**Narrative: “Dealing With The Difficult Family”**

Hello this is Todd Van Beck

It is time again for our next staff meeting. As customary we begin with my assurance that I am not going to tell you how to operate your funeral home or your how to live your life – as always that is none of my business. And once again this information is not a bunch of pleasantries or platitudes. My assumption however is that everyone listening to this information loves funeral service, and to that end it seems always a worthy idea to get together to discuss different aspects of our beloved profession.

Let’s take a moment to review the points that I covered in our past staff get together. Here they are:

1. We said that change has a nature all of its own. It is perpetual, it is cyclical, it is unchangeable, it always has a good and bad to it, and it always creates tension.
2. We said that a good way to embrace change is to not get stuck in old habits.
3. We covered the predictable problems of being stuck and not changing, and the results of being stuck are not always good.
4. We explored the idea of making complexities out of simplicities.
5. We told the great story of the “Acres of Diamonds.”
6. We spoke about the issue of creating meaningful change, instead of being swept along with events.
7. And finally we concluded that prospecting for our opportunities in life is one dandy way to deal with and be prepared for changes, which is certainly not going to end soon, if ever.

Have any of you ever encountered difficult, cranky, fussy, grumpy people? Have any of these people marched through the front door of your funeral home? To be sure difficult people abound in the real world – no Pollyanna stuff concerning this subject.

The Chinese say that when a person is arguing heatedly with someone and begins to fight, that person has run out of ideas. I believe as a funeral professional that this is a good thing to remember when dealing with a grouchy person or family. We may well feel like arguing, but you can and should control the situation with ideas and win the family for a true friend. This is no pie in the sky idea it is a working reality in funeral service.

However we all know of instances when funeral people have lost their composure, and honestly I don’t know of one instance over my 45 year career when the funeral person who just flips out ends up winning, or even coming close to winning. It is a very risky situation for funeral people to flip out, but unfortunately it happens. The proof of this is often times seen in court records – enough said.

A difficult or grouchy family, I have found, either has something on their mind that makes them angry or they feel bad physically and emotionally or many time all three. Given what we all know about grief – well, in the funeral service profession, the odds are mighty high that people may not feel all that great and have highly pressing issues on their minds, like how I am going to go one now after what has happened?

Families may look fierce, bark their questions and demand orders, and even make sarcastic and unkind remarks. Whatever the cause I have found it wise to simply permit the venting to spend itself. Remember we cannot be all things to all people and our job in funeral service and in life is not to get along with perfect people, our job is to get along with imperfect people.

This is a very difficult subject to tackle – this idea of being all things to all people, but the truth of life is that there are some people who just won’t like us, try as we may. It is just going to happen, and thank heaven it does not happen much, but when it does is stings, because funeral people tend to be highly sensitive people who want to please and in return be well thought of. This is certainly a noble quest, it is highly admirable, but it cannot work 100% of the time.

I once served a family who would simply not talk to me. They would not say one word to me, so just imagine how well the arrangement conference moved along? Finally I offered to get another funeral director (we had several on staff) and they took me up on my offer. I felt horrible, just horrible, and add insult to injury they appeared by all accounts to adore the other funeral director who took my place. Those things are just going to happen, and anyone listening to this who is a single person funeral home operator knows all too well the depths of disappointment and frustration when a family is unhappy and there is no one else to call in.

However as I aged I found out those families usually did not continue to be upset or distant when our every effort showed them that we had and have their best interests at heart and that we truly want to serve them. This can be emotional exhausting work on our parts, but in the end I think it is a worthy effort. As a funeral professional you do not want to argue or fight because YOU have not run out of ideas, or you should not have run out of ideas to serve. Patiently try to gain their point of view and always feel kindly (as difficult as this might be) towards them. Trust me such an attitude possesses magic properties.

Families handled this way usually calm down and become human again, but they also can begin to feel secretly ashamed of their actions and attitudes. Often to make amend for their treatment of you they will become an even more generous and complimentary person or group.

Here is a list of what can make a family a difficult family. This list needs discussion from your group of professionals. Here we go:

1. Expectations have not been met.
2. They are already upset with the funeral home.
3. They are tired, stressed, frustrated, and grieved.
4. They feel like a victim, and loss of control.
5. No one will listen to them.
6. They have a chip on their shoulders.
7. Unfulfilled promises by someone, and it doesn’t matter who (could be a nurse, clergy, etc.)
8. They feel like they are not cared about.
9. They feel they were not listened to.
10. They are prejudice again you personally, your hair, clothes, tattoo’s etc.
11. They feel they can manipulate by making noise.
12. They were told by someone not to be angry.
13. They were given a smart of flip reply.
14. They were screened on the telephone.
15. They were embarrassed by someone at the funeral home.
16. Their honesty or integrity was questioned.
17. Someone in the funeral home argued with them.
18. Someone at the funeral home was rude, indifferent or discourteous to them.

WOW, if anything this list ought to make us all believers that as funeral professionals we really need to be alert and on top of our attitudes on a day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute basis.

Here is another thought. As problematic as this idea can be it is nonetheless true – some families and people simply enjoy being ill-tempered. So, as funeral professionals our job in this case is to be polite and considerate and show the gloomy people that you have their welfare at hear. In other words don’t spoil their fun. This should not be too difficult. We don’t have to live with these good people, and thankfully they are somewhat rare, but certainly a presence at times. Just as other people enjoy ill health, some people just enjoy their ill temper. They might respond to sympathy, genuine interest, and good service however. We really don’t have any intelligent alternatives do we? You are be guaranteed however that they will definitely respond to a distant or ill-tempered attitudes from the funeral professional and my friends I can personally assure you that the response will not be pleasant. Our only alternative is to take the risk at being genuine and sympathetic and just give them the best and greatest service attention we can.

Don Rickles, the famous TV grouch character is said to be a very pleasant person in real life. In his acting he gets paid to put on a long face and voice harsh disparaging remarks. Yet, he is the first to admit that such a temperament would be a big handicap in actual life.

I have encountered the “Don Rickles” prototype in most every line of work, and the truth is this grouch approach just falls flat in actual life.

We can all laugh at Rickles on television, but it is no joke for anyone to parade his or her grouchy side in the presence of families and funeral home associates. Nor is it funny when we lost friends and families because we forget to smile, and instead give an exhibition of impatience and ill temper. My grandmother in Iowa always said that molasses draws more flies than vinegar – this sound terribly old-fashioned, and it is, but in our grand profession I feel it is a good thing to remember in dealing with a grouch or in curbing the grouch in ourselves.

The easiest thing one can do is to reflect a grouch’s mood and snap back. That is a true sign of professional weakness and cannot win the patronage or goodwill of such a client or family. Quiet enjoyment can be gained by working on the grouchy client or family with diplomacy and goodwill and watching the grouch soften under your professional attitude of friendliness and spirit of quality funeral service.

A chauffeur in a great funeral home one told me how grouchy and touchy some families he drove were. It is, he thought, to be expected because they are grieving. Some families he reported actually cursed him, some would ignore him, and some were downright nasty to him. Several times, it was clear that he himself had just cause for righteous indignation due to the grouchiness of the families he transported, but through it all he drove unconcerned about the abuse.

The chauffeur’s service formula was simple: He knew the families’ stress and problems were much greater than his, so he would never get excited. He would just quietly and simply do all he could do for them and then would just keep silent. It worked.

I have discovered that the grouch or grouchy families are not as bad as they seem. I have discovered that they don’t have horns and a forked tail all the time. At other times and in other circumstances I believe they are undoubtedly charming. All the rough talk and glowering looks may be simply a way of covering up. When we refuse to let them get you down and we maintain our poise, I have found they will end up respect you. Then, we, and funeral professionals have won a family client and most importantly a friend.

Let’s review our information covered in this staff meeting:

1. Difficult people usually have something on their minds which might have nothing to do with us personally. We need to be sensitive to this possibility.
2. It is always wise in funeral counseling to let people vent.
3. We can’t be all things to all people – it is impossible.
4. There is great wisdom in showing people that we sincerely have their best interests at heart.
5. There were a whopping eighteen things that can upset people in a funeral home.
6. The “Don Rickles” approach to life only works in the fake world of television
7. The funeral home chauffeur exemplified the right approach to dealing with the grouch.

Discussion questions:

1. Are you familiar with the family that needs to blow off steam?
2. Have you even had people who just did not like you? How did you handle that?
3. Why is it important to give more attention to ill-tempered people?
4. How can we curb the grouch in ourselves?
5. Have you ever discovered that the grouch really is not so bad underneath?