

# Viewpoint

By Ann Marie St. George

## Cremation: The Writing on the Prep Room Wall

In 1985, I was a resident student in a traditional Polish funeral home in Buffalo, New York, where I witnessed my first – and last – private home-held wake.

I remember how stress-free and enjoyable it was bringing all the equipment from the funeral home in and out of the family's home. (*Hey, who said women can't lift? LOL*)

Other than this home-held funeral it was a fantastic time for the funeral profession. Visitations were held for two-and-a-half to three days. The morning of the funeral we met at the funeral home for prayers, processed to the church where we grabbed something to eat while the mass was in progress. Afterward, our extra-long police-escorted procession headed to the cemetery for a graveside committal where everyone waited for the casket to be lowered. You know, the good old days where every funeral luncheon had a two-drink minimum, residents worked for free, and the national cremation rate was 14.9%.

Fast forward 36 years where you will get fired for having two drinks at the luncheon, residents want nights and weekends off, and the national cremation rate is 56.1% and is expected to hit 65.2% in 2025 and 72.8% in 2030 – that is a lot of retorts that will need maintenance. Even with clear evidence that cremation is becoming the new norm, my recent Google search defines “traditional funeral” as a funeral with a viewing/visitation and a funeral ceremony with a burial at a gravesite.

Humans have been using some type of cremation since the Stone Age. The first cremation as we know it was performed at the Vienna Exposition in 1873. The first crematory in the United States was built in Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1876. By 1913 there were 52 crematories with over 10,000

cremations taking place. Fast forward to 2019 where there were over 3,000 crematories performing over 1,500,000 cremations.

Google may have their definition of “traditional service.” I, however, think we can all agree that yesterday's “traditional service” has morphed into multiple variations of memorial services and celebrations of life. Families are no longer content with the 1985 “one size fits all” services. They want more. They don't want to do what past family members did. They want their services to be unique and reflective of their life once lived. The internet, which includes social media, has done a fabulous job in educating the consumer (OK, I see you rolling your eyes.)

Looking back to 1985, we didn't know enough to develop a better way to see cremation. When a family said

they wanted cremation, we made the knucklehead decision to assume they meant direct cremation. This makes me think of a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen." And boy did it happen. For whatever rationale, we couldn't get out of our own way. Personally, I feel the Catholic church's change in position regarding the acceptability of cremation contributed to the increase in cremation.

Throughout history, the Roman Catholic Church forbade any Catholic from being cremated. Then in May of 1963 they allowed cremation with specific stipulations: The body had to be present in church for the mass of Christian burial before being cremated. Once cremated, the remains were required to be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Then in 1997, the Church changed its position on the body being present in church and allowed the cremated remains to be present during the mass. Stipulations remained: Burial must occur either in ground or at sea and most notably, you are not allowed to separate the cremains or scatter them. On a side note, I do not recommend sharing with a Catholic priest all the places you have scattered your sister's cremated remains – after burning them in the local crematory I will be burning in

hell. It is a pretty funny story to share, um, but not to another priest.

What isn't as funny is how we funeral professionals got behind the 56.1% cremation rate eight ball. I am sure some of you saw the cremation writing on the prep room wall sooner than most of us. Congrats, you should probably buy a lotto ticket because you are some of the lucky ones. Most of us are still trying to wrap our heads around the trocar that isn't being used anymore. Not to fret, my funeral directing friends, there is light at the end of that 28,000-pound retort.

With most states requiring continuing education, us old dogs have been given an opportunity to learn new tricks. Yes, I do understand that there are a few of you who feel these requirements are a pain in the removal cot but think of it as an investment to help your business be more profitable. Discovering ways to better serve families while making more money can be learned through seminars held at national conventions like those held by the National Funeral Directors Association, International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association and Cremation Association of North America. If national conventions are not your thing, try attending state and local conferences. They're a huge resource that can help you become everyone's favorite funeral director and

they come in the form of all your vendors past, present and future. Use them as a great resource. The vendors are all more than happy to help. Hey, it can also mean more money for them.

Presently, my heart goes out to the funeral directors who are now selling their funeral homes as real estate and not businesses, because the property the funeral home is on is more valuable without the business. This cannot become commonplace in our profession; we are too good for that.

As we come to the close of 2021, we are blessed to have everything we need at our fingertips to stay successful. Stop procrastinating and take that leap of faith, unless of course you want to go back to 1985 where we had call forwarding, pagers and pay phones. So, as you are muttering, "Thank you, Captain Obvious," I need your help convincing my boss not to fire me for asking the families if they preferred smoking or nonsmoking. Apparently, I should have been asking if they preferred cremation or burial ... go figure. I might have to enroll in the next "Retort Maintenance Engineer" class ... they may be looking for people.

The big lesson is always to hold on to your sense of humor. It is what separates us from most – that and a license to take care of the final wishes of those we serve. A happy, healthy and prosperous 2022 to all! •

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