

Funerals. The thought of them can send us wishing for immortality. But the business of death sometimes can not wait. There are those who suffer from it and those who make their living by it. The funeral director. He is a curious breed of businessman, friend and crisis counselor. He is there when you need him. It's his business. How we choose to handle funeral arrangements can be conducted through his (or her's the case may be) guidance. Here is some insight into the problems of death and funeral practices as described by Dr. Edgar Jackson, a minister and author of several books and articles dealing with this subject.



Photographed by Tracy Boker

Funerals: understanding the problems

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

Shopping for a funeral director who will render his services at the lowest price is something like shopping for a doctor who will do a cheap appendectomy.

Neither practice makes much sense in the opinion of Dr. Edgar Jackson, a Unitarian Universalist minister and author of numerous books and articles on grief and funeral practices. He was in the Birmingham area recently.

"I am not interested in funeral service economies," he said. "People who make restrictions for economical reasons simply get a cheap funeral at the expense of the main ingredient—a therapeutic acting out of their grief."

THE COST FACTOR of funerals is of relatively little interest to him, Dr. Jackson said, but that is where most criticism of funerals and funeral directors is leveled.

"Funeral directors are the only people in the community who provide public facilities at private cost," Dr. Jackson said. "Lawyers have the courthouse, doctors have the hospital and educators have the schools, all paid for by the public."

Local funeral directors serve as a private banker for people when death occurs, Dr. Jackson explained.

"They advance all the money needed with the knowledge that they may not be paid for six months or more," he said. "This is one aspect of their service that most people don't realize."

ONE-FOURTH OF all funerals are provided at less than cost, Dr. Jackson added.

The major part of the expense of a funeral to the funeral director is maintaining a 24-hour staff, the equipment and facilities.

He cited the number of funeral directors in rural America who are not able to support themselves by those services and have to earn their livings some other way.

"Where I come from in Vermont the undertaker also is an auctioneer, and he makes maple syrup," he said.

Another service available only during the last few years is counseling of the bereaved by funeral home personnel.

"ONE-HALF OF the people in the country have no church connection, and if they get any counseling at all when a death occurs, they get it through the funeral director," Dr. Jackson said.

Funeral directors receive more crisis psychology training than any other professional group, Dr. Jackson pointed out.

Three such courses are required of persons going into the business today: general psychology, crisis psychology and crisis counseling.

Total educational requirements for obtaining a mortician's license are two years of undergraduate schooling, a nine-month course in mortuary science and a one-year apprenticeship with a licensed establishment.

THE APPRENTICESHIP may be taken at any stage during the required course of study.

The memorial society movement, which advocates simple arrangements and sometimes immediate burial, denies the truth of the situation, Dr. Jackson believes, because it reduces the acting out of grief and the confrontation with reality.

"It is emotionally unsound," he said. "Grief is the other side of the coin of love."

A ceremonial acting out of grief is necessary for several reasons, Dr. Jackson explained.

To deny it is to deprive persons in grief of what they need when they need it most," he said.

THE SIDE EFFECTS of repressed grief appear in physical ailments, psychological distress and social dislocation, he explained.

The psychological value of a long acting-out process has been verified by study and research, Dr. Jackson said.

"When funeral directors argue for a longer process, everyone thinks they just want more money," he added. "They really are acting in the interest of the people they are serving."

The death situation has six basic parts, he explained. They are: Death, notification, confrontation (breaking through denial), group support, religious support or something comparable and disposal.

"When they are out of order or some parts eliminated it may create psychological problems," Dr. Jackson said.

When a person dies, there are four major ways of handling the immediate arrangements. On occasions this is predetermined by the deceased and other times the survivors make the decision.

The majority of deaths today are still followed by a traditional mourning period, funeral service and burial.

Some families choose a memorial service without the casket or body in sight.

Often when there is no casket, it is because the deceased either has been cremated or the body has been donated to medical science.

BOTH CREMATION and donations contain some factors of which the general public is unaware, according to Dr. Jackson.

Cremation has increased in numbers but not percent, Dr. Jackson said. The increase has been only one percent in the past 15 years and accounts for about five percent of total dispositions now.

Donation of bodies to medical science presents a booby trap, he believes.

A recent study of every major medical school in the United States revealed that the optimum

number of bodies that could be used for study nationwide was 3,600, he reported, but the number donated was 4,700.

"IT IS DISCONCERTING for a family to be told the body being donated isn't needed," he said.

Dr. Jackson formerly was a teacher at the University of Minnesota. The market there was so glutted that there was a 40-year advance on bodies donated and no more are being accepted, he said.

Medical schools also have become highly selective of bodies they will accept. Those are accepted that are young, diseased, mutilated or when death occurs more than 25 miles from the medical school, he said.

Another little-known fact, Dr. Jackson added, is that when a body is accepted, it is not touched for one year because many families ask to have a body returned for regular burial.

"IT SOUNDS heroic to give your body for medical science," he said, "but it has hidden emotional factors, and the implications are more complicated than many people realize."

"People think bodies donated for medical research are used for disease research but most are used by medical students to study anatomy," he added.

"I am in favor of providing all

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—Dr. Jackson

anatomy students with material needed and of saving the lives of other people," Dr. Jackson said. "But everyone is morally obligated to have the correct information."

To protect themselves before making any plans to donate bodies, Dr. Jackson urges families to check the current circumstances at the medical school of their choice.

MUCH OF WHAT Dr. Jackson said was confirmed by Rosemarie Kalajian, a secretary at the body bequest office at Wayne State University (WSU).

"We do have a very ample supply at the moment," Miss Kalajian said, "but bodies are still being accepted here."

WSU supplies other fields related to medicine, such as dentistry, and programs which need cadavers at other universities, including Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan, she explained.

A differentiation is made between will and donated bodies

and the degree of selectivity is based on the method of acquisition, Miss Kalajian said.

A will body is one in which the individual fills out the necessary forms before death and a donated body is one in which a family member donates the body after death.

WILLED BODIES are accepted automatically no matter what condition they are in, although a selection committee has the right to refuse a body for medical uses later.

Donated bodies will not be accepted if they have been autopsied, badly burned or mutilated.

Although attempts are made to reduce them, misunderstandings do arise about the use to which will or donated bodies will be put, she continued.

"It is true that most people think a body will be used for research," she confirmed. "At Wayne some bodies are used for some types of research, but not relating to disease."

A unique business

Funeral directors know that their business has two unique features: Their services will always be needed, and they have no control over when they will be called upon to render those services.

Consequently, there is no such thing as a typical day in the life of a funeral director, according to Ben Yort, vice president and secretary of The William R. Hamilton Co.

"When we come in in the morning there may be five new calls or we may go for four days with none," he said.

Yort is one of eight licensed morticians at The Hamilton Co. Four of them meet with families and the other four and two other persons carry out numerous additional responsibilities for the company.

YORT IS ONE OF several young morticians who have gone into the business after employment in some other area of business first.

Yort, whose mother was a Hamilton, took the mortuary science course at Wayne State University (WSU), the only school in Michigan which offers the course. He graduated in the mid-1960s. There were fewer than 30 in his class.

Today he teaches a class at WSU where there are 75 students, including five women.

"There is more interest now than in the past," he said. "I assume we are fulfilling the needs of the profession with 75 students, but we weren't with 30."

THERE ARE A number of reasons why people choose to go into the funeral business, Yort explained, even though most people think it would not be an appealing choice.

"Either it is a family business or a person works as an apprentice and gets hooked," he said.

"People really do get hooked in the profession," he said. "It is like nursing—the service end of it."

"When there is a death people are in a state of crisis and they need help," Yort said. "The thanks we get from people for help we give them is gratifying. That's what keeps a lot of us in it."

"WHEN I FIRST came into the business I thought it would be much more of an emotional thing than it is," he said, "but often death is a blessing or anticipated."

He has never regretted changing careers, Yort said, although "there are cases where I wish I wasn't involved."

However, funeral directors are not the only businessmen who face other peoples' grief on a daily basis, Yort explained.

"It is not so different from being a clergyman or a doctor or an attorney," he said.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR women in the profession are numerous and increasing, Yort believes. There are many husband-wife teams outstate, where both are licensed, he said.

Post-counseling positions also are attracting women, he added.

It is difficult to start in the funeral business from scratch, Yort said, but it can and is being done.

The financial aspect is a major consideration because of the difficulty of finding property and the investment in property and facilities.



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