



Reflections on the "Ultimate Death Symbol"

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

I'm sure you have noticed the trend toward more and more body-absent ceremonies, which can seem more like parties than authentic funeral experiences. While historically we understood the essential, universal need to honor and affirm the life of the person who died with the body present throughout the entire funeral process, now the guest of honor is often missing in action.

How many of you frequently hear families say, "Oh, we'll just remember her the way she was when she was alive..." or "Seeing the body is barbaric and unnecessary"? Yet I submit that there is nothing barbaric about facing the death of someone loved openly and honestly.

We seem to be forgetting what many have known since the beginning of time. Throughout human history, clans and tribes revered and stayed present to the body until it was laid to final rest. Cultures the world over have always demonstrated a passion to recover the "fallen warrior" and dignify the death by bringing home the body. While not all faith communities find it appropriate to spend time with the body and we must always remain respectful of religious beliefs precluding this practice, for most people the body has forever been the most sacred and central element of the funeral process.

I'm reminded of the morning of Thursday, May 30, 2002, when a fire bell rang 20 times and bugles played "America the Beautiful." After nearly nine months, a simple yet profound ceremony signified the end of the search and body recovery effort at Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center atrocities. Perhaps the most striking part of this ceremony was the re-

minder that many survivors never had the chance to spend time with the bodies of those they loved. Workers slowly carried an empty stretcher up a 500-foot ramp to a waiting ambulance, poignantly acknowledging the fact when the "the ultimate death symbol"—the body—is not seen and honored, a critical part of the process of death and mourning is missing as well.

Bereavement originates from the word "reave," meaning "to be deprived of" or "to be forcibly robbed of something." When we experience the death of someone loved, we are indeed forcibly robbed of something very precious to us. But for a short time—a few hours or days after the death—we have the precious opportunity to still be with the person who died, in the form of the dead body, even as we have no choice but to begin to take leave of him. So, not only is the dead body "proof" for our logical mind, it is a means of transition for our searching heart, which so much yearns to still be with the person. It can hurt—in a way that can feel uncomfortable and painful in the moment—but ultimately is helpful and healing.

And what of the common objection, "I don't want to remember her that way"? My experience suggests that the image of the person in death does not become the lasting image in the mind of the survivor. While the sight and presence of the dead body meets the cognitive need to verify the death, that very image usually fades and it is the living memories that are everlasting.

As you meet with families in need to educate them and provide them with choices that

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY, THE ACTUAL PRESENCE OF THE DEAD AT THEIR OWN FUNERALS HAS BECOME OPTIONAL, EVEN UNDESIRABLE, LEST THE BODY BREAK THE ILLUSION OF A CLOUDLESS CELEBRATION, SPOIL THE MEDITATIVE MOOD, AND REVEAL THE TRUTHS ABOUT GRIEF, LIFE AND DEATH THAT OUR THINNED-OUT CEREMONIES CANNOT BEAR.

Thomas G. Long

will help them mourn—including spending time with the body—you have a multitude of forces working against you. Our mourning-avoidant, impatient-with-grief culture has taught them to feel as little as possible and get it over with as quickly as possible. Yet you also know that if you are able to help them make the choice to authentically mourn, you will be helping them return to life, to living, and to loving!

You who bear witness to thousands of people as they spend time with the body of someone they have loved know this. Just as the families you serve opened their heart to love, they must open their heart to feelings of loss. We sometimes forget that love and feelings of loss are inextricably bound together. Yes, the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn.

My hope is that the next time a family says, "I'll just remember him the way he was" or "It's just a shell," you will reflect on this article and help them better understand the value of the ultimate death symbol. Remember—a meaningful funeral is not about denying death but befriending it. Let's not dispatch bodies. Let's treat them with the reverence and respect they deserve.

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, is the director of the Center For Loss & Life Transition in Fort Collins, CO. In addition, he is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School in the Department of Family Medicine. He is the author of numerous books on grief and loss, including Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Families and Understanding Your Grief: Touchstones for Hope and Healing.



TREE OF REMEMBRANCE
DAVIS FUNERAL HOME PRESENTS
DONATION TO THE STAFF OF
NATHAN ADELSON HOSPICE
REFLECTIONS ON THE "ULTIMATE
DEATH SYMBOL"

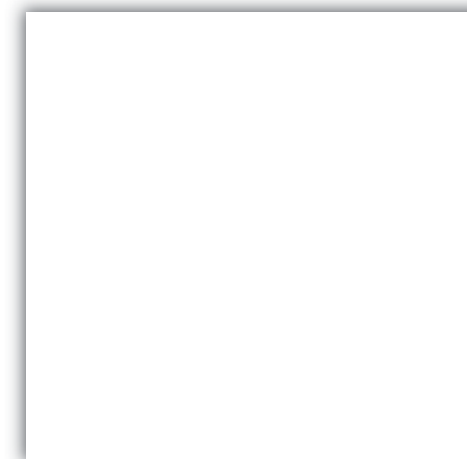
Legacy LEDGER

Serving One Family at a Time

WINTER ISSUE 2013



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Michael Soper
Legacy President
and CEO

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Davis Funeral Home Presents Donation to the Staff of Nathan Adelson Hospice

Todd Noecker, Vice President of Legacy Funeral Group Nevada, along with Allen Kopp, Davis Funeral Homes Eastern Chapel Manager, and Shane Meloy, Davis Funeral Home Charleston Chapel Manager, presented a check for \$2,000.00 to Karen Rubel, Vice President of Development, and Stephanie Forbes, Development Manager of Nathan Adelson Hospice. The check is a joint effort between Davis Funeral Homes of Las Vegas and Funeral Directors Life Insurance Company, through their Helpers of People Charitable Contributions Matching Program.

Davis also donated several helpful books for their library as well as an invitation to present aftercare and pre-care knowledge to their Social Service Staff.

Nathan Adelson Hospice (NAH) is the largest non-profit hospice in Southern Ne-



Left to right - Allen Kopp, Stephanie Forbes, Karen Rubel, Todd Noecker, and Shane Meloy

vada, caring for over 400 patients each day. Known as an industry leader, the organization has a reputation for providing exceptional end-of-life care. In 1983, Nathan Adelson Hospice opened the area's first inpatient hospice and today they are nationally recognized as a model for superior hospice care.

"We are so honored to be able to give this donation on behalf of our company," stated Todd Noecker. "Davis Funeral Homes prides itself on being able to give back to our community, especially those who touch so many lives in caring for terminal patients in such a compassionate and caring manner."

Tree of Remembrance AREA RESIDENTS CELEBRATE MEMORY OF LOVED ONES LOST

GABRIELA MUÑOZ
NEWS-SUN

Juanita Telles placed a red ornament on the Tree of Remembrance at Chapel of Hope and then stepped back to take a picture with her cell phone.

"I want to send this to my sister," Telles said. "Maybe it will make her happy."

Telles lost her niece, Julie Rodriguez, two weeks ago. And though she attended the Tree of Remembrance Celebration to watch her son sing in the choir, she stopped to place an ornament on the tree in memory of her niece.

Chapel of Hope hosted the event for people who have lost loved ones and want to commemorate them during the holidays. Participants collected a red or gold Christmas ornament in the lobby with the deceased person's name written in silver and hung it on the Remembrance Tree near the chapel.

Sherry Joe Norman of Chapel of Hope decided to start the event last year, she said. Although the City of Hobbs provides a memorial service at Prairie Haven Cemetery in December, in which Chapel of Hope participates,

Juanita Telles places an ornament on the Tree of Remembrance Celebration at Chapel of Hope.



she wanted to offer families and individuals another place to grieve and remember their loved ones.

"We just wanted to offer another way for people to celebrate the memory of their loved ones during the holidays," Norman said.

In addition to a Christmas tree celebration, the Hobbs High School Choir gave a performance of Christmas carols and other holiday songs.

"It is so nice to have this," said Tami Van Winkle of Hobbs. "It's nice to know that someone out there still cares about your feelings and what you are going through."

This is Van Winkle's second Christmas

without her mother, however, she was unable to attend last year's event. And since Chapel of Hope only hosts the ornament-placing ceremony for one day, Van Winkle wanted to make sure she didn't miss it this year, she said.

"I wanted to get to make a point of showing up," Van Winkle said.

The City of Hobbs will host their annual memorial service 6 p.m. Thursday at Prairie Haven Chapel.

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Legacy Funeral Group "Dares to be Different"

BY JOE THOMPSON
Legacy Funeral Group
Regional Manager for
West Texas and
Southeastern New Mexico

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Our tongue in cheek "Think Outside of the Box" T-shirts put a little sharper point on the thought process behind the recent management meeting held in Austin Texas. All of Legacy's regional managers came together for a three day conference that was geared toward sharing new and different ideas that are changing the thinking of today's death care

providers. Certainly the growing national trend toward cremation presents a challenge to the accepted, "mode of operation" in most funeral homes and cemeteries. Several hours were dedicated to meeting this challenge by first changing the mindset of our personnel to be more engaged in educating our families about the value of funeral services and memorializa-

tion. New programs and products were also presented that will provide families a more easily understood alternative to the direct cremation.

Many new operating procedures were also presented in this meeting. As Legacy grows, the need for verifiable standardized procedures becomes more and more important. This will be an ongoing effort for many years to come. New companies like ours often need to rewrite the book to reflect our dynamic business environment.

Legacy Funeral Group has a very active and experienced team of regional managers entrusted to carry the word to the front line. Education and communication are going to be our keys to success in the future. Having meetings like this is the best way to be sure that the song remains the same.

Andrea Muenchow Receives Memorial Scholarship Award



FDLIC Market Center Manager
Sunshine Andersland presents
Andrea Muenchow of Palmer
Mortuary with a certificate from
FDLIC's Scholarship Program

SEGUIN

Legacy's own Andrea Muenchow, administrative assistant with Palmer Mortuary & Cremations in Seguin, Texas, has received the 2013 Memorial Scholarship from Funeral Directors Life Insurance Company (FDLIC) to help her further her education as she attends

mortuary school.

Andrea has worked for many years in the mortuary, monument, and cemetery business and joined Palmer Mortuary in 2012. "Thanks to Andrea's hard work and dedication, she has far exceeded my expectations and has many times gone above and beyond

to help assist families in their time of need," said Brian Nichols, Legacy Funeral Group's regional manager. "Andrea is very pleasant to work with and extremely committed to her job and the company."

"In reviewing her scholarship application, it was very apparent to our committee that Andrea is naturally inquisitive, is a hard worker, and loves to learn. By all accounts, she's a natural at working with families, listening to their stories, and offering comfort and support during a trying time," said Jeff Stewart, Scholarship Committee Chairman.

FDLIC supports future funeral service professionals through the Memorial Scholarship Fund, which is perpetually supported by FDLIC and by the generosity of donors.

For more information about FDLIC's Memorial Scholarship program, please visit www.funeraldirectorslife.com.