

# PROVIDING NURTURING CARE

*A New Vision for Funeral Service Providers*



By C. Lynn Gibson, PhD, DPhil CFSP  
& Jason Troyer, PhD CT

We dedicate this guidebook to the many professional men and women who stand together in solidarity each day to comfort the bereaved and uphold the value of life and legacy.

## ***Providing Nurturing Care: A New Vision for Funeral Service Providers***

**By Lynn Gibson, PhD and Jason Troyer, PhD**

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

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The purpose of this guidebook is to provide you, a funeral service professional, with a fresh look at the heart of your important work — nurturing care. Emerging from applied research over the past five (5) years, and through numerous presentations and peer reviews, we have prepared an encouraging and contemporary tool that we think will assist all funeral caregivers in the daily work of caring for the bereaved. We call our tool “The Integrated Model of Nurturing Care.”

As with any model, the best way to grasp the essential concepts is to establish the foundational elements one step at a time. To that end, we have designed the guidebook to be read sequentially, from Chapter 1 through Chapter 5. Each chapter is brief, but we think you will find

our core concepts of sufficient depth to be informative and applicable to your daily work. As a guidebook, we believe you’ll want to refer back to these ideas over and over again.

We first published this series in the National Funeral Directors Association trade journal, *The Director*, by releasing each chapter as a stand-alone article in the April — August editions in 2017. With the encouragement of industry leaders, and with only a few minor adjustments, we decided to publish all of the articles together in one-volume. We trust that you will find this guidebook helpful. Of course, we welcome any feedback you may have about our model. Please feel free to reach out to us as we all strive to improve as professional funeral caregivers. Our contact information is provided for your convenience on the back cover.

# A Compelling New Vision

## *Introduction*

Funeral Directors in blue jeans, clergy encouraging families NOT to have a funeral, memorial services at the golf course .... Funeral service certainly has changed. And yet, some things stay the same. Funeral practitioners know that helping families honor and remember their loved ones in a personal way is still a worthwhile endeavor. But how can we adapt to the changes and yet maintain our core principles? Is this even possible?

Over the next 5 chapters, we will be sharing a compelling new vision for a contemporary model of nurturing care for bereaved families. This model provides funeral directors with a tangible way to navigate the changing funeral trends by building from bedrock principles. Topics that will be included in this series include:

- How funeral directors can maintain a Balanced Perspective and avoid being overwhelmed by the business aspects of funeral service;
- How funeral directors can utilize timeless and universal Cornerstones of Care to improve client-family satisfaction;
- How funeral directors can facilitate Components of Service to provide client-families with a customizable framework for creating healing rituals;
- How funeral directors can foster a Comforting Presence necessary for daily at-need, preneed, and aftercare scenarios that arise within their community.

Throughout this chapter series, we will explore numerous examples of how our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care can be used in real-life situations with bereaved families. In this chapter, we'll look at the changing landscape of funeral service to better understand the context and challenges of our daily work.

## *The Changing Landscape*

While there are many aspects affecting family preferences today, we want to highlight three (3) primary factors: (1) a general movement toward deritualization, (2) the increasing percentage of religiously unaffiliated (the religious “nones”), and (3) the changing relationship between funeral professionals and clergy. Of course, we recognize that we aren't the first to describe these factors, but it is worthwhile to briefly examine each as we consider the cumulative effect on the outlook of our profession.

### *Deritualization*

We describe deritualization as a growing public openness to revise, replace, minimize the significance of, and even eliminate or avoid long-held funerary rituals that have traditionally assisted the bereaved in the adaptation of loss. As such, deritualization is a significant term that describes the shift in the way people appropriate rituals to facilitate healing and wholeness when faced with the death of a loved one. In their instant classic, *The Good Funeral* (2013), Long and Lynch describe “the curious downsizing of funeral rituals” and “the increasing number of people who specify “no service” to mark their deaths.” In this way, funeral directors see the effects of deritualization firsthand when they meet more and more adults who have never attended a funeral service or have never been in the presence of a deceased person. This also includes a decreased appreciation for traditional rituals such as assuming the time and energy involved in attending a viewing, visitation, ceremony, or interment is not worth it. Funeral directors can also see the profound effects of deritualization when families simply hand over a credit card and avoid any further involvement in the process.

Some may suggest that the deritualization trend represents a shift in how people today perceive the value of human life in general. At minimum, what is clear is that deritualization is symptomatic of changing attitudes toward the effectiveness of traditional funeral rituals to bring about real comfort and meaning to the bereaved in times of acute loss.

Because funerary rituals are as old as humanity itself, funeral service professionals and other bereavement caregivers today are concerned that deritualization (also known as ritualistic downsizing) is contributing to potential distress in processes of grieving. Though no one knows the cumulative negative effect of deritualization on human society, we can recognize its daily impact on our current workaday world of funeral service. For example, funeral rituals are often diminished when family members can't agree upon which services to hold and the details of those events. Many families we serve today include ex-spouses and step- or half-siblings; they are also more likely to not live in the same geographical area and not have a common faith tradition.

Unfortunately, some funeral professionals have unwittingly worsened the deritualization trend by emphasizing unhelpful aspects of products and options we offer. To be clear, we are not opposed to providing bereaved families with a wide range of funeral products and various customization options. However, we are concerned that some funeral professionals overly emphasize certain aspects of our products or options in ways that do not match the primary concerns or needs of the bereaved. As this occurs, families simply withdraw their interest in participating in funeral rituals.

We should recoil at how modern day funeral directors are often portrayed in popular media as casket peddlers primarily interested in persuading a family to choose a non-ferrous metal casket over a lower-cost alternative. This characterization surely impacts public opinion regarding the funeral profession. In fairness, however, though only some funeral directors may find a conversation about casket styles and

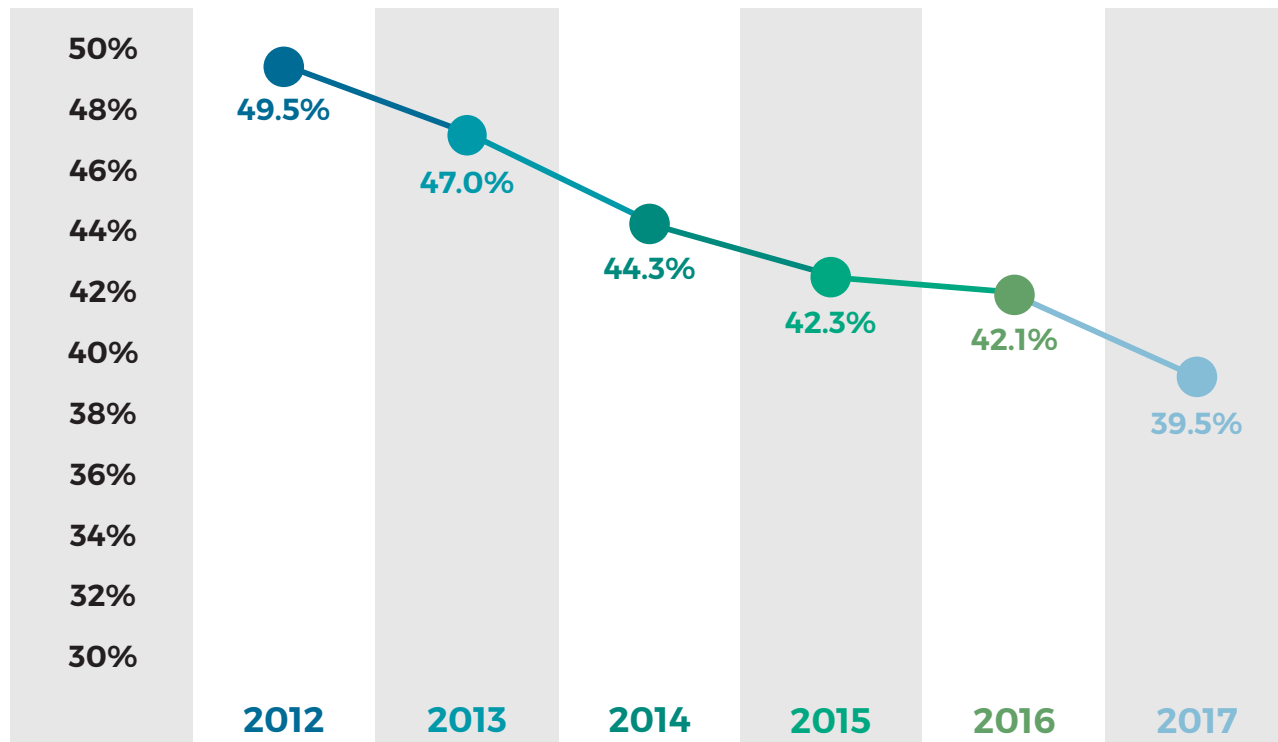
interior fabrics endlessly fascinating, we must admit that all of us have at times inadvertently contributed to the diminishing value of funerals when our perceived focus as caregiving professionals becomes misplaced. Honestly, most families are not excited to see our newly-remodeled selection rooms. While many families may be comforted by a particular color and style of casket they want, the hard truth is that most bereaved families have little or no interest in the obscure minutia of casket parts.

We believe the difficulty is that many funeral directors have been working with a limited toolbox. In other words, if your main emphasis with client-families is on product solutions, you may unintentionally encourage deritualization by not being able to address other primary concerns such as creating rituals that help them find meaning and comfort. It would be like the owner of a wedding event facility emphasizing the speed and reliability of the facility's Wi-Fi when the bride is really concerned about the wheelchair accessibility so her grandmother can attend. It is great to have high quality and customizable products, but it is important to remember that bereaved family members get to decide what is important.

### *Religiously Unaffiliated (The "Nones")*

Another significant factor affecting the landscape of professional funeral service is the religiously unaffiliated. To be sure, the percentage of Americans who do not identify with any specific religious tradition has been rising consistently over the last 10 years. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Research Center, over 22.8% of Americans do not identify with a specific religious tradition. It is important to note that while the "religiously unaffiliated" category includes individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic; most of this group do not classify themselves as atheist or agnostic. They simply do not identify with one of the more common religious or sectarian traditions in the US (such as Christian, Jewish, etc.).

*Perceptions of People Who Feel A Religious Component is Very Important in a Funeral Ceremony*



2017 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey

Religious organizations that have seen some recent increases, most prominently the “mega-churches”, tend to emphasize a more casual style and less emphasis on traditional ritual. At the same time, the trend toward being religiously unaffiliated appears to coincide with a general shift away from traditional religious groups and practices. For example, the 2017 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey reported the significant decrease in the number of families who think a religious component in a funeral is very important.

Funeral directors have experienced these changes first-hand including:

- A growing number of families not having a close connection to a local religious organization or clergy;
- Many families preferring not to have a funeral or memorial service at all or simply requesting not to have a “churchy” service for their loved one.

We also believe that many families may enter the arrangement meeting with some anxiety because they do not want to use traditional rituals or a clergy person as an officiant. Some may feel embarrassed or fear that they will be asked to contact their pastor who they haven’t spoken to in years (or decades) to officiate the funeral for their loved one. Bereaved families may admit that it has been a long time since they have attended a religious service — and so it would be awkward (and unhelpful) to have a funeral that includes traditional religious elements. Others may be more adamant about their rejection of traditional religion and strongly warn the funeral director that they “don’t want a minister preaching at me!” What is often missed is that although they may know what they do NOT want, many are unsure of other options. Unfortunately, these families often view their options as a false choice between a traditional funeral service or simply nothing at all — and sadly, growing numbers are choosing nothing at all.



## ***Funeral Directors Changing Relationship with Clergy***

A third significant factor affecting professional funeral service is a changing relationship between funeral directors and clergy. The traditional view is that clergy and funeral directors have often worked hand-in-hand. In fact, Paul Irion's seminal text, *The Funeral: Vestige or Value* (1966), explained that the single most important aspect of a funeral (what he called the "sine qua non") is the participation of clergy. In our recent past, funeral directors would provide necessary services and products (e.g., embalming, caskets, etc.) and the clergyperson would provide the bereaved family with support throughout the arrangement, officiate the service, and then coordinate the grief support through their congregation.

For many decades, this team-work approach worked very well. But, this mutually beneficial relationship depended on several key factors: a) most people belonged to a faith community and often had a long-term relationship with their pastor, b) clergy viewed funeral services as an essential religious ritual and, therefore, encouraged the family to have a viewing, visitation/wake, and funeral service, c) families were tight-knit and usually lived close to one another and shared the same religious beliefs, and d) most funeral services within a particular faith and cultural community looked the same.

This partnership has eroded now that: a) many people do not belong to a faith community and often do not have a trusted clergyperson who could officiate a service, b) some clergy suggest that funeral rituals (and funeral homes) are no longer necessary, c) families are often splintered by divorce, disagreements, and distance, and d) people are demanding more personalization and customization for their services than ever before. Therefore, it makes sense that some families are more likely to choose direct disposition over a traditional funeral or memorial service. They are more likely than ever to not be emotionally or geographically close. They are less likely to belong to a religious group (and even if they do, family members may not belong to the same group or tradition). While they might agree to

not have a religious funeral service, they get stuck because they do not know what a nonreligious funeral service looks like. Even if they do want to have a religious funeral service, they often do not personally know a clergyperson who can officiate, nor are they able to agree on which religious traditions to include. Given all of these roadblocks, it can be much easier to simply agree on no service at all (an option that has the added benefit of being the easiest on one's budget too).

### ***What is the future for the funeral service profession?***

We recognize that we have painted a pretty bleak picture for the future of funeral service. Admittedly, there are substantial factors working against professional funeral service. Yet, we remain optimistic that funeral directors still have a crucial role in helping bereaved families. However, the increase in deritualization, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, the changing relationship with clergy, and many other factors require that funeral directors approach funeral service with a fresh perspective if they are to remain relevant professionals entrusted by their communities.

In the next four (4) chapters, we will discuss a new framework that provides funeral directors with a game plan for dealing with these significant challenges. We will discuss:

- How an overemphasis on business metrics has hurt the funeral profession;
- How timeless goals of funeral service are still relevant today;
- How meaningful opportunities are cultivated to provide nurturing care to bereaved families;
- How a professional readiness in today's world requires skills to better educate, serve, and support families in need of care.

We firmly believe an exploration of these topics will help establish a positive strategy to deal with the current challenges and reaffirm the value that funeral directors provide to bereaved families.

# AN INTERDISCIPLINARY BALANCE

## *The Parable of the Two Students*

A Distinguished Professor gave two of her best and brightest students an important assignment. They were each selected for the task of conducting an independent analysis of the funeral industry and to report their findings to the Professor's office for a final grade. After preparing for months, the students were eager to present their bottom lines. On the appointed due date, the Professor welcomed into her office the first student.

“Professor, I'm sorry to report, but the state of the funeral industry is very unfortunate. I found that with the increasing trend toward deritualization, profit margins have plummeted, direct disposal of deceased human bodies is on the rise, and a growing number of families are no longer connecting with traditional funeral customs. The negative effects have been devastating to this once thriving profession. In fact, the industry is already experiencing a decrease in the number of family-owned funeral homes. It seems that the death care industry is facing its own demise.”

And with that, the Good Professor cordially dismissed her first student and welcomed into her office the second student who was patiently waiting outside.

“Professor, I am so excited to tell you about what I found in my study. You see, the entire funeral industry is experiencing significant challenges. And, as a result, funeral professionals are learning how to adapt to changing preferences of society. Some are advancing by thinking outside of the box of traditional funeral care and developing creative and interesting rituals to support their communities. There is reason to believe in a bright future for funeral professionals. As challenges are being met by industry leaders, funeral service is not only being fine-tuned, it is potentially going to be better than ever. Of course, the real benefit will be in

the level of support that bereaved people will receive from the professionals committed to nurturing care.”

Upon dismissing the second student, the Good Professor recorded the grades. Both students received an A for their astute analysis; however, only the second student received an additional comment. In the margins of that student's report, the Good Professor wrote: “let's meet again soon over coffee to continue this conversation.”

The Parable of the Two Students demonstrates the importance of perspective...one encourages further dialogue; the other is a conversation stopper. While we certainly sympathize with the sobering facts presented in the first student's analysis, our vision supports the positive outlook in the second student's report. Funeral service is indeed an evolving profession. This is not a bad thing. The entire history of funeral service bears witness to a trajectory of increasing capacities and skills needed for professionals to better assist the bereaved in the adaptation of loss.

From the auspicious beginnings of funeral service (once rightly identified as “the undertaking”), professionals have been regularly shaped by defining moments, such as coffin-making, embalming and livery services, the creation of comforting funeral parlors, and even today's use of contemporary reception halls. Because change is both necessary and normative, reinvention is essential to the effectiveness of any profession. It wasn't that long ago when Alton Doody's *Reinventing Funeral Service* (1995) worked off the premise that a “science of merchandising” could usher in a new paradigm for funeral service in order to “fully serve the needs of society in the twenty-first century.” We are making a case that the time is ripe again for a new paradigm of funeral service to emerge. We call this new paradigm the **Integrated Model of Nurturing Care**.



In our previous chapter, we explained why the changing landscape of funeral service warrants a fresh new vision. Our vision proposes that today's funeral professionals are best equipped by:

- An Integrated Approach;
- Universal Principles of Care;
- A Flexible Framework for Service.

These aspects are the head, heart, and hands of funeral service. Over the next few chapters, we will explore each of these main ideas and provide a profile for professional readiness that will support the daily work of funeral service professionals. In the current chapter, we'll look at an integrated approach to funeral service as an Interdisciplinary Balance. To explain clearly what we mean, we'll examine: 1) the nature of knowledge, 2) the concept of integration, and 3) why all of this matters to the daily practice of funeral service.

### *The Nature of Knowledge*

Do you ever feel like you are losing the joy and pride you once had for being a funeral director? We can certainly empathize with you. The funeral profession is one where you can easily become off-balanced and disheartened. This should not be surprising given all the fields of knowledge required to be an effective funeral service professional.

Just one look at the curriculum of an accredited mortuary college will illustrate the diversity of knowledge needed to pass the National Board Examination (NBE). The International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (the Conference) ensures that the content for the NBE validates a strong multi-disciplinary competency needed for professional funeral service. For example, the Arts Section covers diverse disciplines such as accounting, funeral directing, history, marketing/merchandising, counseling, compliance, cemetery and crematory operations. Moreover, the Science Section covers broad disciplines such as embalming, restorative art, human disposition, and funeral service science (i.e. anatomy, chemistry, microbiology,

and pathology). The amount of knowledge recommended just to BEGIN a career as a funeral director and embalmer is quite staggering (most people outside of the profession have no idea).

What you may not have considered before is how knowledge is organized into various disciplines in order to gain greater understanding of specific subject matter. Each discipline has its own terminology, concepts, and stated objectives. A discipline's operating epistemology (what we simply call its "language") sets it apart from other disciplines. Chemistry, a natural science, has a different way of learning than psychology, a social science. When you consider everything one needs to maintain competency in funeral service, it is easy to see how practitioners become overwhelmed and even disheartened over time.

With all the knowledge fields required for competency, there is a real danger of becoming fragmented as a practitioner. That is, it is common to gravitate to one or two areas you like most (or are better at). For example, the constant stress of keeping on top of important corporate tasks, such as marketing funerals with "wow-factor" appeal or keeping a careful eye on financial metrics (profit margins, average revenue per call, overhead, etc.), make it easy for owners and managers to overemphasize the discipline of applied business.

There is an important corollary that needs to be addressed regarding the nature of knowledge: an over-emphasis on one essential domain often leads to an under-emphasis on other essential domains. Admittedly, as any seasoned funeral director will attest, funeral service is much more than an applied business. Ironically, though funeral service is a multi-billion-dollar industry, if a funeral home is managed by business metrics alone, it will not be "in business" for long. Effective funeral service has always been more complex than the latest "Good to Great" management technique. We do recognize how essential it is to develop and sustain a vibrant and solvent business. Nevertheless, if our sole focus becomes our business success (i.e. our financial bottom-line), the real point of our work will inadvertently be marginalized (i.e. the nurturing care of bereaved people).

Perhaps because many of us are so focused on the business health of our companies, we do not give adequate attention to other essential dimensions of our work, such as natural science, social science, and spirituality (to name just a few). While business rightly concentrates on revenue and profitability, natural science shapes our understanding of essential issues such as the care of deceased human bodies, concerns regarding formaldehyde exposure, and minimizing the environmental impact of cremation. Likewise, social science is an essential domain of knowledge that informs us with the latest research regarding bereavement, grief, and mourning, as well as how to understand and communicate within the social demographics of our day.

Spirituality, or the theological dimension of comfort, is essential to support the human need to search for comfort, meaning, and hope in the realm of human suffering. Unfortunately, we believe this domain of knowledge often receives the least attention among discussions of professional funeral care. This certainly represents a significant missed opportunity for nurturing care. To be clear, we are not suggesting that funeral professionals proselytize a particular religious perspective in order to be proficient in their work. What we are advocating, however, is a professional engagement with the sacred dimension of bereavement caregiving as a significant component of funeral service. Regardless of one's faith perspective (or lack thereof), every bereaved person dealing with acute grief has a need to adapt to the loss of a loved one. The art of funeral service is as important as the science.

Here's our point: What is needed in funeral service today (perhaps more than ever) is an increased effort to understand how we can better integrate all the disciplines we need in order to provide the best nurturing care we can to our bereaved communities. To do this will require that we heighten the level of our thinking. In short, we encourage practitioners to give careful attention to an Interdisciplinary Balance.

## *The Concept of Integration*

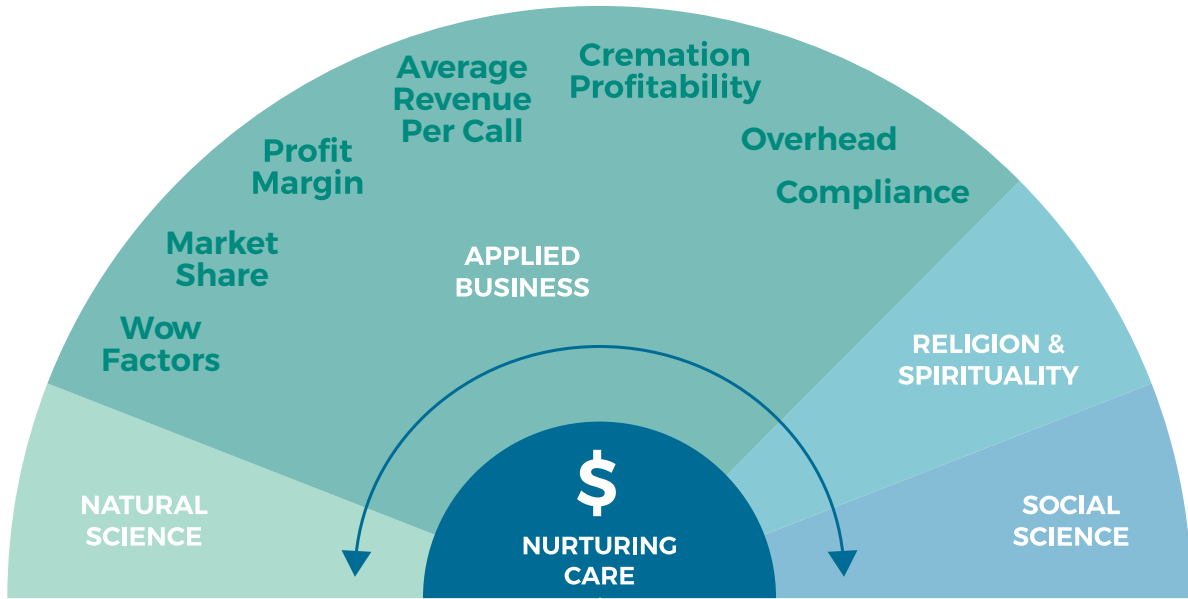
It is essential for funeral professionals to strive toward a balance in the spheres of knowledge required by their daily work. As such, we must become very adept at integrating disciplines such as natural science, applied business, religion/spirituality, social science, etc. without allowing business (or any other field) to overshadow the other disciplines. Each domain of knowledge deserves a reserved seat at the table of funeral service.

We recognize, of course, that one cannot give equal time to every discipline in our daily work. Yet, even if you are in a large firm where there is a high degree of specialization (e.g. funeral arrangers who don't embalm and embalmers who don't arrange funerals), we encourage you to be mindful of all key areas in funeral service. A balanced approach is simply a mindful approach. In fact, we contend that the key to help professionals unlock a balanced approach is to understand the concept of integration. To explain, we'll briefly examine the joint ideas of interdisciplinary and centered-set thinking.

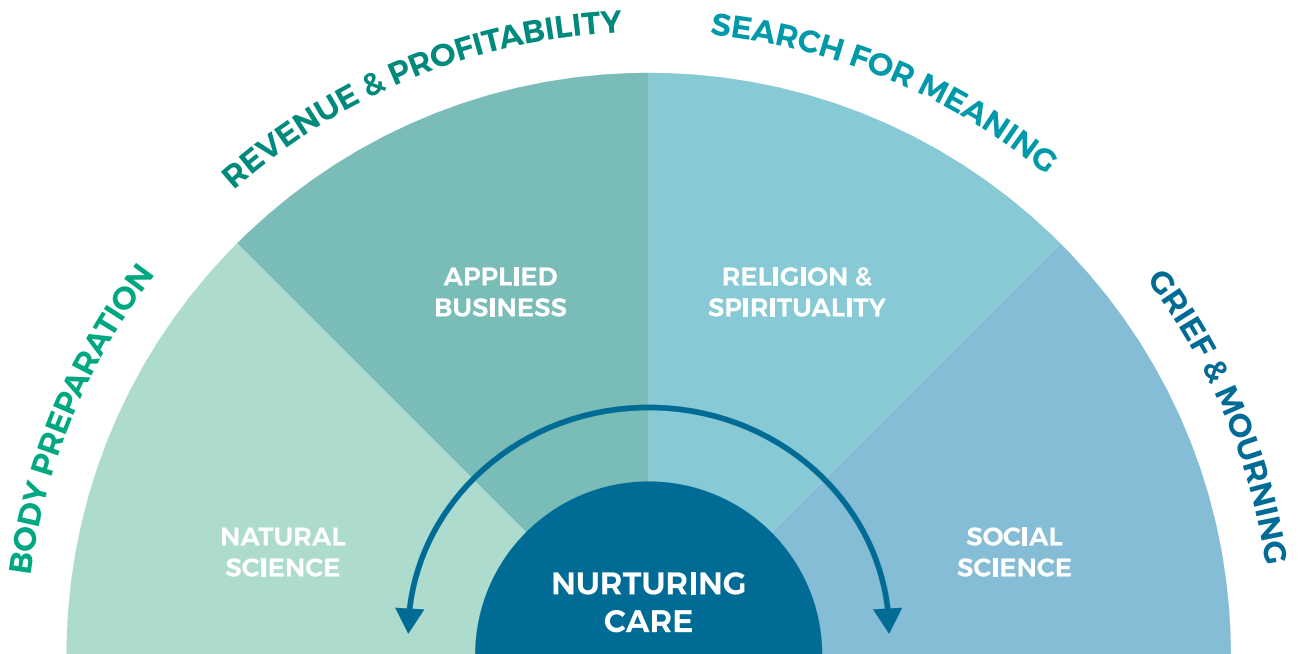
## *Interdisciplinary Thinking*

In simplest terms, interdisciplinarity is the idea that the sum is greater than the parts. The logic is that integrating insights from two or more disciplines (e.g. natural science and social science) often produces greater understanding of a complex task (like nurturing care) over a single disciplinary perspective alone.

Think for a moment about the demanding work of funeral service: A director naturally moves in and out among many disciplines each day, having to demonstrate a professional competency in each and every area in order to be truly excellent at bereavement care. Directors serve their families best when they understand how each discipline integrates with the others to facilitate excellence in funeral service.



*Unbalanced Disciplinary Perspective*



*An Interdisciplinary Balanced Perspective*

We confess that interdisciplinary thinking is indeed hard work — but it is essential for funeral professionals who want to be effective in their trade. Fortunately, the funeral industry already has excellent resources in place to help us. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) is one such organization that makes intentional effort to provide funeral practitioners with helpful seminars and training throughout each year by covering multiple disciplines. We recommend attending the NFDA International Expo to take advantage of these opportunities. The NFDA extends great effort to offer practitioners a broad spectrum of helpful topics over the course of just a few days. However, don't just take seminars on how to improve profits; consider seminars on diverse topics such as aftercare, restorative art, the use of rituals, public relations, and social media. Strive for a “balanced meal” as the standard diet for an interdisciplinary practitioner.

Of course, the real task in interdisciplinary thinking is to integrate what you have learned. One activity we recommend is to involve yourself regularly in professional roundtable discussions with other funeral practitioners. Typically, a group of five to ten participants will suffice. These wonderful occasions foster interdisciplinary thinking that arises organically through simple conversations. Take for example a roundtable meeting organized for the purpose of sharing what was learned at a recent conference. One director may begin the meeting eager to share what she learned in a marketing seminar regarding the importance of branding (an insight from applied business). Another director may continue the conversation by sharing what he learned from a seminar about current bereavement research (an insight from social science). As a result of their sharing of ideas, a larger conversation may emerge among the roundtable participants about how to better brand their funeral establishments as nurturing care providers (an interdisciplinary idea). One director may suggest that effective branding could be achieved through disseminating grief booklets to grieving families. Another director may explain how reallocating dollars in an advertising budget could pay for the new branding project without incurring additional

expenses (the genius of content marketing). Roundtable conversations like this one, where there is an engaged interplay among participants, is an excellent way for exciting new initiatives to emerge.

### ***Centered-Set Thinking: The Ultimate Goal***

In conjunction with interdisciplinary thinking, a second idea to help integrate knowledge in a balanced way is centered-set thinking. Just as interdisciplinary thinking is illustrated by connecting the disciplines together, centered-set thinking is illustrated by a shared purpose. The logic of centered-set thinking is to unite all knowledge around a clear and compelling goal – something big enough that it connects all the disciplines together. Centered-set thinking keeps you focused and moving toward the main objective of your work. The issue is not that you arrive with all the right answers, but that you are constantly moving toward an intended end. Centered-set thinking is like an anchor to help keep you from drifting. Also, with a clear center, you will not get stuck in one aspect of funeral service to the neglect of others.

In our vision, we suggest that the chief end of funeral service is to provide nurturing care to the bereaved. As such, we recognize that our central purpose (or ultimate goal) as funeral professionals is not found in preneed sales, website designs, or merchandising (as important as each of these are). Instead, the model we are advancing is unequivocally people-centered. The people who call upon us to “undertake” whatever is necessary to help them in their time of loss is what matters most in professional funeral service – whether it is to provide peace of mind by formulating a future plan for when death will occur, facilitating helpful rituals and events following a recent death, or providing grief support and care months (or even years) after a death. Our work is inextricably connected to caring for people, and we seek to always be moving toward this center. Keeping people first will greatly facilitate a focused and effective interdisciplinary approach to funeral caregiving.



## *Implications for Daily Practice*

Though there are many merits to maintaining an Interdisciplinary Balance, we want to conclude this chapter by highlighting a few that are particularly significant for daily practice. A balanced approach to funeral service will: 1) embrace the spirituality of death; 2) encourage lifelong learning; and 3) recognize the ongoing pursuit of excellence in comforting care.

### *The Spirituality of Death*

Something we must never forget is that death is an irreducible mystery (Wolfelt 2006). This mysterious highway is where funeral directors traffic every day. Regardless of social status, race, gender, or creed, bereaved people seek wholeness when life doesn't provide rational answers. To maintain an interdisciplinary balance in our work as funeral professionals, we avoid focusing exclusively on financial metrics and business bottom lines in order to make room (literally sacred spaces) for families and friends to cope with loss. The spirituality of death beckons funeral directors to create opportunities where families enter our care as friends, not as strangers. Henry Nouwen put it so beautifully: "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place." To be sure, as we embrace the spirituality of death, we do not provide all the answers to grieving people, but we are committed to stand with them and share in their pain as trusted caregivers.

## *Lifelong Learning*

An interdisciplinary balanced approach to funeral service also encourages lifelong learning. For most of us, our professional licensing necessitates continuing education units (CEU); however, surely our commitment to staying on top of our complex field moves well beyond obligatory CEUs. A critical element for the development of the funeral profession is a love for learning. We should be more than just willing to learn new things — we must regularly share our learning with one another. To approach our work as interdisciplinary practitioners means that we never cease growing as professionals and developing our field. We must take the time, as part of our professional development, to attend meetings and seminars, and to proactively organize networking opportunities among our peers (like the peer-to-peer roundtables previously discussed).

### *Ongoing Pursuit of Excellence*

Balanced funeral professionals also recognize that there is an intrinsic messiness to our trade. Though funeral directors love order and design, the real-world of funeral service is much more like Pick-Up Sticks than a Rubik's Cube – the nurturing care of bereaved families and friends rarely fits neatly into the same organized pattern. What we can do, however, is to commit ourselves to providing the best nurturing care available for our communities. This means we never stop listening to families and responding to their individual needs. We don't fall into the habit of prescribing funeral "solutions" without first seeking to understand what it is a family needs from us. What truly makes funeral service compelling is that our approach to caregiving will always be dynamic, contextual, and progressive. In the on-going pursuit of excellence, some directors even contend that they are creating more meaningful funerals now than ever before.

### *The Real World of Funeral Service*

In the next chapter, we will advance our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care by exploring how universal principles of bereavement shape the work of funeral service today.



# THE HEART OF THE MATTER: *The Cornerstones of Care*

## *The Parable of the Confused Apprentice*

An eager new funeral apprentice was shadowing his mentor. The mentor was a third-generation funeral director known throughout her community as a caring person and skilled practitioner.

In his first week of training, the apprentice observed his mentor serve two families. For both families, he watched her ask questions during the arrangement conference, listen with empathy, provide gentle suggestions, reserve venues, coordinate with officiants, complete paperwork, and countless other tasks.

The two services could not have been more different. The first was very traditional – even down to the selection of flowers, the choice of casket, the Bible verses read, and the hymns sung. The other service was held at the local Harley-Davidson dealership, where the deceased had worked for years. In this service, men and women dressed “ready to ride” and clad in all leather. The deceased arrived in an urn handcrafted out of a Harley gas tank. The service included a musical montage of Elvis tunes followed by a pipe-roaring procession of 50 motorcycles in route to the lake for a BBQ celebration of life.

At the end of the week, the apprentice read the thank-you notes from both families that were posted on the staff bulletin board. In essence, each note said the same thing: “Thank you for helping us honor our loved one. Although this was one of the most difficult weeks of our lives, we gave our loved one a meaningful farewell, and the support we received from our family and friends was such a great comfort to us. Thank you for all of your help — we couldn’t have done it without you.”

The apprentice was confused and approached his mentor. “But how will I know which type of service to recommend? Everything about the two services was different.”

The mentor smiled as she recognized that her apprentice was now ready to learn the most important lesson about funeral service. “Helping families isn’t about caskets or Harley urns or the 23rd Psalm — though you better never stop learning what’s available out there to help families. Let me tell you what my mentor taught me when I first started. He said the true heart of funeral service is all about the **Cornerstones of Care**.

In this guidebook, we are outlining and describing what we call our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care. We proposed that funeral professionals are best equipped by engaging their work with 1) an interdisciplinary balance of knowledge, 2) universal principles of care, and 3) a flexible framework for service. These indeed are the head, heart, and hands of funeral service. In this chapter, we will explore the Cornerstones of Care. These universal principles shape the essential foundation of our model — in other words, the whole point of nurturing care. To be clear, our focus in this chapter is not on interdisciplinary knowledge or practical action (the head and hands); instead, we will look deeply at the very heart of professional funeral service.

We chose the term “cornerstones” for several specific reasons. First, the Cornerstones of Care provide the foundation of nurturing funeral service. As with the cornerstones of a building, these principles are important in serving every bereaved family. Second, the value of cornerstones are recognized across various cultures and religious groups. We believe the Cornerstones of Care are relevant to grieving Baptists in the United States, Buddhists in Japan, Catholics in Brazil, or Agnostics in Switzerland.

Third, the Cornerstones of Care are not a rigid “stages of grief” model. Just as skilled builders will ensure that a building’s foundation is level, no one cornerstone is viewed as inherently more important than another.

We believe the primary goal of professional funeral service is to help facilitate the Cornerstones of Care for the bereaved. Therefore, we believe all products and services

that funeral professionals offer should be judged on how well they help the bereaved experience the Cornerstones of Care. As mentioned, we do not hold out one of the cornerstones to be more important than the others; however, we recognize that bereaved individuals and families may find one or more to be especially important or helpful. The circumstances of the loss determine which cornerstone(s) is most needed.

### *Universal Cornerstones of Care*



Before we explain each Cornerstone, we find it helpful to review three (3) brief considerations.

### **CONSIDERATION 1:**

#### **Educating Families about the Timeless Value of Funeral Rituals**

A natural consequence of focusing on the Cornerstones of Care is that it creates opportunities to educate families about the value of funeral rituals. Many funeral directors have heard families say, “I guess we should do what everyone else does.” We believe that funeral directors should respond, “No, you don’t have to do what everyone else does. In fact, “traditional” rituals may not be helpful at all for you and your family. Let’s talk a little bit about what grief experts suggest would be helpful for bereaved families and find some ways to help your family experience those things.” The Cornerstones of Care provide a framework for educating families about the needs of the bereaved without making assumptions related to the circumstances of the loss, religious views of family members, or other factors.

### **CONSIDERATION 2:**

#### **What are the Best Products and Services?**

A second consideration is that products and services are evaluated based on their ability to facilitate the Cornerstones of Care for each bereaved individual or family — not the other way around where we force a product or service on a family that does not quite work for them. Using our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care requires getting to know the family, learning about the deceased, and listening for their values

and concerns. This is why the traditional and non-traditional funerals mentioned in the parable can both be exceptional for each family.

Funeral directors may need to look for new products and services they do not currently offer. Furthermore, funeral homes may need to create new partnerships (e.g. new venues for services, custom urn makers for specialized products, etc.) or even direct the family to others to help them meet their needs. While this may appear to be asking you to give up potential income, we firmly believe that helping families have a meaningful experience (and the value of their referral) will far outweigh any revenue you may lose.

### **CONSIDERATION 3:**

#### **Cornerstones are Not Exclusive to Funeral Directors**

As a third consideration, many different people can help establish the cornerstones for the bereaved. For example, family, friends, clergy, and mental health professionals can each serve important roles in supporting the bereaved. However, we also know that funeral directors have unique training and experience to connect with families, facilitate healing rituals, offer memorialization products, and prepare the deceased. No other professional is in a better position to see how the multi-faceted Cornerstones of Care can benefit the bereaved.

As mentioned, we believe the Cornerstones of Care represent six (6) universal needs of the bereaved. Let’s look now at a brief description of the cornerstones with practical examples of how funeral directors can facilitate each one.



**DIGNITY:**  
*Care for the deceased and bereaved*

Caring for the deceased and the bereaved in a dignified way reflects our belief that all people are worthy of respect and care in life and death. We believe all bereaved individuals want their loved one to be treated in a dignified manner — from acceptance of the body all the way through final disposition. Furthermore, the bereaved family also wants to be treated with dignity by funeral professionals and their community. The desire to treat the deceased and bereaved with dignity may come from a funeral director’s religious values or other sources.

Practical examples of Funeral Directors demonstrating Dignity include:

- Treating the deceased like one of their own family members by keeping bodies modestly covered with a sheet or blanket even when on a dressing table.
- Maintaining immaculate funeral coaches to transport the deceased to and from the funeral home.
- Offering affordable products and services to families of all income levels.



**ACCEPTANCE:**  
*Recognize the finality of death*

Virtually all major theories on grief include the acceptance of loss as an integral part of the grief process. What is often overlooked is that acceptance is multi-faceted and a long-term process. Certainly, the viewing of the deceased can be a powerful part of the process of acceptance in most situations. Other ways that people recognize the finality of death can include viewing the final disposition and going through holidays and other significant days (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) without their loved one.

Practical examples of Funeral Directors facilitating Acceptance include:

- Accommodating some families who feel desperate to see the deceased as soon as possible.
- Preparing families for their first viewing by explaining what to expect (i.e. normal grief responses).
- Allowing unhurried and frequent opportunities for families and friends to spend time with the deceased.
- Encouraging some families to participate in the closing of the casket or assisting in some small way at the gravesite.



**RITUAL:**  
*Participate in symbolic action*

We use the term “ritual” in a broad and inclusive way. We believe rituals are any symbolic acts that express thoughts and feelings. Examples of rituals include reading, writing, songs, music, lighting a candle, scattering cremated remains, starting a scholarship, visiting a place of final disposition, serving the deceased’s favorite food, gathering and displaying photos and mementos, praying, etc. Rituals associated with grief and loss could be traditional (e.g. funeral service led by a minister, priest, rabbi, etc.,) or non-traditional (e.g. making an urn out of a Harley-Davidson gas tank). Rituals may be associated with a larger religious tradition or may be meaningful only to one individual.

Rituals allow the bereaved to physically express thoughts and feelings. Performing rituals also force the bereaved to slow down and be fully present in the moment; rituals may be spontaneous or planned, but should never be rushed. Rituals also help by allowing the bereaved to find comfort in being connected to larger religious and spiritual traditions. For example, singing songs and reading texts can help provide solace in one’s faith tradition.



We find value in thinking about rituals as being secret, private, or public (Fulghum 1995). Secret rituals are those that only an individual knows about (e.g. a prayer said before sleep each night or listening to a meaningful song when alone in your car). Private rituals are meant for a select group of family and friends (e.g. a private family viewing or a graveside service). Public rituals are those meant to draw support and provide connection among a larger group of people (e.g. a community-wide holiday memorial event for anyone who has lost a loved one in the past year).

Practical examples of Funeral Directors encouraging Rituals include:

- Being flexible with how families may want to modify traditional rituals, such as the sequence or location of events.
- Helping family members be active participants, such as cosmetizing the body, lighting candles during a ceremony, and carrying the casket to the grave.
- Creating opportunities for the community to express their condolences, such as making it easy to post memories to a website or send flowers or food to family members.



### **MEANING:** *Seek hope and understanding*

Following a death, the bereaved strive to reconcile their loss with how they view the world. Unexpected and traumatic losses often require a significant amount of time and reflection to come to terms with the loss; expected losses are (sometimes) easier to accept. Finding meaning includes understanding why the loss happened, considering what happens to the deceased after death, recognizing how life will be different, and many other personal questions the bereaved are confronted with post-loss. We believe that the process of wrestling with and finding meaning continues long after the death of a loved one – although the struggle may be particularly difficult in the first weeks and months following a loss.

Practical examples of Funeral Directors facilitating Meaning include:

- Encouraging families to draw strength from their religious and spiritual traditions through prayer, Scripture, confession, and worship.
- Helping families select music and readings that reflect and honor the life of the deceased.
- Displaying personal effects and memorial items that help community members know what the deceased valued most in life.



### **SUPPORT:** *Receive and provide comfort*

Customarily there are limited opportunities when and where the bereaved will receive support from their friends, family, and community. Funeral rituals and events provide a unique chance for the bereaved to receive support. For example, while it is common to tell stories and express sympathy at a visitation or wake, many people feel uncomfortable sharing the same stories and sentiments two months after the loss at a community picnic or over dinner. Furthermore, bereaved family and friends also have the opportunity to provide support to one another. Expressions of support may include gifts, notes, cards, stories, flowers, and simply one's presence. Non-traditional methods of sharing support can include writing messages on caskets, vaults, websites, banners, urns, etc.

Practical examples of Funeral Directors fostering Support include:

- Making modern grief support information readily available to the bereaved so that they can better understand common reactions to grief.
- Offering ways for those who cannot attend the services to connect with one another, such as tribute videos and web-streaming funeral ceremonies.
- Providing lists of where additional help can be found, such as local and national grief support groups, personal journaling workbooks, or even professional counselors.





## **LEGACY:** *Share stories and remember*

A critical part of accepting and making sense of loss is affirmation that a life has mattered. We believe the bereaved need opportunities to share stories and remember the deceased. Furthermore, we recognize that the bereaved often have a continuing connection with the deceased. This “continuing bond” may be experienced in a variety of ways, including a sense of family connection and the desire to recognize how the deceased continues to influence the living. This continuing connection is evident, for example, when a man visits his father’s gravesite to share the news about his promotion at work and feel his father’s approval.

Practical examples of Funeral Directors facilitating Legacy include:

- Dedicating time during funeral ceremonies to share personal stories and remember the deceased.
- Encouraging the bereaved to visit regularly the location of their loved one’s final resting place (e.g. a birthday, anniversary, holiday, or any occasion when the bereaved would like to connect with their loved one).
- Organizing community-wide remembrance services where the bereaved recognize their continuing bonds with the deceased long after the funeral.

## *Interconnectedness of the Cornerstones*

As one can see from the descriptions and examples, the Cornerstones of Care are often connected to one another. For example, a bereaved family holds a visitation (Ritual) where they hear stories about their loved one (Support) in a setting that reaffirms the value of life and where the deceased has been carefully and professionally prepared (Acceptance, Dignity). The attendees’ stories reinforce the importance of the deceased to their family (Legacy) and help the bereaved begin adjusting to a life without the presence of the deceased (Meaning).

The Cornerstones of Care are the heart of professional funeral service. The cornerstones represent universal needs of the bereaved regardless of the type or circumstances of the loss or the bereaved’s religious/spiritual beliefs. If funeral service is shifting from simply offering products and services to providing a dynamic healing experience, then the Cornerstones of Care can help funeral directors educate the bereaved about how to receive the maximum benefit from funeral rituals.

In the next chapter of our series, we will discuss another important element to our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care — what we call the Components of Service.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMFORT: *The Components of Service*

In the changing landscape of funeral service, there are many voices and expert opinions heralding “a new way forward.” We recognize the difficulty in knowing who to listen to for advice and guidance. We humbly suggest that this is an ideal time for funeral service professionals to consider a paradigm shift in the way we approach our demanding work. For many of us who are inclined to measure success mainly in terms of business and financial metrics (e.g. calls, percentages, margins, profits, and EBITA), we suggest a more interdisciplinary approach that embraces nurturing care as the definitive goal and supreme good of funeral service. To this end, we have developed our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care.

In chapters 1-3, we proposed that funeral practitioners are best equipped for their profession by engaging their work with: a) an interdisciplinary balance of knowledge, b) universal principles of care, and c) a flexible framework for service. Indeed, we referred to these essential elements simply as the head, heart, and hands of funeral service. In the current issue, we will focus specifically on an adequate framework to meet the needs of the

bereaved — what we call, the Components of Service. To be clear, the components are where funeral service professionals have the most effective “hands-on” opportunities to serve their communities well.

Though there are many ways to organize the daily work of professional funeral service, we have chosen five (5) components to reasonably encapsulate all the basic services families need when planning a funeral. Our Components of Service include the following:

- A Private Family Time — to gather family together for mutual support and reflection;
- A Visitation for Family and Friends — to receive condolences and support;
- A Ceremony to Honor Life — to express meaning through life stories and media;
- A Place for Final Disposition — to dignify life in sacred spaces for burial and cremation;
- A Gathering and Reception — to relax and share together with food and refreshments.



## *The Components of Service*

We believe that Funeral Service Professionals will benefit significantly by understanding the key assumptions undergirding the Components of Service. In short, funeral service components are predicated upon two (2) fundamental factors — compatibility and flexibility. Taking these two factors into consideration will greatly aid our efforts in providing comfort and support to families when planning a funeral.

### **FIRST KEY FACTOR: *Compatibility***

We suggest that the framework Funeral Directors utilize when helping bereaved families must be compatible with the universal Cornerstones of Care. In the previous chapter, we proposed that every person who experiences a loss of a loved one, regardless of age, race, gender, orientation, educational level, or social status, has six (6) basic needs to be addressed. These basic needs include:

- Dignity: The need to care for the deceased and bereaved;
- Acceptance: The need to recognize the finality of death;
- Ritual: The need to participate in symbolic action;
- Meaning: The need to seek hope and understanding;
- Support: The need to receive and provide support;
- Legacy: The need to share stories and remember.

### *The Universal Cornerstones of Care*

We recognize that many Directors are daunted by the weighty responsibility of designing funeral services that provide real comfort, compassion, and support for diverse modern families. Directors may regularly ask themselves: “how do I know what will serve this family best?” Our research has led us to a key insight: **Flexible Components serve Universal Cornerstones.** Let us explain: Funeral Directors do not define what is meaningful for a family and we never

have; instead, Funeral Directors seek to understand what is meaningful for a family and then design components to serve those needs. The importance is not in the number of funeral service components, but how the components facilitate the Universal Cornerstones.

We encourage Directors to stay mindful that the chief measure of an effective funeral is the nurturing care a bereaved family receives in their time of loss. To assist Directors in keeping the right focus, it is helpful to understand the relationship between Universal Cornerstones and Flexible Components: while they are indeed compatible, they are not the same thing. The six (6) Cornerstones are universal and apply to every family; the five (5) Components are flexible and must be developed with the family’s preferences and needs in mind. Keeping this straight is important: the **Components serve the Cornerstones.**

To meet a family’s needs, funeral service components may be traditional or non-traditional, elaborate or simple, large or even small gatherings of support. Directors must remember that funeral service components are not an end to themselves, but are a means to a higher end (i.e. the universal Cornerstones of Care). For example, we do not recommend families to view their deceased loved ones because spending time with dead bodies is good or easy. When we recommend a family viewing time (i.e. a Component), we do so in order for the bereaved to accept that their loved one is deceased and to have a private unhurried opportunity to extend a personal farewell (i.e. Cornerstones: Acceptance & Meaning).

### **SECOND KEY FACTOR: *Flexibility***

Closely related to compatibility is the factor of flexibility. When we begin working with a family, we must not present the Components of Service as linear or hierarchical. That is, we do not advocate a rigid step-by-step approach to planning a funeral. To be sure, we reject the idea that every family must experience all five (5) Components of Service and in a particular order. Seasoned Funeral Directors know that because every family is different, funerals should not all be designed the same.

Flexibility also means that we reject the notion that the Components of Service are hierarchical — that is, where one component is necessarily more important than another. This kind of flexibility is significantly different from prior thinking in funeral service. Twentieth century funerals were generally characterized by the following: a) a focus on a funeral service that, b) was delivered by a clergyperson who, c) shared common sentiments and read familiar religious texts to, d) an audience of whom mostly belonged to the same faith tradition.

For many generations, funerals took on a hierarchical form with an emphasis on the funeral ceremony (officiated by a priest or clergyperson) as the chief context for ministry and nurturing care. In most cases, funeral homes provided families with embalming, viewing of the deceased, visiting with family and friends, a ceremony with a pastoral sermon, a procession to the cemetery, a brief committal service, and a final burial (and usually in this order). The funeral ceremony, however, was regarded as the central and most important ministerial component of all because it allowed for a respected person of authority to speak about the Christian faith to a captive audience. Large transcendent issues such as death, eternal rewards, divine judgment, and salvation were common topics of most funeral sermons.

The traditional funerals of the 20th century maintained a linear, hierarchical, structure. This traditional approach to funerals was rooted in sectarian ritual and religious authority. The nurturing care families received in this older model was tied to verbal proclamation, reinforced by a liturgy of the common faith perspective of a given family (i.e. a kerygmatic approach).

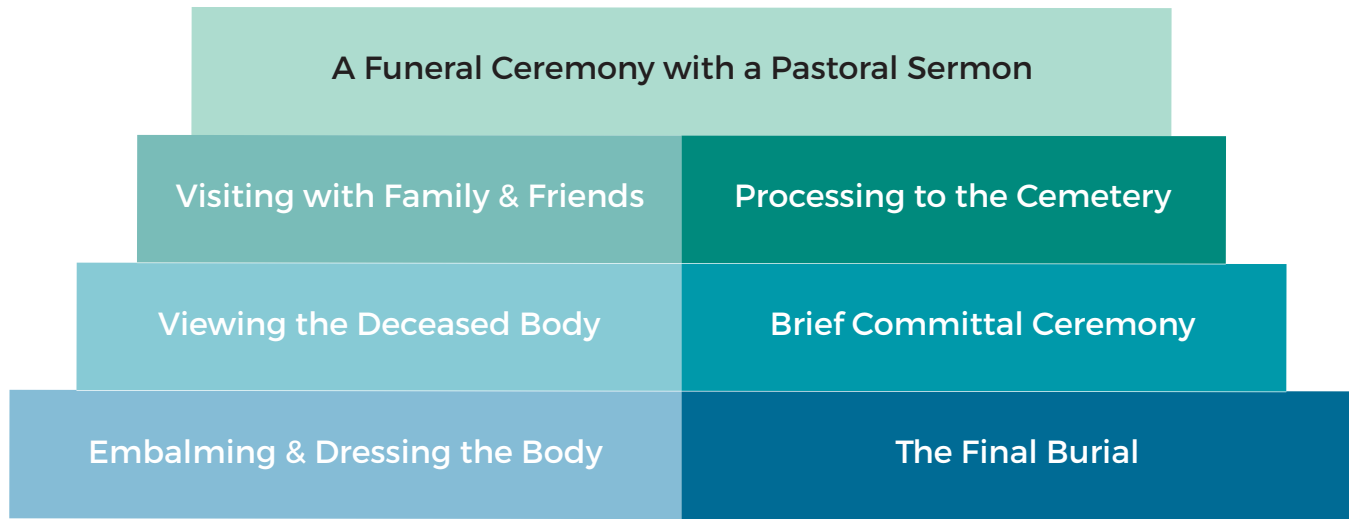
## ***A Hierarchy of 20th Century Traditional Funerals***

While this traditional model was very effective for many years, and in fact, continues to be a preferred approach to ritualization for some families, there is an emerging consensus that funerals must be more flexible to meet the diverse needs of families (and communities) today. Perhaps Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch best capture the sentiment of today's view of funerals in their acclaimed *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care* (2013). They suggest that the most important functions of funerals are: 1) to accompany the body of the deceased to the place of final farewell, and 2) to tell the story of what the life and death of the deceased truly mean. We believe that this emphasis on accompanying the deceased (i.e. movement) and sharing of one's story (i.e. narrative) fairly characterizes the fabric of contemporary funeral ritualization.

We want to make clear that newer traditions do not in any way preclude the use of faith or religious rituals that have long been effective in supporting the bereaved. We are simply suggesting that our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care rejects the idea of rigid hierarchies as necessary for funeral ritualization. There is no longer a singular formula or linear process by which all families must follow. For example, a family may simply wish to have a private viewing, followed by a cremation, and then an informal reception among friends with favorite music, food, and drink. In cases like this (and countless others), Funeral Directors may have to fight against a feeling that the family has not been cared for as well as they could have been if they had chosen more traditional services with a formal funeral ceremony. Different ritualization does not necessarily mean that a family is receiving less nurturing care.



## *A Hierarchy of 20th Century Traditional Funerals*



As funeral service increasingly moves outside the parameters of traditional clerical/religious paradigms, the value of the Components of Service more and more springs from the ability to facilitate the Cornerstones of Care. Consider one exemplary case where all the crucial Cornerstones are addressed: a private viewing and informal reception provide a family with opportunities to acknowledge the reality of their loss (Acceptance), read scripture (Ritual), share stories about the deceased (Legacy), begin to recognize how this loss will affect them (Meaning), provide comfort to one another (Support), and is done in a spirit of caring for their loved one and themselves (Dignity). Here's the point again: the **Components serve the Cornerstones**.

We believe that funeral practitioners know that they must be more flexible in their approach with families today, whether they approve of all the new ritualization ideas or not. Families are indeed more diverse than ever before in their perceptions of what is truly meaningful. Individual family members now express all sorts of opinions about what was traditionally observed, such as the choice of embalming, casket, funeral processions, facilities, music, attire, and disposition (to name a few). As such, diversity impacts how families perceive the value and helpfulness of certain funeral service

components. Obviously, Directors must adopt a flexible framework to be attentive to diverse (and sometimes conflicting) family dynamics. This is why a standard hierarchical structure no longer works when planning funerals with bereaved families.

### *The Good News for Funeral Service Professionals*

What excites us most about professional funeral service is our conviction that practitioners are more uniquely positioned than ever before to provide an invaluable service to their communities. Given the current landscape of funeral service, such as the changing relationship between Funeral Directors and Clergy, the increasing numbers of the religiously unaffiliated, and even the general movement toward deritualization, the future of funeral service is indeed changing, but the opportunities to meet real community needs may in fact be *increasing*.

By embracing a flexible framework for ritualization, with deference to the universal cornerstones of bereavement caregiving, Funeral Directors are well prepared to discuss the five (5) components of a funeral with bereaved families. Because these components are so familiar to funeral professionals, we will briefly describe how each one provides a meaningful opportunity to minister nurturing care.





**COMPONENT:**

***A Private Family Time***

Private Family Time, more commonly called a “private viewing,” provides close family and friends with an opportunity to see their loved one in a peaceful state and begin to recognize the full extent of the loss. Many families find this to be a priceless intimate time to share private stories and draw strength from one another before more public rituals or services begin.



**COMPONENT:**

***A Visitation for Family and Friends***

A visitation (also commonly referred to as a public viewing, receiving of friends, or wake) is an occasion for the bereaved to receive support from others and allows members of the community to pay their respects. The visitation benefits the family by providing a key opportunity to hear stories across the lifetime of the deceased. A visitation today does not necessarily include a formal receiving line, but could provide an invaluable opportunity to mingle among friends over hors d’oeuvres.



**COMPONENT:**

***A Ceremony to Honor Life***

The ceremony provides a key time to connect with larger traditions and conduct meaningful rituals that include reading time-honored words, singing, and other symbolic acts. This ritual may be traditional or non-traditional, religious or secular, large or small, celebratory or somber. It also helps attendees learn more about the legacy of the deceased.



**COMPONENT:**

***A Place for Final Disposition***

Choosing a place for final disposition and accompanying the deceased to that location helps the family feel that they have fulfilled their responsibility of caring for the deceased in a dignified way. Rituals associated with interment can also help the family begin to accept the reality of the loss and connect with spiritual and religious traditions.



**COMPONENT:**

***A Gathering and Reception***

A reception provides family and friends with an unhurried opportunity to come together for a meal and share support. This event also helps the attendees transition from the focus on loss to celebrating and remembering a life. The gathering may be simple or ornate, traditional or innovative, large or small.

In the final chapter, we will demonstrate how our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care can be used as a helpful guide for the day-to-day work of funeral service. The real workaday world is, after all, where the rubber meets the road.

## WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD: *A Comforting Presence*

She's sitting across from you. Someone she cares about is dying, recently died, or died a year ago. Her only question for you is this: "How can you help me?"

There are many ways to answer this question. Certainly, part of a Funeral Director's role is to provide funeral-related services (e.g. transfer, embalming, event planning, etc.) and products (e.g. caskets, vaults, urns, stationery products, etc.). But these are only part of the answer. We believe that your answer should be, "I can provide care that brings you and your loved ones comfort and support." Your role is larger than providing services and products; it is to provide nurturing care.

In this guidebook, we have been sharing a vision for our **Integrated Model of Nurturing Care**. Our model is not a mere aftercare program (a small garnish on a plate), but a comprehensive approach to contemporary funeral service (the meat and potatoes). We truly believe that there has never been a better time for funeral service practitioners to contribute to our communities in more dynamic and meaningful ways. In fact, we suggest that our compelling new vision of funeral service has emerged out of the changing landscape of a socially diverse world.

From a big picture perspective, we have proposed a significant paradigm change: above and beyond financial metrics, marketing plans, facilities and equipment, and even product sales, we envision nurturing care of the bereaved as the ultimate goal and supreme good for professional funeral service. In short, we have stated that nurturing care is a function of: 1) an interdisciplinary balance of knowledge, 2) universal Cornerstones of Care, and 3) flexible Components of Service. With these elements in mind, we intentionally designed this guidebook

to focus more on the development of Funeral Service Practitioners (i.e. the individuals) rather than Funeral Service Firms (i.e. the businesses). Our conviction remains that exceptional people make exceptional funeral establishments.

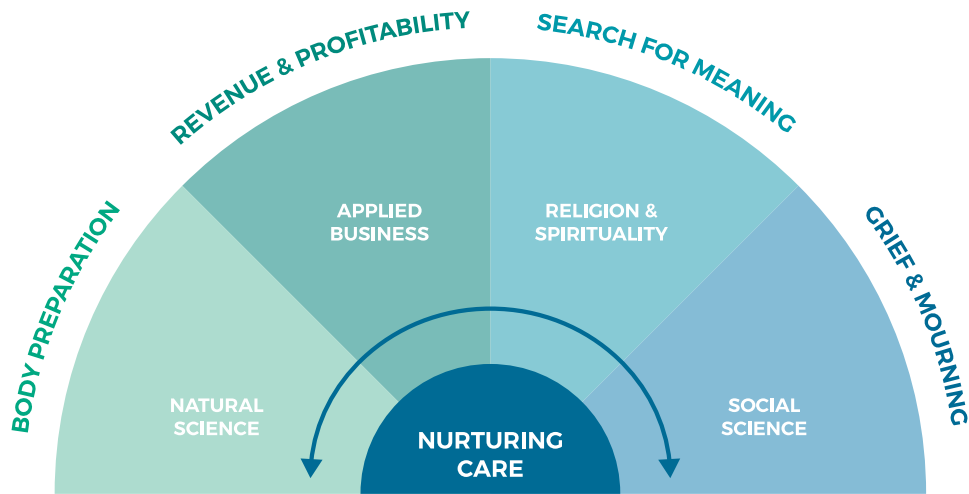
### *An Integrated Model of Nurturing Care*

In this final chapter, we will examine how our theoretical model is applied in the regular workaday world. We recognize that every day is different for a funeral service professional. Directors do not know from one minute to the next precisely who may call or walk through the front door of the funeral home with a crisis of loss that has turned their family's world upside down. Funeral home care-teams work diligently in preparing a day's schedule to make sure every detail is covered for every family they are serving. And yet, seasoned Directors know to expect the unexpected. It is truly remarkable that in any minute of any given day, funeral professionals stand ready for whomever may call upon them for assistance. This is a phenomenal undertaking.

We want to help Funeral Directors better navigate their volatile work environment. To this end, we give special attention in this chapter to the readiness required to be a Funeral Service Professional today. In simplest terms, we describe professional readiness as a **Comforting Presence**, the normative posture needed by every funeral professional to respond well to what our daily work requires — Educating, Serving, and Supporting people in need. We will explain each of these three activities from the perspective of providing professional nurturing care. Before we do, however, we want to highlight the significance of putting our comprehensive model into practice.

# AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF NURTURING CARE

*An Interdisciplinary Balance*



## Universal Cornerstones of Care



## Flexible Components of Service



## A Comforting Presence: From Theory To Practice

In our prior chapters, we found it helpful to explain our **Integrated Model of Nurturing Care** in terms of the head, heart, and hands of funeral service. So, how can we best explain what our model looks like in actual practice? Ultimately, we are hopeful that funeral professionals will test-drive our model in their daily work. That’s really where the rubber meets the road — the moment of truth to demonstrate the real value of our proposal. As such, we describe the regular day-to-day functions of funeral service in the same helpful terms. That is, we believe that a Comforting Presence also engages the spheres of head, heart, and hands. The practice emulates the theory.

Spheres	MODEL THE THEORY	AGENCY THE PRACTICE
HEAD	Interdisciplinary Knowledge	Knowing Functions
HEART	Cornerstones of Care	Being Functions
HANDS	Components of Service	Doing Functions

To explain what we mean, we originally presented our model in terms of big ideas. In this way, our guidebook series functions like a seminar — you hear or read some exciting new ideas and hopefully think, “this information could make a difference in my work.” Of course, articles and seminars are often presented well, but the real question is how do you apply what you have learned? The truth is that funeral service requires much more than a fancy model of care; it requires real human agents who work in a demanding 24-hour per day context called “real life.”

In practical terms, how do caregivers (Funeral Directors) guide care seekers (Bereaved Families) in nurturing rituals? In other words, how may we practice our craft with an intentionality toward

helping the bereaved engage in creative and meaningful ritual forms so that they may better cope with loss and reframe their lives? We suggest that caregivers greatly benefit from offering the bereaved a Comforting Presence — the professional readiness truly needed for the communities we serve. Professional readiness is personified as Directors become well adept at the essential practices utilized every day – this is what we call the knowing, being, and doing functions of funeral service.

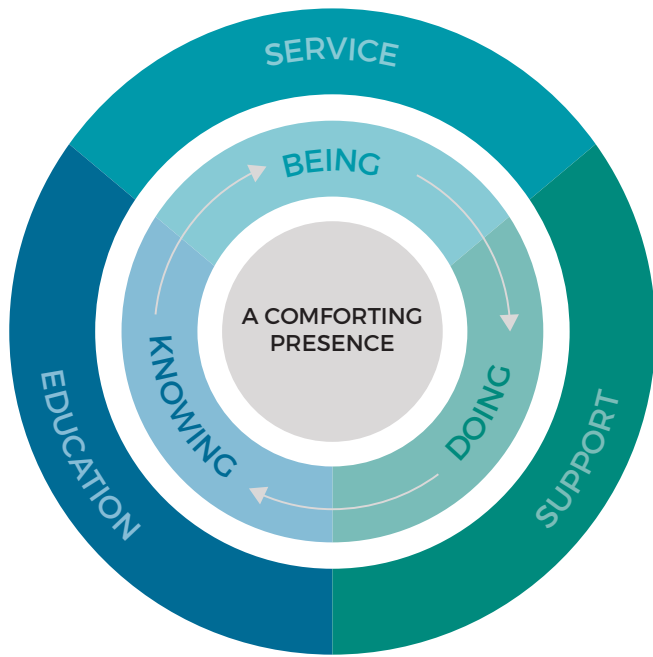
### The Dynamics of a Comforting Presence

Let us briefly clarify the essential functions of a Comforting Presence:

- Knowing functions include not only a Director’s knowledge of products and services, funeral staging, and mortuary law, but also refer to a Director’s ability to share comforting information with bereaved people who need to be well-informed about grief. Professionally-ready Directors have an advanced understanding of the contexts of loss so that they are able to anchor the bereaved against the forces of grief.
- Being functions refer to a Director’s ability to provide comforting hospitality to the bereaved. Professionally-ready Directors have the courage to be open to the pain of others, the fortitude to wrestle with the mystery of death, and the skills to listen empathically without feeling the need to resolve existential crises with empty platitudes (e.g. “she’s in a better place,” or “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle”).
- Doing functions refer to a Director’s ability to design and facilitate comforting activity for the bereaved. Professionally-ready Directors stand ready to suggest creative and meaningful ritualization activities that support bereavement care.

Connecting these three functions together (i.e. knowing, being, and doing), a Comforting Presence is simply a term that epitomizes an exemplary posture needed for professional funeral service providers.





With these key functions of a Comforting Presence in mind, we can now turn to the practical daily activities of funeral professionals — real-life scenarios with client-families in the realms of education, service, and support. While many Funeral Directors work mostly with families dealing with acute loss, we prefer to think of professional funeral service more broadly, in terms of three common activities: 1) professional assistance before a death occurs (i.e. preneed), 2) professional assistance when a death occurs (i.e. at-need), and 3) professional assistance months and even years after a death has occurred (i.e. aftercare). We'll look at each of these below from the perspective of a Comforting Presence.

### ***The Daily Activity of Educating***

The rubber meets the road for many Funeral Directors each day as they are asked by people of their community for assistance in advance planning of a funeral. Remember the woman who was sitting across from you? She wants to preplan her funeral and she needs your help. Here is one example of how a Funeral Director could employ our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care with a Comforting Presence to provide her with peace of mind:

“I believe that pre-planning is one of the most helpful things you can do for your loved ones. It will certainly bring you great peace of mind. Not only does it help your loved ones by removing financial stress and the burden of guessing what you would have wanted, but it also allows you to plan rituals and services that will bring them healing and support when they need it most. You see, I believe that bereaved individuals are best helped when they experience 6 things — we call them “the Cornerstones of Care.” They include Dignity, Acceptance, Rituals, Meaning, Support, and Legacy. By planning your services to provide opportunities for your loved ones to receive these essential Cornerstones of Care, it gives them a foundation of support to promote healing as they begin their grief process. The great thing is that your loved ones can receive the Cornerstones of Care through traditional or nontraditional services and they are flexible enough to incorporate your specific choices.”

The Funeral Director continues:

“I know that you’re not the type of person who likes to be the center of attention — you mentioned earlier that you don’t want your loved ones to make a lot of fuss over you. But the most valuable benefits of well-planned services are that they provide many healing moments to your loved ones when they need it most. If you’re willing, I’d like to share some ways that your surviving loved ones can feel supported in their loss and have a service that honors your unique life story....”

One of the most powerful contributions of our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care regarding preplanning is that it focuses on how well-planned services and rituals can help the bereaved survivors with their grief.

### ***The Daily Activity of Serving***

In funeral homes across the world each day, the rubber meets the road for Funeral Directors as they serve their communities well by facilitating a variety of services to aid the bereaved in the death of a loved one. The profession sometimes refers to this core activity of Funeral Directors as “at-need work” — the short-hand for all the types of care provided to the bereaved who are suffering acute grief.



Perhaps that woman sitting across from you just experienced the death of her husband and she is looking to you to help her. A Funeral Director provides a Comforting Presence through sentiments like these:

“I believe my role is to help provide you and your loved ones with meaningful experiences. Our care team will: [Note the Corresponding Cornerstone]

1) Treat you, your husband, and your family and friends with dignity in everything we do [Dignity];

2) Help you and your loved ones begin the challenging process of recognizing that your husband has died and the implications of that [Acceptance];

3) Provide you with multiple opportunities to express your grief by putting your thoughts and feelings into action [Ritual];

4) Help you begin to make sense of what this loss means for you and others [Meaning];

5) Create opportunities where you can share and receive comfort [Support];

6) Share how your husband had a positive impact on others and how his contributions will continue to live on [Legacy].”

The Funeral Director continues:

“I’m not sure exactly what this will look like for you right now, so I’ll need to learn more about your family before I can offer suggestions. But I do know that families who experience these 6 Cornerstones feel that the services are more meaningful and helpful. Some people choose to have some combination of private time with their loved one, a public opportunity to receive support, a service that provides time for ritual and legacy-sharing, a fulfillment of taking your husband to his final place of rest, and/or a more relaxed opportunity to share stories and food with those who loved your husband. If you’d like, I can tell you a little more about what each of these events or rituals can do to help you and your loved ones as well as ways we can personalize them to your needs and make them reflect your husband’s personality, interests, and values.”

The goal is not to impose a rigid script, but to be present to a family’s grief and pain in authentic and helpful ways. Instead, the Integrated Model of Nurturing Care, including the Cornerstones of Care and the Components of Service, provides a framework that reminds the Funeral Director about the ultimate goals of serving (“How can I help this person?”) and educates the community about the remarkable value of funeral rituals.

### *The Daily Activity of Supporting*

The rubber also meets the road for funeral professionals in providing ongoing support to people following a loss. The idea of providing support weeks, months, and even years after a loss, has not always been accepted by Directors (and the public) as an essential role for funeral practitioners. Supportive roles by trained professionals were traditionally the exclusive domains of pastors and faith communities. But times have changed and fewer people have strong ties to faith communities and family members nearby to offer ongoing support.

In our example, if the woman sitting across from you is seeking support a year after the loss of her young child, a Funeral Director could embody a Comforting Presence by providing or suggesting experiences that match the 6 Cornerstones of Care. Their conversation may go something like this:

“I suspect you feel as though everyone else has “moved on” and yet you continue to deal with the loss of your child daily. While I am sorry that your loss continues to burden you, I am pleased to know that you see our funeral home as a source for information and support. There are several ways we can help you, including:

- Offering a book on the loss of a child from our lending library;
- Providing booklets on dealing with the loss of a child, navigating anniversary reactions, and other related topics;
- Recommending a local grief group for bereaved parents like yourself;

- Inviting you to a workshop on dealing with loss led by a local mental health professional; and,
- Simply listening to you without trying to “fix” your problems and affirming that you have experienced a significant loss.”

We believe that aftercare and grief support can take a wide variety of forms and can be directed at numerous audiences. In addition to the examples mentioned above, here are a few ways that funeral homes can provide additional aftercare and support:

- Sponsoring additional training and/or materials for a local grief support group leader;
- Supplying local school counselors with materials on suicide after an epidemic of local students taking their lives;
- Writing or sharing an article on prenatal loss in the local newspaper, on their website, and/or social media sites;
- Sponsoring a speaker to provide continuing education for local hospice physicians, nurses, chaplains, and volunteers;
- Holding a “Missing Mom before Mother’s Day” Tea where attendees can bring photos, share stories, and connect with others;
- Sponsoring a team to participate in a “Walk to End Alzheimer’s Disease” fundraiser.

As you can see, aftercare is not only about providing counseling or support groups to the families you have served (although those are worthwhile options). It also creates opportunities to build relationships with community partners (e.g. hospice, mental health professionals, places of worship, etc.). Providing grief support is especially powerful because it has a long “shelf life.” In other words, it is a topic that many community members will be interested in for years or even decades after their loss. Additionally, providing a variety of aftercare and grief support initiatives will reinforce the funeral home’s message that “We care for your family — even after the funeral.”

## *Our Bottom Line*

We started this chapter with a simple question from a potential client-family: “How can you help me?” We believe the answer begins with cultivating a Comforting Presence and serving others with our heads (Interdisciplinary Knowledge), hearts (Cornerstones of Care), and hands (Components of Service). We acknowledge that funeral products are a critical and helpful aspect of professional funeral service; but, we caution Funeral Directors to remember that services and merchandise are only helpful to the degree that they provide nurturing care.

Funeral Service is indeed an exhilarating, yet highly demanding profession. It is a sacrificial vocation with the potential for great rewards. For those of us who have committed our lives to this distinctive trade, we sincerely hope that beyond the many challenges you are faced with every day, you garner a deep sense of satisfaction in this lifework, unparalleled in other fields of professional service. In that spirit, we hope that you find our Integrated Model of Nurturing Care a helpful way to address the on-going needs for comfort, meaning, and hope among the people we are so honored to live among and serve.

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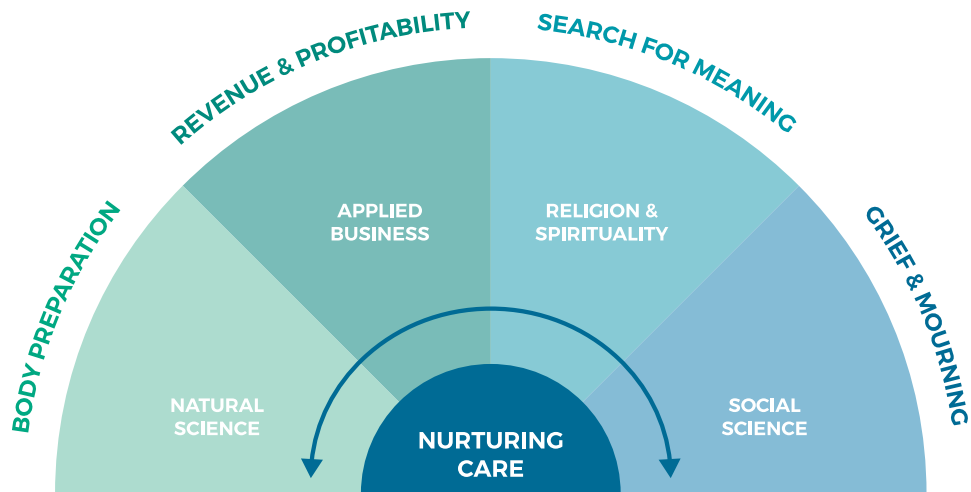
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# AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF NURTURING CARE

*An Interdisciplinary Balance*



## *Universal Cornerstones of Care*



## *Flexible Components of Service*



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