

PYRAMIDS, SPHINXES, AND CALLA LILIES

Dwight Bastian, Carroll College

Two things are certain, said Ben Franklin, death and taxes. The majority of United States' taxes are based on the financial worth of the individual. Income taxes are based on the person's ability to pay; real estate taxes on the value of his property; inheritance taxes on the amount of his estate. In other words, the government takes advantage of a person's financial situation.

In like manner many funeral directors are taking advantage of survivors in a particular situation--death. A sentimental public has allowed the funeral business to make death a field for family exploitation. Charity agencies as well as insurance companies are concerned with the way excessive funeral bills absorb estates and indemnities. This condition has resulted from the peculiar nature of the business, from traditionalism and sentimentality, and from a pronounced attitude of independence by the majority of undertakers.

Death creates a condition of disorganization and emotional grief in the family. Under this particular strain the survivors encounter the friendly undertaker, who assumes, according to Dr. Leroy Bowman's study, The American Funeral, these six pagan and materialistic axioms:

1. Sentiment should center around the dead body;
2. Expenditure for the funeral has a direct relation to the family's affection for the deceased;
3. Displays of elegance at the funeral indicate the status of the deceased and his family in the community;
4. There is a moral obligation to reveal this status;

The undertaker's fifth assumption is that

The beauty displayed at a modern funeral is one of its essential features; and he assumes finally that

Anything different from current practice or the American Way of burial is a family disgrace.

In almost any other business, assumptions of the seller, such as these, would have no effect on the buyer, but as one such seller in Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi put it: "There's one thing in this world which a person don't say--'I'll look around a little, and if I can't do better, I'll come back and take it.'" That's in reference to a coffin.

A survey conducted by the National Funeral Director's Association reported that 90% of the people coming to them admitted they were at a loss concerning what steps to take. For those who might doubt that even in such a situation a person could be convinced to do the proper thing against his will, let me cite a survey made by Texas Technical College which indicates that 67% of all persons interviewed were either against elaborate funerals or did not care one way or another. Yet Time magazine reports that the average funeral cost in 1960 was just below \$1,000. This fact seems to substantiate a view voiced by a San Francisco undertaker that in keeping with our high standard of living there should be an equally high standard of dying.

A minister wrote to Ann Landers recently condemning the use of flashbulb pictures and movies at funeral parlors. He said that such barbarism has developed because we have become apathetic toward our Hebrew and Christian teachings, that we have permitted undertakers to Egyptianize our techniques of disposing of the dead. "Instead of exulting the spirit, we, like the ancient Pharaoh, glorify the body. We lavish it with cosmetics and place it on display." We say that the body lies in state, but we forget to ask ourselves, "State of What?"

Let's face it--a funeral is a solace to the living, not a comfort to the dead! The survivors, in their grief, are anxious to have the satisfaction that they have given all that could be asked of them. They assume that the larger the expenditure the greater the curative effect on the mourners. The idea seems to be that there is little love for the dead unless the funeral represents the most expensive outlay the family can scrape together. These false assumptions are precisely what many undertakers capitalize upon.

But now let's ask ourselves, shouldn't a funeral serve as a solace to the living rather than a comfort to the dead? A funeral means absolutely nothing to

the deceased person. And the survivors who deck out the physical remains in ephemeral glory do nothing but prolong and emphasize their grief and retard their adjustment to the situation. Death finds the survivor facing a mirror of life. In it he sees life's trivialities and values more poignantly than ever before. The basic meaning of life in its entirety is spread before him. He faces a crucial decision: He can smash the hierarchy of values by values by which he has lived or he can find in the present crisis renewed confidence in the future.

But the funeral has always caused this examination of self, the problem is that modern society has outgrown history's answer. Today's funeral is an anachronism; it is a 20th century version of an Egyptian pyramid, an inadequate adaptation to modern needs. The funeral rite, properly employed, can be a highly significant and essential function of any society. Ours is no exception. Today there is still a need for facing the sorrows of bereavement. There is still a need for evaluating the basic ideals and values of life. But today's society must meet these needs not with the monetary haze that hovers over life, but with the spiritual assistance which seems to be inevitably sought at the time of death. In very primitive society anthropologists are able to assign a positive function to the funeral rite, but this rite can serve a like function in today's industrialized society only

- by subordinating the technical and materialistic features of the funeral to the psychological, social, and spiritual aspects;
- by removing the emphasis on the body and the mechanisms to adorn it;
- by reducing the enormous and unnecessary costs of the funeral and the culturally-determined inescapable obligations of the family.

A civilized society must give this positive function to its death rite. The crass impact of the funeral can be softened by preparing for the arrangements in advance. The spiritual aspects can be stressed by removing, or nearly removing, the body from the rite. The undertaker can then serve his function quietly; the clergyman will provide his needed influence.

Spiritual comfort and adjustment can be provided for the survivors through discriminate and compassionate observance, which is seen in the planned arrangements in the death of Dr. Charles Woolbert, former chairman of the department of speech at the University of Illinois. In eulogy Dr. Andrew Weaver, former chairman of the department of speech at the University of Wisconsin, described his colleague as 'dynamic' and 'vibrantly alive.' Woolbert, then, did not live the type of life to be represented by a piece of stone and six feet of earth. He asked that after death his ashes be strewn on the river so the stirring water might help his friends remember him as he was in life. He saw in the water a measure of eternity and he hoped others would not forget. Woolbert's sentiments are represented very well by Theodora Kroeber's "Poem for the Living:"

When I am dead, cry for me a little.
Think of me sometimes, but not too much.
It is not good for you or your husband or your wife
Or your children to allow your thoughts to swell
Too long on the dead:
Think of me now and again as I was in life.
At some moment which it is pleasant to recall.
But not for long. Leave me in peace
As I shall leave you, too, in peace.
While you live, let your thoughts be with the living.

If our modern attitude toward the death rite can be with the living, then the sphinxes, the pyramids, and the calla lilies can be buried with the Egyptian monarchs.