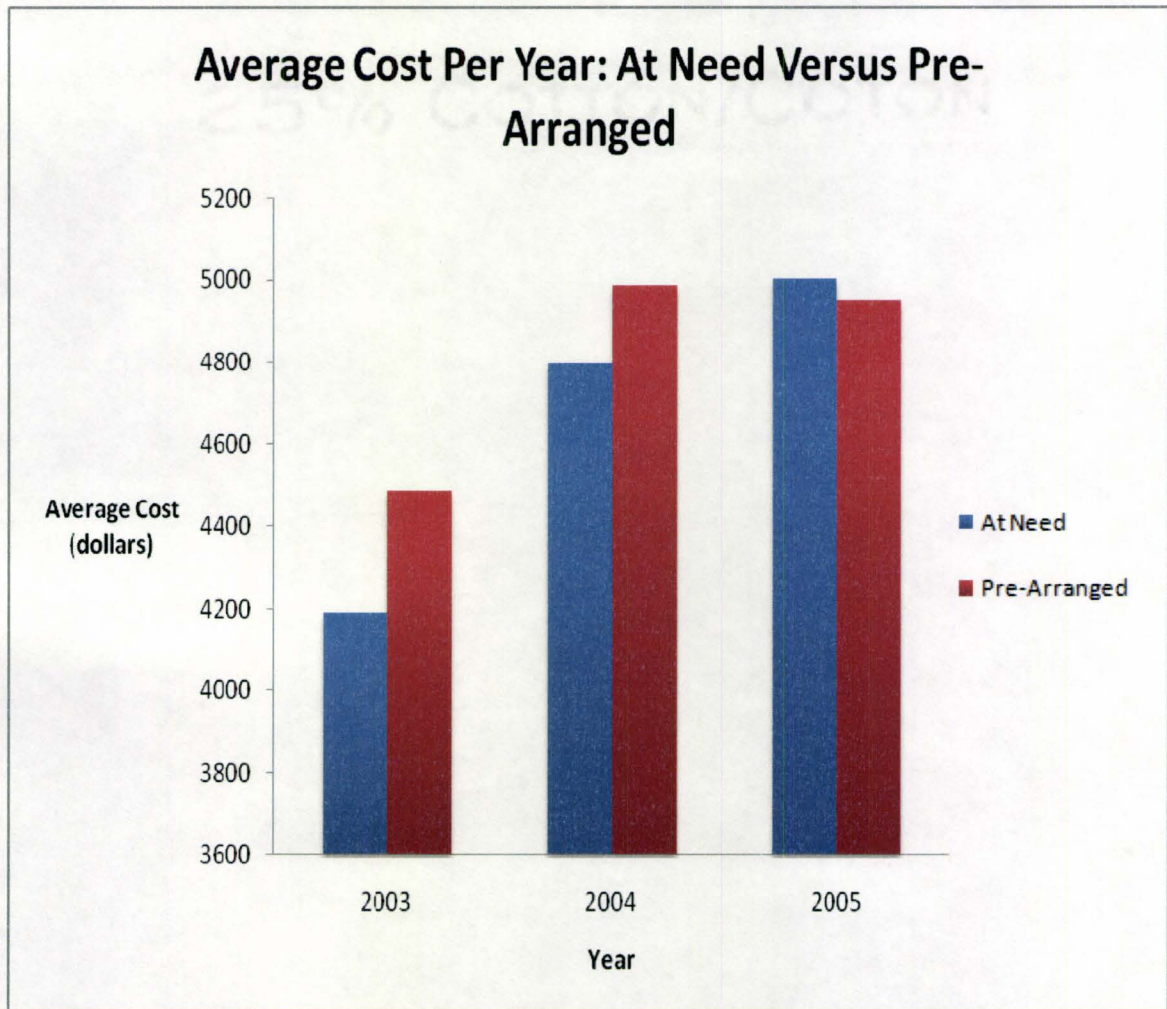


### Pre-Arranged, January-December 2005



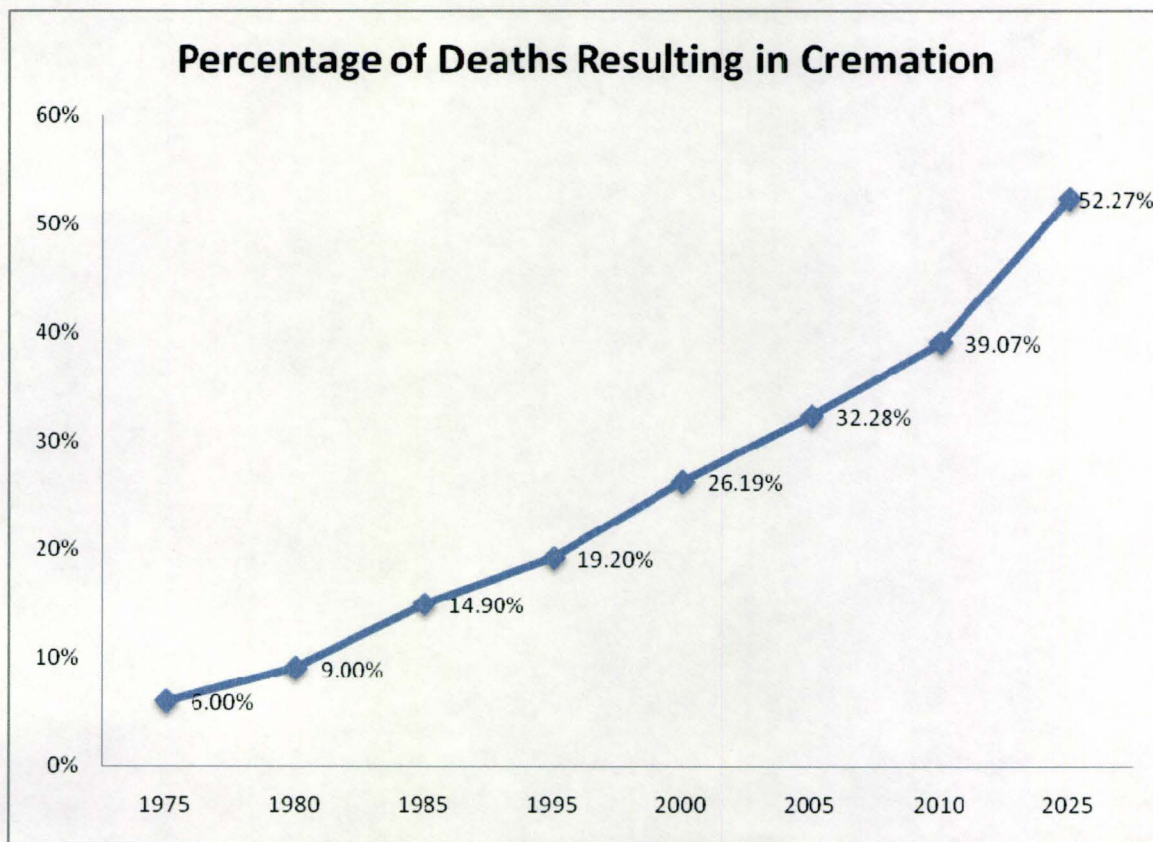
## APPENDIX II

### Average Funeral Cost Per Year: At Need vs. Pre-Arranged 2003-2005

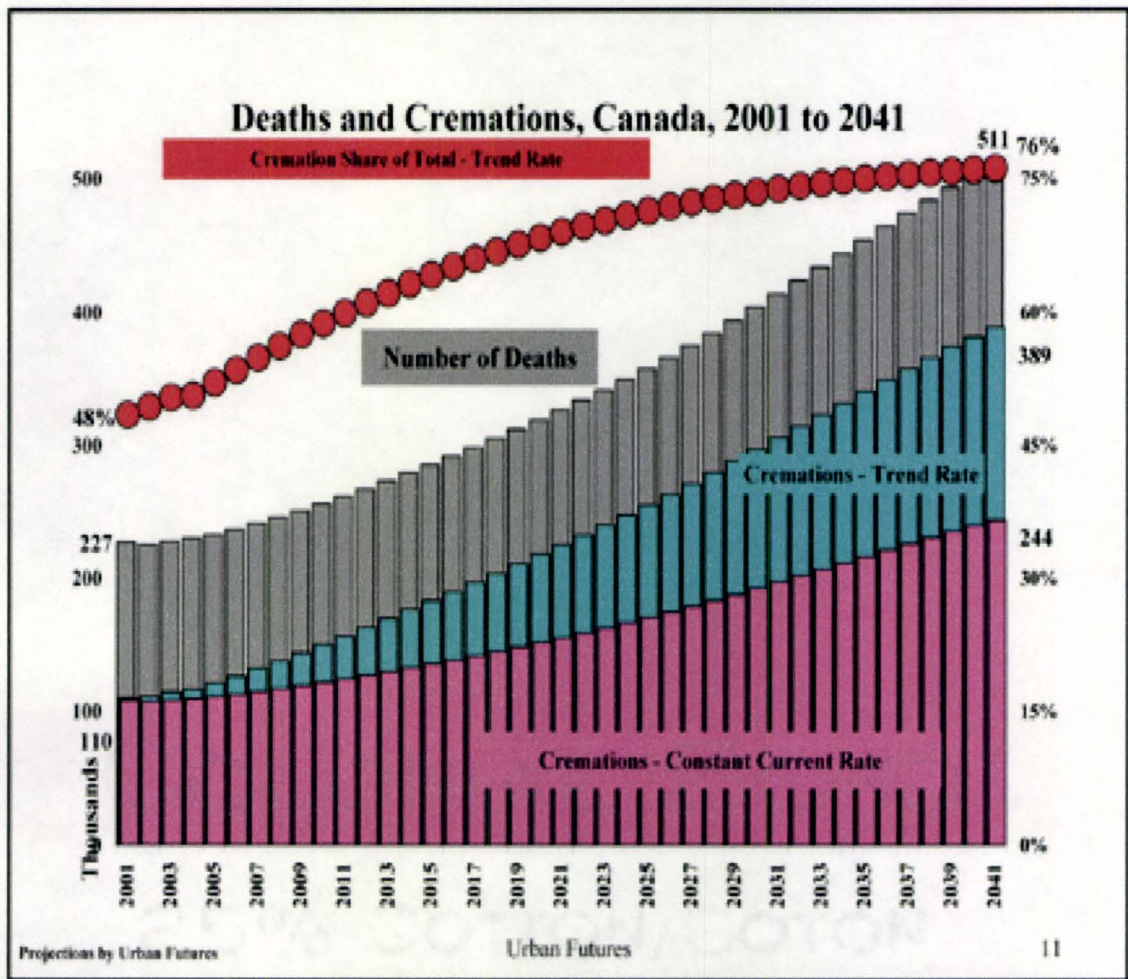


### APPENDIX III

#### Percentage of Deaths Resulting in Cremation



Source: Cremation Association of North America: [www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org) (March 13, 2007).



This chart shows for Canada:

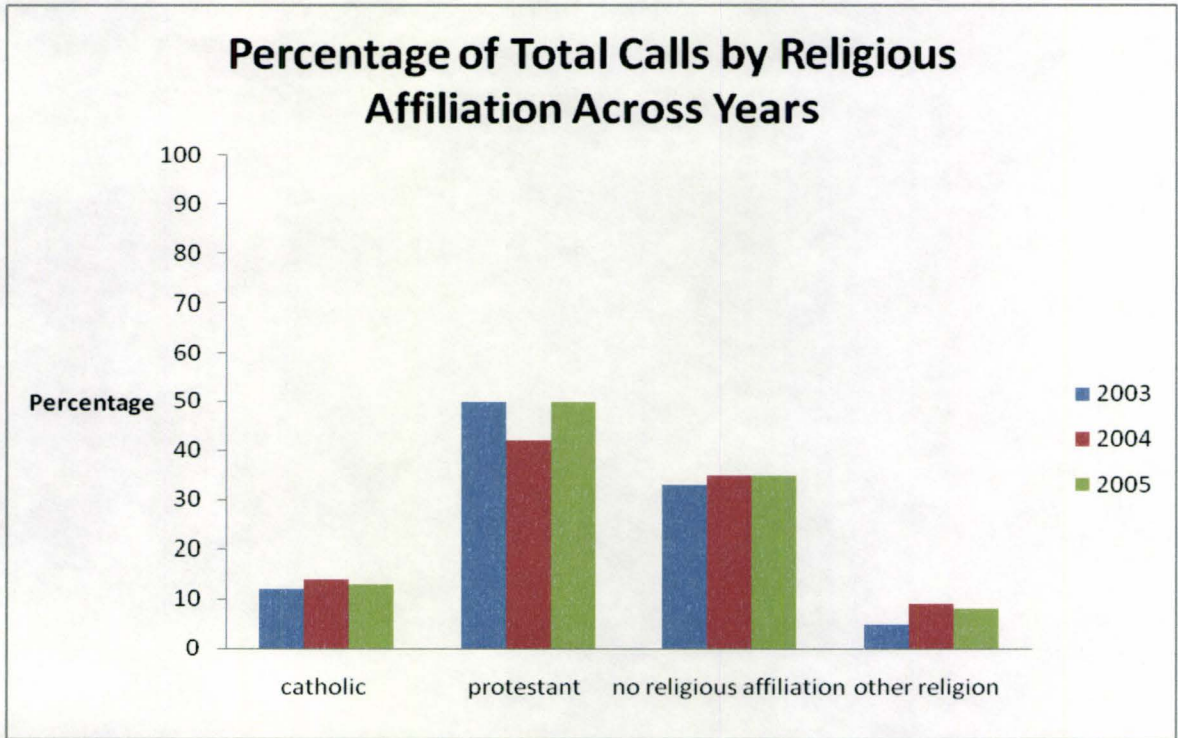
1. (Circles) the percentage of cremations from 2001 projected to 2041.
2. Total number of deaths each year, 2001 projected to 2041 (3 colors).
3. The increase in cremation trends in both percentages and numbers from 2002 to 2041 (middle color).

Cremation rate if it were to remain constant. 2001-2041 in number of cremations and percentages.

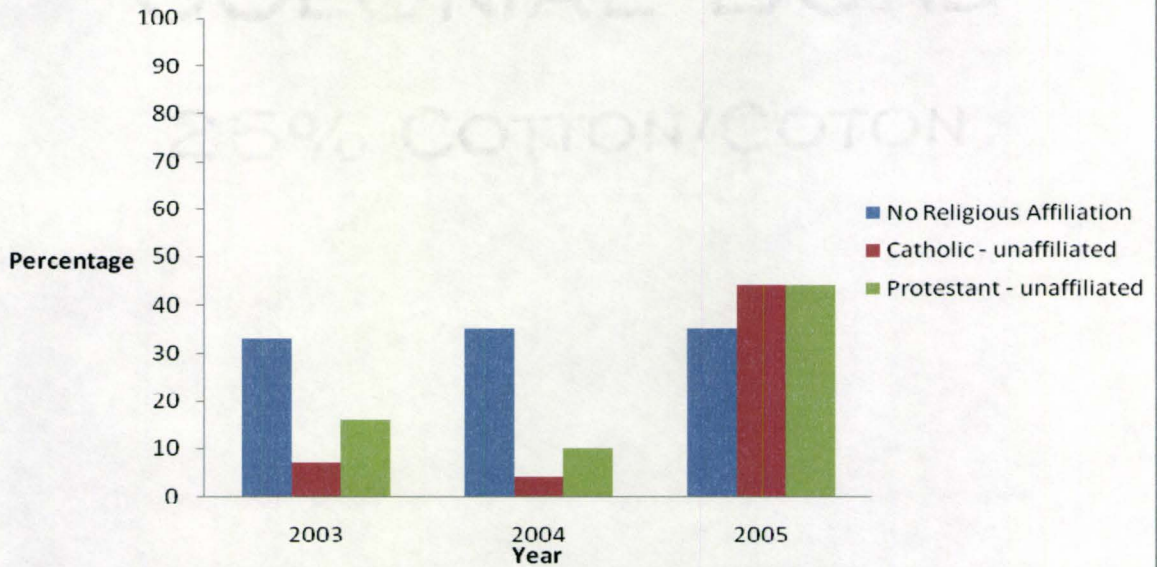
Source: Cremation Association of North America: [www.cremationassociation.org](http://www.cremationassociation.org) (March 13, 2007)

APPENDIX IV

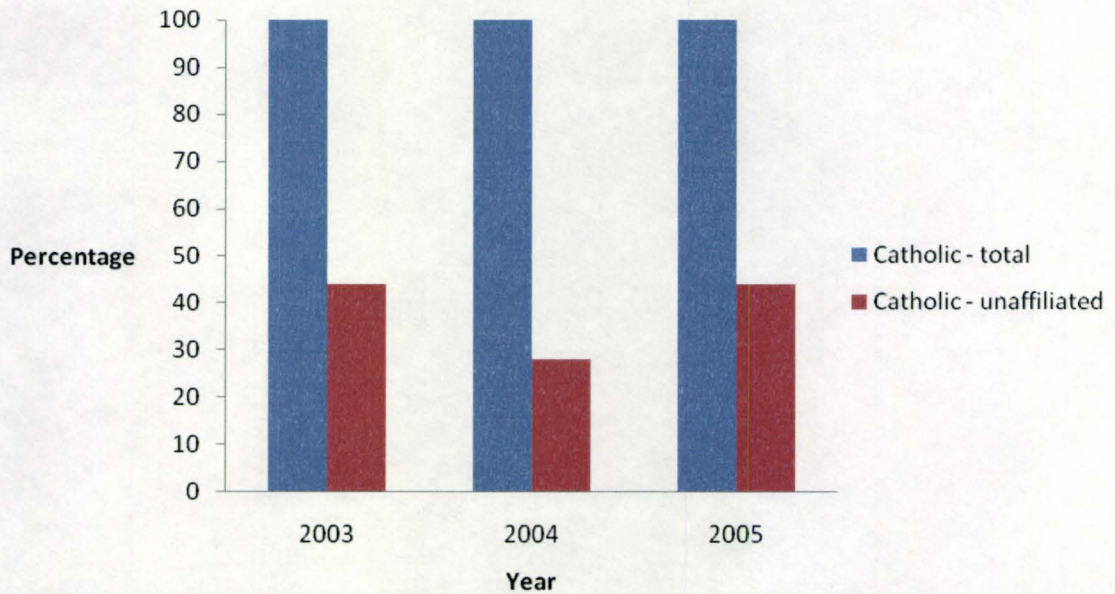
Religious Affiliation 2003-2005



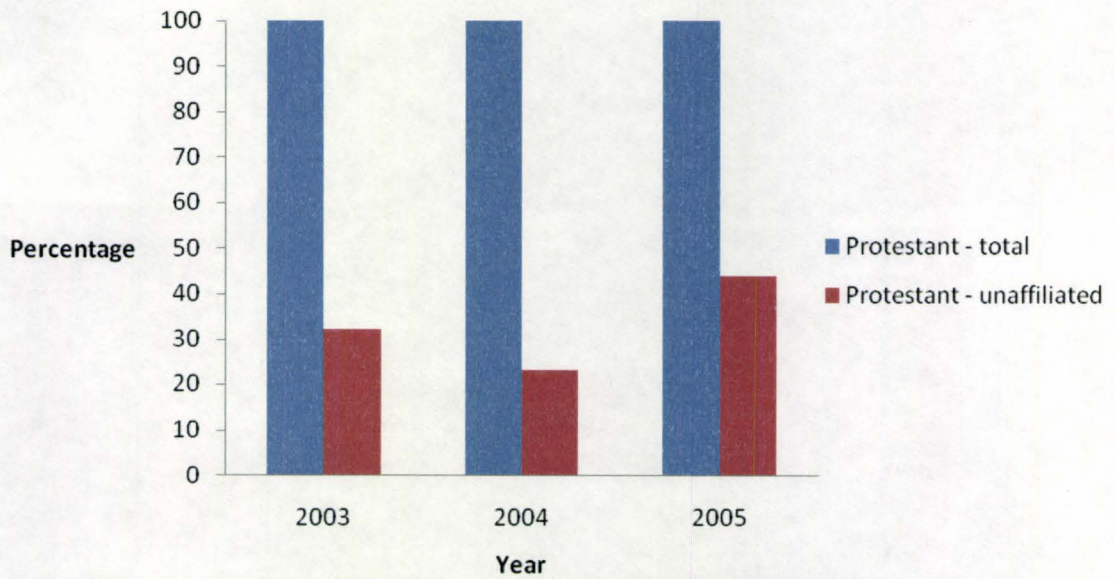
### No Religious Affiliation Versus Unaffiliated Catholic and Protestant Funerals Across Years



### Percentage of Unaffiliated Catholic Funerals Across Years



### Percentage of Unaffiliated Protestant Funerals Across Years





## APPENDIX V

### Clergy Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your affiliation?

What is your denominational affiliation	Number of funerals at which you have officiated	Number of funeral homes you are affiliated with

Do you accompany families to the funeral home to make funeral arrangements?

Never	Seldom	Usually	Frequently	All the time

What is the **role of the clergy** in planning a funeral?

Role	Never	Seldom	Frequently	All the time
Assist family in planning the funeral				
Assuring that liturgy/ Denominational practice is followed				
Spiritual support and counseling				

Other:

What do **you consider** an appropriate honorarium?

Parishioners	
Non affiliated families	

Comments:

What is the **role of the family** in the planning of a funeral?

Role	Never	Seldom	Frequently	All the time
Make arrangements for the service				
Co-operate with the clergy in Organizing funeral plans				
Carry out wishes of the deceased				

Other:

In **your** opinion, what is the role of the funeral director?

Role	Never	Seldom	Frequently	All the time
Assist and organize in the background				
Exhibit compassion				
Preparation of Deceased's remains				
No role or minor role				

Other:

How would **you** characterize **your working relationship with funeral directors?**

Working Relationship	Comment
Very good	
Good	
Neutral	

In **your** opinion, what are the **qualities of a good funeral director?**

	Comments
Empathy	
Interpersonal skills	
Understands the church's role	

Other:

Are you available for further discussion concerning the roles and relationship of the clergy with the funeral director? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

Comments :

*Thank- you*

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