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How can you make a positive difference in your community as society trends toward a meaningless tomorrow filled with simple cremation? BY JOHN T. MCQUEEN



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Most scientists and archaeologists agree that Homo sapiens, or modern humans, came into existence between 200,000 and 300,000 years ago. The first known communities, however, did not exist until around 14,000 years ago. But it's the 9,500-year-old Neolithic settlement known as

Catalhoyuk, located in south-central Turkey, where nearly 8,000 people gathered, that may hold the key to the rise in major communities.

Prior to the discovery of Catalhoyuk, humans were mostly known as nomadic people, hunters and gathers wandering in search of food. Although still up for some debate, archaeologists believe these early settlers came together through shared spirituality and artistic expression, giving way to shared farming and other social customs. There is no doubt that the Neolithic Revolution changed humanity forever and was the foundation for today's communities – complete with skyscrapers and traffic jams.

How does all this relate to you, the local funeral director? Common burial practices and rituals can be traced back as far as these Neolithic communities. In Catalhoyuk and other places, it was common practice to bury the dead under the floor of their mud huts. In fact, in some cases, the skulls of human remains have been found covered in plaster, with artificial noses and eyes molded into place, demonstrating their care and reverence for the dead.

As Dr. Alan Wolfelt with the Center for Loss & Life Transition has taught our profession for years, “When words are inadequate, have ceremony.” Whether it's the use of flowers, candles, food or other items, customs and rituals have been used from the earliest of times to honor life. The role we play as funeral professionals within our communities is vital to the significance of those who have died and those left behind.

Early evidence shows this to be true. As far back as 60,000 B.C., Neanderthals decorated the dead with flowers, antlers and other items from the natural world in what is believed to be tied to their spirituality and belief in the afterlife. Throughout history, civilizations have cared for their dead in a variety of ways that honor the deceased, appease the gods and care for the living. In fact, many of the world's most famous structures – from the Egyptian pyramids to the Taj Mahal and Roman catacombs – were built to house the dead or serve as a memorial to them.

How, then, can you make a positive difference in your community as society trends toward a meaningless tomorrow filled with simple cremation and the disposal of the ashes? A

simple way is to implement the acronym from Aretha Franklin's famous song, “Respect.”

REVERENCE

If we as a profession do not respect the dead and the vital role we play in caring for the living, we can't expect the community to hold what our profession does in high esteem. Leave the catchy book titles, reality shows and the like to Hollywood. If you truly want to serve your community, do so with integrity, honesty and dignity. Those are the qualities upon which funeral professionals are made.

I recall some sage advice from my mortuary management teacher at Gupton-Jones College, the late Glenn Morton. He said someday you'll be at a lobby bar during a convention cutting up and drinking, and some patron, not part of the convention, will ask you what you do for a living. Morton's advice: “Tell them you're an attorney.” He went on to say that people expect that behavior of their attorney, but they don't expect it from their funeral director.

EDUCATE

Access to information abounds today, but you can't always believe what you read on the Internet or hear on TV. You are the gatekeeper to a practice that has lasted thousands upon thousands of years, so don't leave the answers to your community's concerns to others not trained in funerals.

Become the community expert by making yourself available to anyone who will listen. In a world filled with noise, you'll need to provide your expertise in a variety of ways, such as group presentations, one-on-one discussions, podcasts, blog posts, YouTube videos and more. Will it take effort? Sure. Will it pay dividends? Most definitely!

Remember the old commercial, “When EF Hutton talks, people listen”? Be the one whose opinion people want to hear. (If you don't remember the ads, check one out at youtu.be/2_ygqPepLjM/).

SHOW YOU'RE HUMAN

All too often, the only images the public has is of us riding around in a big car or standing by the front door at a visitation or funeral. Embrace opportunities to show that you are part of the community – not just financially but through your participation (and your staff's participation) in civic groups, parades (throwing black beads is huge), community festivals, youth activities and more. Let them see you as approachable rather than with the preconceived opinion they might have of a funeral director.

I know what you're thinking – other than the beads, you already do all that stuff. That's great, but do you promote it? Use social media to share photos of you and your staff involved in the community.

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Consider adding a page to your website, such as abcfuneral.com/givesback. Let people see the good you do to make your community a great place to live, work and play. Remember, people want to do business with people they know or like, so make a connection – personally and virtually.

PURPOSE PLAN PASSION PERSISTENCE

These qualities are often found in the sports arena, but they ap-

ply perfectly to our personal and business lives, too. In implementing the 4 Ps, start by defining the purpose or vision for your company and preach it from the rooftops until it is owned, lived and breathed by everyone on your team and even the community. The next step is to develop a plan outlining how to achieve success, and then work that plan. Sure, all great plans may require a detour from time to time, but your plan prepares you, so you never lose sight of your destination. As “The General” Bobby Knight, former Indiana University basketball coach, said, “The ability to prepare to win is as important as the will to win.” Are you and your staff prepared?

Next, in all you do, deliver with passion. As another all-time great coach, Lou Holtz, University of Notre Dame football, is known

for saying, “Ability is what you are capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do. Attitude (passion) is how well you do it.”

We’ve all experienced both ends of the spectrum, whether it was a waiter, a repairman, a retailer, a banker or a funeral director. The lack of passion made us question every penny we spent compared to the services received. The passionate made us value everything we received and left us wanting more.

Finally, commit to persistence. The great Mike Ditka, former head coach of both the Chicago Bears and New Orleans Saints, shared, “You’re never a loser until you quit trying.” Life is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We typically get what we expect. Winners expect to win. Many a competition is won or lost not on the field or in the pool, but in the mind. If you want to be the go-to professional in your community, think and act like the go-to professional. And don’t just take my word for it – ask Mark Panciera, funeral home owner and CEO/partner of The Pacific Institute, if mindset matters!

EVALUATE

If you can’t measure it, how do you know if you’re successful? Financials are relatively easy to evaluate. At The Foresight Companies, we benchmark our clients against industry standards to ensure that their pricing is optimal, their expenses are in line and their profit margins are where they need to be.

Other services can be more challenging, however. Did our phone skills training work? How are we doing overcoming objections? Should we continue to offer complimentary Starbucks when Folgers is half the cost? All these and more can be answered; it’s knowing the right questions and building processes to measure them that is the overwhelm-

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ing part. Typically, one of two things happen: 1) You try something new for the first time and it doesn't work, so you quickly go back to the old way, or 2) You're not sure how to measure it, so you just continue doing it even though it costs you money.

Get professional help – the benefit will far exceed the cost.

BE COURAGEOUS

Fear is a basic human emotion. Of all our potential fears, humans are born with only two innate fears: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noises. All other fears are learned, influenced at a young age, by environment and culture. Humans are programmed with a fight-or-flight reaction, and fear is what engages that reaction. However, the greatest fear for many funeral directors is that of rejection.

I know several younger funeral directors who won't tell people they meet in public what they do for a living. They've told me people find it creepy, or the conversation stops because people are afraid of death.

Personally, I find it one of the best icebreakers in a conversation. After all, everyone follows up with a 'Is it true...?' or 'I've heard...' questions, allowing us to educate and talk about death.

This fear of rejection occurs most often while making funeral arrangements. Being a professional means making recommendations, and too often, fear prevents directors from doing so, resulting in missed opportunities for the client and for added services or merchandise sales for the funeral home.

If you have positioned yourself as an advisor early in the conversation and explained that you would be educating the family on their options so they can make an informed decision that's

right for them, you simply say, "Mrs. Smith, based on what you have shared, I would recommend choosing the XYZ package, and here's why..." Don't let fear hold you back. Remember, the answer is *always no* if you don't ask the question.

TRAIN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

To quote the late Earl Weaver, manager of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."

True professionals are lifelong learners dedicated to mastering their craft. They read trade journals, attend seminars and seek out new and innovative concepts, even if just to understand. They improve their skills and the skills of those they employ. They recognize that a rising tide lifts all boats – theirs, their employees' and their communities'.

When future archaeologists undercover remnants of our society in a thousand years, what will they find? Will they find a civilization that cared for their dead with dignity, or will they label us the "lost civilization"? ☹

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