

An Educator's View on Cremation & the Value of Embalming

By: Amy Fulton



Fact #1: Cremation is increasing.

Fact #2: Embalming for cremation cases is decreasing.

Question: Are all families made aware of the option?

When a family says “We just want a cremation”, what does that really mean? While some may truly want minimal or no services and no visitation, many other families may want a full service with visitation and a committal service, while other families may desire something in between...if only they knew all their options.

As an industry, are we doing our collective job to educate families on all available options when we hear “I just want a cremation”? Perhaps those words are interpreted too literally and in so doing, we are failing in our job to educate and guide families. As many bemoan the financial impact caused by increasing cremation rates, might some of that be self-perpetuated by not informing cremation families of all their options? The options are many, but perhaps one of the least-utilized is embalming and the presentation of the deceased. Least-utilized because it is not chosen by the family? Or perhaps in part because it is not even offered to the family?

As an embalmer and clinical preceptor, it is my personal mission to restore the value of the embalming and presentation of deceased to all families, including those wishing cremation. How can we better communicate the value of embalming to families? Let's take a look at the most common reasons for choosing cremation and consider how we might address embalming and visitation with presentation within each.

• Cost

We have all heard it: “Cremation is cheaper” or “I only have enough money to cremate”. Indeed there are families who are financially strapped and have

no other alternative, and we must respect that. On the other hand, many cremation families will spend as much as a traditional burial family in merchandise and “extras”. The purchase of jewelry, urns, flowers, services, interment of cremated remains and so forth reveals that money isn't necessarily a hurdle for families choosing cremation – even if they initially state that they are choosing cremation because they understand it is cheaper. Present options and let the family make the choices – you may be surprised at how many choose a visitation with viewing if only they realize that they can do so with a cremation.

• Green Alternative to Burial

Some choose cremation as a green alternative to burial. Among their environmental impact concerns is the belief that formaldehyde will leak into water systems from interred caskets. However, they do not understand that proteins are coagulated during embalming in a chemical reaction with formaldehyde, leaving no trace of the chemical behind. Even if presented with embalming and viewing as an option for a loved one who will ultimately be cremated, they may decline embalming due to a mistaken belief that fumes will contaminate the atmosphere during cremation. Educating green-oriented families is essential. They must be informed that the formaldehyde is changed during the protein coagulation to a neutral form and will not create any pollution during the cremation.

• Assumed Simplicity

Every funeral director has had the experience of explaining the time and paperwork required for cremation, watching the shocked look on the family's faces as document after document is placed before them to be read and signed. Many times cremation families believe that once the deceased is picked up from the place of death, they are taken directly to the crematory and cremated immediately. It's really best to advise them on the time and paperwork necessary before, during and immediately after the removal. Once cremation families are given this information and realize

it is not as simple as they thought, they may give closer consideration to services and even final disposition.

• Previous Poor Experience with Traditional Services

A poorly embalmed, restored or cosmetized body often leads to the decision to cremate to avoid repetition of the previous bad experience. Conversely, a good experience keeps families receptive to services which include visitation with viewing – even if cremation is the final disposition. We need to have families walk away from a casket commenting on the excellent job done by all concerned. We want them to come to an employee and say, “How did you do that? Can you do that for me? I have a loved one who is being ravaged by disease (or time) and I want them to look this good when the time comes”. This is how we restore the value of embalming.

• Wanting to Remember Them “As They Were”

In many cases, the deceased was emaciated, jaundiced, traumatized, in pain, and stripped of dignity at time of death. Families want instead to remember their loved one as healthy, vibrant, happy and peaceful. Still, no matter how hard they try, they will not be able to erase the illness from their minds. They need to know our capabilities and the restorative work that can be done to give them a positive final memory.

I speak from the heart here. When my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I saw her age twenty years in two weeks. The cancer ravaged her body and replaced her with an emaciated old woman. This was not my mother. My mother was a glamorous, beautiful, vivacious woman. And many of my family wanted to “remember her as she was,” not casketed. But I gave it all back to her. I personally embalmed and dressed her, and did her hair, cosmetics and restorative work. She was absolutely gorgeous, and once everyone saw her, they couldn’t believe how young and healthy she looked and were comforted by the peaceful expression on her face. It took a visual picture for them to appreciate the value of that last memory.

• Avoiding Grief

Having the deceased present is actually a starting point for the grieving process. Those who attend will be able to show their support in an environment conducive for grief. The service will be the link that connects the family to the community, rather than the death event. The family will be able to have conversations from the helpful aspects of the service rather than reliving the initial sorrow.

• Portability (Take Cremated Remains Anywhere)

This last issue doesn’t directly pertain to embalming but merits addressing with cremation families. Certainly, in-home placement of cremated remains allows those remains to be taken with families if they move. However, my concern with this choice is that there is no permanent memorialization. Where

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will future generations go to pay tribute to their ancestors? There is tremendous value in permanent placement. When a family says to me, "I'm going take him home with me" or "I'm not ready to let her go", my response is "That's okay for now. Take your time. But think of the future. In several years, where will the cremated remains be? When you pass away, who will get the cremated remains then? On Father's Day, where will the children go to remember him?" Usually in a year or so, those families come back and say, "You were right. We are ready to create a permanent place to lay him to rest and give us somewhere to go to remember him."

As cremation has increased, so have available options, creating a myriad of opportunities for the astute funeral director to help cremation families. Many do not realize that you can still embalm and have a traditional or non-traditional farewell to the deceased with cremation afterwards. They often believe that

once their loved one is taken into the care of the funeral home, this has to be the last time they will see them. Failure to provide them with this option is a disservice to these families. Do not assume every cremation will be a direct cremation. They do not know what they do not know. Give them options. At the very least, families should be offered an identification viewing. Obviously the deceased does not have to be embalmed for this procedure, but in many cases they could be. Can you imagine a family who comes to do an ID view, only to discover that their loved one looks so good they opt for a full service cremation instead of a direct cremation? It has happened many times. Show them what you are capable of doing.

As an industry, we must present these options and not assume "It's JUST a cremation." Cremation is a choice that is being made by consumers based on many factors, and it is our job to educate them on all available options. **FBA**



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