



## SERVING A DEATH-DENYING CULTURE

*Funeral Directors as Servant-Leaders*

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Funeral directors have labeled the typical American society a “death-denying culture.” For example, parents may try to shield children from the death event because of previous occurrences with death and the funeral home (Mahon, 2009). Unfortunately, by protecting others, the death-denying culture is perpetuated (Mahon, 2009). Therefore, it is no surprise that research on funeral directors, and funeral homes, may be underdeveloped. To address the scarcity of research literature on the impact of funeral directors, this article discusses the importance of the death care industry and provides an overview of servant-leadership theory as a framework for understanding the role of the 21st century funeral director.

The funeral home industry has been studied through a servant-leadership framework (Long, 2009) yet, research on the funeral director as servant-leader is scarce. While it is true that funeral homes have been studied through a servant-leadership framework mostly through the lens of vocational effectiveness (Adnot-Haynes, 2013), relationships with the bereaved (Mahon, 2009), and trending professional



developments (Granquist, 2014), research on the role of the funeral director as a servant-leader remains underdeveloped. Funeral directors, an often ignored population in leadership and communication study, may display tendencies of servant-leadership and, potentially, communicate with clients primarily as servant-leaders. Despite a clear connection between funeral directing as a “servant” profession, and the necessity for servant-leaders to communicate compassionately and effectively with the bereaved, this vocation remains under-examined. Therefore, this article addresses the servanthood nature of leadership as demonstrated by funeral directors.

#### FUNERAL SERVICE

Death is an ever-present cultural phenomenon and burying the dead is a primary cultural universal. In fact, the act of burying the dead is one of the oldest known cultural universals, an ultimate foundation of society. For example, there is evidence of man exhibiting concern for the dead, as far back as 50,000 years ago (Lensing, 2001). Death, as a societal norm, has perpetuated the role of the funeral director and the necessity of someone to lead the bereaved through the end-of-life process.

Funeral directing is multifaceted and often misunderstood by family and friends. According to Adnot-Haynes (2013), mortuary studies students should approach the subject discerningly when speaking to others. There is great excitement but also significant mystery involved in funeral directing. Some may assume that the primary task of a funeral



director is to care for the body and, while it is true that funeral directors dispose of bodies and perform maintenance on the deceased, according to Despelder and Strickland, today much of the attention has shifted to relationship, specifically with bereaved family and friends (as cited in Lensing, 2001). This may cause confusion for funeral directors as what was once a task-oriented profession has become primarily relational.

In the past, families and friends were the primary caregivers for the dead. However, the funeral director now has a much larger role. This shift in responsibility stems, primarily, from the denial of death. Specifically, mourners may view death and funeral service as components of a contagious disease (Lensing, 2001). At one time, in the United States, death was a significant part of family life and ceremonies were often held in the home (Lensing, 2001). Historically, after the Nineteenth century, funeral directors developed larger roles including embalming, and selling furnished goods to the family (Lensing, 2001). In the Twentieth century, changes became even more apparent. Funerals were held in storefront buildings, with much more of an emphasis on the sales of goods and services for families that are at-need or who have had a loved one who has recently deceased.

The relational role of the funeral director is multilayered. Funeral directors often build positive relationships with grieving family and friends and the funeral home is viewed as a safe space for grieving (Lensing, 2001; Mahon, 2009). As a result of this new connection, innovative funeral homes offer aftercare programs to help families achieve a healthy grieving



process, even partnering with hospitals and churches to accommodate the needs of clients (Lensing, 2001). Despite this current relationship dynamic, a relational emphasis was not present during the early days of the profession.

Over time, the role of the funeral director has dramatically shifted. The very essence of the funeral directors' role now includes making sure the needs of the family are met and helping the bereaved find a meaning in their loss. As a result, a funeral director must serve, console, educate, listen, advise, suggest, and empathize before, during, and after a death occurs (Lensing, 2001). Often, funeral directors are confronted with families that are overwhelmed (Mahon, 2009), uneducated on the subject of death, and unsure of next steps. Therefore, funeral directors should lead families in grieving and accomplish a healthy grief, at least in one way, by:

Providing a social support system for the bereaved;  
Helping the bereaved understand death is final and that death is a part of life; integrating the bereaved back into the community; easing the transition to a new life after the death of a loved one; providing a safe haven for embracing and expressing pain; reaffirming one's relationship with the person who died; providing a time to say goodbye. (National Funeral Directors Association [NFDA], n.d., para .2)

The modern funeral director can serve families and friends of the bereaved by leading others through the grieving process. The role of the director has evolved from one of task-orientation to relationship and, as a result, a revised framework



for approaching funeral service is necessary.

The vocation of funeral director has always been service-oriented, but that servitude distinction is even more present in modern times. It is true that able servants, with potential to lead, will lead (Greenleaf, 1970). Even though funeral service is continuously changing, funeral directors must continue to serve families (Granquist, 2014). Funeral directors may find themselves carrying the burden of death, ultimately lifting up clients during their time of need (Holloway, Adamson, Argyrou, Draper, & Mariau, 2013). The funeral director as servant-leader cannot be overstated. Funeral service has dramatically changed and it is important to study the profession through the lens of service as leadership. The remainder of this manuscript will address the funeral director as servant-leader by explaining specific tasks and the necessary servant-leadership mindset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century funeral director.

## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

For funeral directors, the willingness to serve is tied to the ability to lead. Many leadership theories emphasize one ruling over many, however, servant-leadership is unique (Chung, 2011). A servant-leader will inspire with humility and motivate others through powerful communication and trust to establish a collaborative environment that results in a vision of service (Chung, 2011). As servants, funeral directors often have leadership bestowed upon them (Greenleaf, 1970) because of their community influence and standing.

Despite the potential for servant-leaders to act as



affirmative builders (Greenleaf, 1970) of society, the role of the servant-leader is not a popular framework. The leader as servant may be controversial because the leader puts himself or herself in the place of the servant (Greenleaf, 1970; Chung, 2011). On the other hand, servant-leadership theory is so attractive because its core value is love (Chung, 2011). As a result, servant-leadership is effective in organizations because it exerts team building and working with others to complete a common goal that benefits all (Chung, 2011).

The lack of research on funeral directors as servant-leaders presents a fascinating and practical avenue for study. For one, death has always been an interesting if not popular phenomena. Additionally, scholars would be wise to consider the spiritual and practical implications of engaging with funeral directors to further enhance our perspective on service and the human psyche. While the academic exploration of leadership is not new as a field of study, leadership has predated the emergence of mankind (Greenleaf, 1977); as such, it is important to determine leadership influences in a variety of situations and professions. There has always been a leader to play a central role in decision-making (Greenleaf, 1977) and this is true especially for vocational funeral directors.

## FUNERAL DIRECTORS AS SERVANT-LEADERS

It is important to recognize the procedural cycle of the role of the funeral director as servant-leader. Funeral directors lead others through difficult and trying times and they often need to lead bereaved families through a healthy grieving process. The



human condition, with immense suffering, joy, and imperfection (Greenleaf, 1970), is ripe for servant-leadership in the midst of life's most confounding state, death. Leaders in funeral service should serve first and above self-satisfaction (Greenleaf, 1977) and should view the other person as primary. The ability to help the bereaved achieve a wholeness should be at the forefront of the mind of the funeral director. As funeral directors move the bereaved through the grieving process, they should recognize the importance of developing a process of leadership.

#### *Servant-Leadership is Procedural*

According to Greenleaf, “generally, the servant-leadership approach focuses on developing employees to their fullest potential in the areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation and future leadership capabilities” (as cited in Mahembe & Engelbrecht, 2014, p.2). Servant-leaders will, eventually, inspire others to lead through serving as well (Greenleaf, 1977) but the process, and result, may differ depending on the audience.

The funeral director is a multifaceted leader. In the profession, directors lead families and friends of the deceased as well as their own coworkers in an organizational setting. The servant-leadership model is an accurate reflection of the role of the American funeral director. In funeral service each employee must work together within the team to accomplish a parallel goal, to serve grieving family and friends. Servant-leaders can positively impact their followers and, as a result, an organization's success or failure is sometimes dependent on the



actions of the servant as leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Additionally, servant-leaders are actively engaged in helping, assisting, and meeting the needs of their employees and customers they serve (Maden, Goztas, & Topsumer, 2014). Servant-leaders have a profound respect for other human beings, and with that, inspiring others to do the same, ultimately changing the realm of another's inner self (Bell & Habel, 2009). Servant-leadership stems from one's own character (Bell & Habel, 2009), much like the role of the funeral director, as their passion to help others influences everyone else in their organization.

As leaders, funeral directors should raise the level of service within their organization and set the tone for leading bereaved families. Striving for, amongst other things, serving the highest priority needs of the other person (Greenleaf, 1970). Funeral directors can lead employees by example, especially as they lead the bereaved. Specifically, funeral directors can lead families by lifting spirits and understanding the need of others to be understood and cared for compassionately. Grieving can also include the effects of creating a lasting legacy. By leading family and friends through this process, and by educating relatives on the psychological aspects of grieving, the bereaved can "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, [thus] more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1977, p.6). As a result, hopefully others will follow in this ideological framework, raising the work ethic and empathy of those around them.

Funeral directors who serve employees, grieving families and friends, as well as the community at large can also serve





their community by actively engaging in local organizations. A cyclical process can occur if the community observes the service of funeral directors, and they may be more willing and active in reaching out.

Unfortunately, the desire to serve is not necessarily innate. Greenleaf (1977) illustrates this by saying that the desire to serve:

Begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is a leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. (p.6)

If funeral directors want to be effective servant-leaders, the onus is first on service, and second on leading.

The servant-leader, the natural servant, must be servant first. According to Greenleaf (1970), the natural servant is more likely to “persevere and refine a particular hypothesis on what serves another’s highest priority needs than the person who is leader first” (p. 6). This ability, and concern for service, can be, and should be, an inward inclination for funeral directors. Serving another’s highest priority need, surrounding the death of a loved one, may differ depending on the individual. However, the end goals remain the same: service, growth, comfort, empathy, and then, in turn, the ability to serve.

Funeral directors, in theory, are often practitioners of servant-leadership. Specifically, through observational



mentorship and professional development, they can develop employees to be more willing to serve customers in a professional, compassionate manner, while increasing strategic competence (Maden et al., 2014). And, as previously mentioned, they serve the families and friends of the bereaved. Funeral service managers must continue to consider the needs of others and create a climate of service, trust and hard work and, as result, motivation to serve is likely to increase (Maden et al., 2014). For funeral directors to continue as servant-leaders, an exploration of how servant-leadership is embedded in the vocation is necessary. What follows is an articulation of the role of funeral directors and a practical justification for how servant-leadership can be implemented into each major vocational tenant.

## CORE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Funeral directors conduct a variety of challenging tasks including body removal, comforting the bereaved, embalming or cremation, handling legal procedures, and running a revenue-based business. These duties are rudimentary but provide a basic outline of the important responsibilities performed on a daily basis. Each undertaking requires special licensing requirements from each state as well as educational requirements one would receive from an accredited Mortuary college or program (American Board of Funeral Service Education, n.d.). However, the overall descriptions remain consistent across funeral service.



### *Role 1: Body Removal*

Body Removal is crucial because it is often the funeral director's first encounter with the family. First, the funeral director must transfer the deceased from the place of death to the funeral home (Klicker, 2007). While this seems like a simple task, there are many issues funeral directors must consider before leaving the funeral home to remove the body. Specifically, funeral directors must decide what vehicle to take according to the weather, size of the body, and location of the body (Klicker, 2002). Packing the correct equipment can also be a challenge as this depends on the age of the deceased, the weight, the condition of the deceased and other (Klicker, 2007). All in all, it is important to recognize that the physical obligations of body removal are nothing short of vital.

There are two major classifications of body removals: home removals and institutional removals (Klicker, 2007). Home removals can be difficult because of the small doorways, hallways and steps often found in many households. The funeral director should be careful of what vehicle to drive to the house because a hearse can be a daunting symbol that disturbs neighbors. Institutional removals, on the other hand, can be made at a hospital, nursing home, hospice facility, etc. Once the removal has been made, the funeral director will schedule an arrangement conference with the family so they can plan the next steps in the funeral process.

### *Role 2: The Grieving Process*

Body removal is an important physical task but funeral



directors must lead relationally as well. Families often look to their funeral director for, “support, information, and assistance in normalizing their own unique grief experience” (Lensing, 2001, p.45). Shakespeare may have said it best in Macbeth, Act IV, Scene III, when he says, “Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break” (as cited in Lensing, 2001, p. 57). Funeral directors can help families find a positive meaning within death of a loved one and provide a supportive network for the bereaved (Holloway et al., 2013; Lensing, 2001). As facilitators of the grieving process, funeral directors serve as a catalyst of mourning.

The grieving process is nothing short of phenomenal in that the bereaved strive to progress as they deal with an ultra-human phenomena. As enablers of a healthy grief, funeral directors express and facilitate meaning through philosophical and religious frameworks to help families find closure and comfort in the loss (Lensing, 2001). Furthermore, they provide a positive and healthy environment for people to mourn the loss of a loved one while honoring the life once lived (Lensing, 2001). In severe cases, funeral directors cannot provide adequate counseling alone. They must collaborate with other healthcare professionals to make sure that the families served by the funeral home receive the correct mental care (Lensing, 2001). This includes, but is not limited to, licensed counselors, psychiatrists and social workers, etc. (Lensing, 2001).

### *Role 3: Embalming/Cremation*

The third task a funeral director will perform on a regular



basis is embalming. Embalming is the process of chemically treating the dead human body to reduce the presence and growth of microorganisms, to temporarily inhibit organic decomposition, and to restore an acceptable physical appearance. Embalmers have several objectives. First, the embalmer wants to create a safe body that is properly disinfected in order to protect the public from disease (Mayer, 2011). Second, an embalmer wants to temporarily preserve the deceased so that the family has time to see the body before final disposition (Mayer, 2011). Third, the embalmer recreates the body to achieve an acceptable physical appearance (Mayer, 2011; Klicker, 2002). These objectives are of the utmost importance for creating a safe physical transition of the deceased.

The embalming process is fascinating and although there are many different techniques for embalming the “normal” situation includes a body that has not been autopsied, with no mutilations, no blood coagulation, no known communicable diseases, no decomposition, and so on (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). Once the body has been placed on the embalming table in proper position, it has to be thoroughly disinfected; this is called “primary disinfection” (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). At this time the embalmer will “set the features” which includes closing the mouth and the eyes at the correct angle while also turning the head 15 degrees to the right for proper casket positioning (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). Embalming is a complicated and sometimes nerve-racking process.



After the embalmer completes the analysis of the body he/she will select a major artery and vein that should be easily accessed according to the embalming analysis (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). The embalmer will then make a small incision, locate and raise the vessels so that the embalming instruments can be placed inside (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). The Arterial Tube that is attached to the centrifugal embalming machine is placed into the artery (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). This is how the machine will inject the formaldehyde-based fluid into the body's arterial system (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). The accompanying vein will be incised and opened with forceps so that the blood in the body can be forced out from the pressure of the machine (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). While the fluid is being distributed into the body, the embalmer will look closely at the changes in color, distention, and firmness (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). This shows the embalmer that the body has accepted the fluid adequately (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011).

As the body is injected, the embalmer performs "secondary disinfection" which includes washing the hair, nails, etc. (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). Once the embalmer has completed arterial embalming and has removed the embalming instruments from the body he or she will perform cavity embalming (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). Cavity (embalming) treatment is the direct treatment, other than vascular injection, of the contents of the body cavities and the lumina of the hollow viscera; usually accomplished by



aspiration and injection of chemicals using a trocar. After this step, the body should be properly embalmed (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011). Next, incisions should be sutured closed and the body washed, to complete the final disinfection (Strub & Fredrick, 1989; Mayer, 2011).

Embalming is not required by law except in certain special situations. For example, if a family has opted for direct cremation, the body does not need to be embalmed. Families may decide to cremate the deceased. Cremation, or the reduction of a dead human body to inorganic bone fragments by intense heat in a specifically designed retort or chamber, can be performed either at a funeral home that contains a retort or a crematory that specializes in cremations. This process includes multiple authorizations, paperwork for both the family and the funeral home, and proper consent from the next of kin. Once the cremation is completed, the family receives the cremated remains to bury, scatter, or place in an urn.

#### *Role 4: Legal Procedures*

The funeral home is a place of grieving and proper procedure but it is also a business and, as such, legal issues may arise. In order to successfully operate a funeral home, directors must abide by governing forces. The funeral industry, like many businesses, is highly regulated by the state and federal government. The primary enforcement body is the Federal Trade Commission (Klicker, 2007), however, there are many more, such as: State and Federal Board of Funeral directors, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),



Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Social Security Administration (SSA), Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), local Health Departments, Attorney General's Office, etc. It is important to know, and understand, the legal ramifications of running a funeral home.

#### *Role 5: Running a Revenue Based Business*

Funeral service, as a business, is slightly different compared to other fields. The educational requirements for funeral service, for most states, fail to incorporate the level of business management required to run a revenue-based business. Funeral service educational programs are primarily concerned with scientific processes and psychological studies (American Board of Funeral Service Education, 2015). However, funeral service has two primary objectives (Klicker, 2002). The first is to provide professional and compassionate services to the grieving families (Klicker, 2007). The second goal is to operate the business at a profit that has an acceptable return on investment (Klicker, 2002). As such, managers must be adept at managing employees, logistics, and customers at a profit, while adhering to numerous state and federal laws (Klicker, 2002). Obviously, managing and leading a funeral home is a difficult task because of the legal and relational complications.

In most states, an owner of a funeral home must have a valid funeral directors license to keep the establishment open. Unfortunately, many directors have not had any type of business training other than on the job training by their superior. Gary Justice (personal communication, November 28, 2015)





the longtime owner of J.W. Call and Son Funeral Home, of Pikeville, Kentucky, was asked about running a successful revenue based business and humbly replied:

The most difficult part of my job is money management. Watching your cash flow carefully can be difficult in this business because it is feast or famine. You can't run sales or anything to get more business and you can't predict when a family will need your services.

Obviously, running a funeral business is more than just charging customers a fee and filling out paperwork. Running a funeral business is, in itself, an opportunity to lead employees and clients through service.

#### A NEW PARADIGM: FUNERAL DIRECTORS AS SERVANT-LEADERS

Funeral service is much more than the sum of a few vocational tasks. According to Granquist (2014), funeral service “. . . can be of great importance to families in times of grief and stress” (p. 37). Although, the term ‘director,’ indicates being the leader or manager, in the case of the funeral director they often lead from behind. Only from behind can you lift people up (Greenleaf, 1977) and what better time to do so than when people are mourning. Additionally, during funeral service, there are several opportunities for servant-leadership. The roles, or tasks mentioned previously, including body removal, comforting the bereaved, embalming or cremation, handling legal procedures, and running a revenue-based business can all be approached through a new paradigm.



A servant-leadership mindset can drastically alter the funeral service landscape.

### *Leading Through Body Removal*

One way funeral directors can participate in the service process, is by picturing themselves in the shoes of the bereaved. As Greenleaf (1970) would say, nothing is meaningful until it is related to the experience of the hearer. “A servant-leader puts himself in the place of the servant and puts the people in the seat of the master and thinks about how to serve them” (Chung, 2011, p.162). This sentiment correlates perfectly with body removal. When someone has passed away, the family or hospital staff calls the funeral director to retrieve the remains of the deceased and to lead the family through next steps. However, instead of leading, the funeral director serves the family by providing options and basic information while letting the family make decisions. Once a decision has been made, the funeral director continues to serve the family’s needs, no matter the day or time. Funeral directors must often sacrifice family time, holidays, weekends, and even vacation in order to put the families that they serve first.

Without a service mentality, the funeral director may choose to do other “chores” before coming to the family’s rescue. As the time between the call of the family and the arrival of the funeral director passes, many physical consequences events occur. First, as the body sits un-embalmed, nature begins to take its course. Movements happen within the body including the settling of blood that will eventually stain



the outer layer of skin and will impact the overall presentation of the body (Mayer, 2011). Also, as decomposition begins, odor, purge, discoloration, swelling, and other challenges occur (Mayer, 2011). These physical and chemical changes to the body will further negatively impact the family through mental distress. The family may feel neglected because of the funeral director's lack of urgency in this time of extreme need. Acceptance, and empathy, are primary for the funeral director and, in essence, the servant-leader (Greenleaf, 1970). The servant-leader, a vehicle for empathetic acceptance, can serve the bereaved even in the midst of drastic physical turmoil.

#### *Leading Through the Grieving Process*

Leaders are better than most at pointing others in the right direction and leading towards the goal (Greenleaf, 1970). It is important that a healthy grieving process is achieved after a death in the family. Many times, families will typically designate a day to come together and celebrate and honor the life of their deceased love one. A servant-leader can transform this process by “bringing people together, to collaborate, to cosponsor, to break down walls –real and imagined—to assist in the learning process” (Chung, 2011, p.163). This is exactly what can happen when the funeral director meets with the family. People are brought together by planning the funeral, discussing options, refereeing family disputes (Granquist, 2014), and learning how to grieve in a healthy and effective way. These dynamics all serve the family and provide a safe place to mourn.



However, without the funeral director acting as a servant-leader, the family's voice may not be heard. If the funeral director acts only as the leader, the family would not be able to provide input on how they are feeling and what would accurately honor their loved one's life. This may be an easier way of doing things, but without the family involvement with decision-making, and story-telling (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005) they may not be able to grieve properly. Greenleaf (1970), when mentioning the goal of servant-leadership, emphasizes the overarching purpose, the dream visionary concept, the ultimate consummation which one approaches but never really achieves. These idealistic concepts are in desperate need in the grieving process and funeral directors may help in the process of achieving the consummated reality of a healthy and appropriate, and potentially transcendent, grief.

### *Leading Through Embalming*

Some assume that the funeral director's first priority is taking care of the deceased body (Mayer, 2011). Generations ago that may have been true however, today, caring for the deceased is only a fraction of what funeral directors accomplish. Embalmers, those licensed to preserve the dead, take care of the body for the sake of the family to help in the grieving process. Viewing the body has been shown to aid in many psychological aspects when mourning a loved one (Mayer, 2011). But, no matter if the family chooses embalming or cremation, the embalmers priority is to provide a professionally prepared and



presented deceased loved one to the family. In doing so, the embalmer provides an extenuating service to the family and to the public. The funeral director, often the embalmer too, preforms this task. The body is washed, preserved, and dressed so the family can have a positive final memory. Embalming may seem like a physical activity, but it is more important as a means to care for the family's emotional state.

Without this service, the family would have to take up the inglorious task caring for the deceased and when not done professionally, the body will change quickly in unattractive ways. These natural, chemical and physical, changes can produce an unwanted odor as well as mental distress from the family members (Mayer, 2011). This would provide a negative memory of the deceased that could cause complicate grief (Klicker, 2007). Thus, the physical preparations of the body may help manifest an emotionally healthy grieving process.

### *Leading Through Legal Procedures*

A vital role in funeral service is the application of legal procedures and requirements defined by regulating agencies. Funeral directors carry a heavy burden as they attempt to follow laws associated with operating a funeral home. Those in funeral service answer to not only the FTC, but also state and federal agencies, state funeral boards and associations and the local government. Following the laws result in moral and ethical practices. A law-abiding operation protects your business, clients, the employees and their loved ones. Additionally, a funeral home that operates legally provides a



wonderful example of leadership for the community. Without following regulations, families and employees would suffer consequences like physical danger, mental distress, and financial ruin.

### *Leading Through a Revenue-Based Business*

Running a business is much more than paperwork. One must be a good manager of both time and people. Maden et al. (2014) believe:

The focus of servant-leadership is to serve employees, who in turn will serve customers. Throughout this process, servant-leaders consider their employees' needs before their own and create a service climate built on trust and willingness to deliver excellent service to customers. Hence, employees will be motivated and will do their best to serve customers due to the examples set by their leaders. (p.2)

Indirect influence, when boosting employee morale and treating employees equitably, will improve the employee's performance (Bass, 2007). When speaking with an apprentice about his choice in funeral service, a funeral director (B. Justice, Personal Communication, November 30, 2015) confessed:

I wanted to join the funeral business because of my dad (the funeral home owner). He treats all of his employees like family, so in an essence, my co-workers are family. What better way to spend your day than with family?

Running a funeral business is much more than accounting



and payroll. It is setting an example, serving families, and hard work. In terms of servant-leadership, the funeral director must display a business acumen that includes two intellectual abilities highlighted by Greenleaf (1970), a sense for the unknowable and the ability to foresee the unforeseeable. These skills, knowledge and foresight, are valuable for the funeral director as servant-leader as well as the servant-leader as business proprietor.

Servant-leadership should be rampant in the funeral industry, especially in the five roles discussed above. Although the servant-leader to funeral director may be an interesting comparison, one may ask, so what? As Mulligan (n.d.) answers on an Integrity Funerals website:

On average, most people will arrange only two funerals in their lifetime. This limited experience often leaves a family feeling inadequate, not knowing what to do or what it costs. When faced with the unfamiliar feelings and emotions that the death of a loved one brings, families have a need for security and normality. This is where a qualified funeral director helps. (para. 1)

When a person experiences a death, it may be one of the worst moments of their life. This is where the funeral director takes over “to lift the family up” (Greenleaf, 1977) from the depths of despair. It is imperative, that in matters of relationship and business, the funeral director develops a habit for intuition, having a feel for patterns and the ability to generalize based on what has happened in previous experience (Greenleaf, 1970). The funeral director as servant-leader



should be an intuitive leader knowing how to relate and empathize in the midst of sustained grief while also wisely leading employees as business proprietors.

## HEALING AND MAKING WHOLE

The roles of a funeral director, including business proprietor, relationship builder, grief counselor, embalmer, and all others not mentioned in this essay, are tasks, worthy mind you, but tasks that do fulfill a greater vision. As a facilitator of multiple dimensions of the death and grieving process, funeral directors hold a tremendous amount of leadership responsibility. To approach these tasks without the perspective of servant-leadership is unequivocally unwise and does, in essence, a disservice to those in a desperate state. This begs the question, how then shall they serve?

Funeral directors are no different from those they serve. There is pain, grief, and unrest in all, not just the bereaved. The opportunity to make whole, to heal, may also be a motivation for the funeral director, to heal themselves in the process (Greenleaf, 1970). The search for wholeness is shared, and while whole healing may never be achieved, it is sought. As funeral directors seek to heal the brokenness in others, they themselves may be made whole, or, at the very least, may search more intentionally for wholeness.

The funeral director, then, becomes an affirmative community leader, servant, and builder in its purest sense. The community, by following the example of the funeral director, may then be a dispensary of love that institutions cannot





achieve (Greenleaf, 1970). Love, according to Greenleaf (1970), is both subtle and finite, yet love for others is one of the primary motivations for funeral directors. There is an inward liability, a cause for concern for the other person, a willingness to lead through service that binds the funeral director to their community.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the rarity of the academic study of servant-leadership in funeral service, this essay presents an initial exploration into the role and function of a funeral director as servant-leader. A servant-leadership framework vital to the financial, legal and psychological operations in the funeral industry. However, it is also important for the community at large. Individuals in the grieving process are often easily influenced into making decisions. A funeral director who provides professional services must employ a servant-leadership mentality to ethically provide for the grieving family. A fitting final sentiment from Sir William Gladstone is appropriate: “Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals” (“The Variety and Importance,” 2009, Para. 1). And then, we may see, those who were served arise as a catalyst of love, of service, and architects of healing and wholeness to build a community of healthy, wise, free and autonomous citizens.



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