



Education in Funeral Service

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“Readin’, ritin’, and ‘rithmetic” used to be sufficient in the good ole’ days of schools. If it was good enough then, why isn’t it good enough now? Few of us like to admit that being adequately prepared in the past doesn’t translate to being really prepared for today. More importantly, being prepared for today isn’t being proactive for tomorrow. Why is this dilemma truer than ever for funeral service education? What can be done to create better educational practices?

First of all, the pace at which life moves is faster with each generation. In the past, people “rested on the Sabbath,” visited family and friends, worked on hobbies, and funerals were social occasions as well as times of remembrances. Today all of that has changed drastically. People rush around trying to do too much in the same twenty-four hour time span. Traffic is worse, social visits are shorter, multi-tasking has become a “buzz” word in the working world as well as at home. Multi-tasking may mean that an individual is only partially listening while checking e-mails. It may mean that students pay scant attention to the classroom lessons because they are so busy being plugged into various devices. Granted, students will do more fact checking via Google than they ever did with encyclopedias, but much of that is superficial without gaining depth of knowledge.

Secondly, being proactive involves forward thinking. New ideas in funeral service emanate from the “out of the box” thinking of the Baby Boomers, so funeral homes need to be educated about the new business modes. Baby Boomers now require less religious ceremony and more celebrations. Thus, funeral homes need to reconfigure their spaces to make them more multi-functional for the possibilities required by Boomers. Many students attend funeral colleges stating that they have a passion for serving their families, but when asked to give examples, they are at a loss as to how that translates to reality. Maybe they need to know much more rational subject matter to match the emotional passion they feel.

In addition, the areas of cremation and pet burial practices need to be fully embraced in order to move forward with the education of funeral directors. Cremation figures are on the rise in all states so funeral directors need to make the grieving experience meaningful for the non-traditional families. Frequently, the new millennials don’t want the rituals of the past, so they look to the funeral directors for guidance about the possibilities.

Another area of forward thinking is the plethora of female funeral directors and the many advantages of hiring women. Families perceive that women may be more empathetic and handle the grieving process in a new and caring way. In many cultures, women have been the chief mourning directors in funerals.

As one can see, much of this revolves around the process of personalization. While this has become more important over the years, all too many funeral homes don't actually practice this. Thus, funeral directors need to be taught in mortuary schools about the intricacies of personalizing different parts of the process for various people and cultures. If a family's tradition is to sit with the body all night, then the funeral home needs to accommodate that ritual.

Lastly, most of this revolves around knowledge. Funeral colleges must expand the horizons and possibilities for students to be prepared for the future. Ignorance is no excuse! While the sciences are very important and necessary, so are the arts, as well as the openness to embrace the future traditions. Creating an open mind at mortuary school enables a student to value his/her education and embrace learning of all kinds. Too often students want only the basics, but that limits their futures. Perhaps greater practicum will allow students to be more serious about their academics as mortuary schools expand their curricula.

"The more they know, the more they will want to know" is an old-fashioned academic edict that might work in this interconnected world. More community interaction may be necessary so students will be comfortable embracing different ideas. It's difficult to dislike a group of people if one knows just one person from that "different" group. As I teach in my History classes, different just means different; it doesn't mean better than or lesser than. Then I make the students check this fact in their dictionaries so the lesson will be imprinted on their minds as they move into their communities and find ways to cross pollinate ideas and grieving practices.

In summary, what do all of these new avenues mean for education? As I teach I say, "Open your eyes!" All of us need to open our eyes to be on the lookout for new ideas and new people to assist us in our funeral careers. Frequently young people will have some of the best ideas, so let's share with them. We educators give students the knowledge, and then the students think up new ways to incorporate that knowledge into the everyday world of funeral service. Together, all of us can create a better education for funeral service leaders!



About Kay Campbell

Kay Campbell has been an instructor at Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service, Decatur, Georgia, for twenty-one years. She teaches English Grammar and Composition, English Literature, and American History. In addition, Kay founded the academic support group Mars and Returning Students (MARS) for the returning college students at Gupton-Jones.

Kay has been extensively involved in civic endeavors in Atlanta including the Atlanta City Council as Chairman of the Neighborhood Planning Unit A. In addition, she has been involved as a board member of the national Faith at Work/Lumunos Organization in Washington, D.C.



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