

# Ask the Undertaker

## What Exactly Do You Do?

By Ryan Helfenbein

A few weeks ago I returned home from an out-of-state conference. While traveling I had conversations with individuals on the plane, at the airport and even in the cab. Undoubtedly, the common question would come up, "Are you here for business or pleasure?" The answer was business and that I was in town for a conference. "Come on Ryan," I'd say to myself, "why say that?" You know you are now going to have to answer the very familiar follow-up question: "So what do you do?" Fellow readers, I've been around the funeral industry all my life. I have gotten pretty creative when answering this question, since it often ends up eliciting the same reaction, followed by numerous questions. But over the years I've become very proud of what I do, and I almost say it with a smile: "I'm an undertaker." As peoples' eyes become as big as softballs, they would take one step back and reply with a "What?" or "Ewww" or my favorite, "Are you serious?"

So, to answer that last question, "Well, I am serious, it's what I do. Yes, it's definitely not an occupation that small children are running around the yard pretending to be and they're not asking their parents to buy the latest "Undertaker Man" action figure, but I am proud to say I help people heal through the most difficult time of life – losing a loved one. I guess one could say that the scientific aspect of the funeral industry could be viewed as being a bit morbid, but there is so much more that undertakers can provide for a family today that they never did before.

My industry has changed over the years. Technology is moving us toward more personalized service and merchandise. Pictures resting on a table in the visitation room are now being saved on DVDs, which can be shown throughout the funeral home or uploaded to the Internet. Services in a funeral home are now visible to family and friends through webcasting.

Recently a funeral home had a relative of the deceased participate in a service through webcasting and a speaker phone while he was on active duty with the military. Today we see food and



refreshments being provided, and families can participate in the service through balloon and teddy bear ceremonies. Even themed rooms are now available. In Michigan one funeral home offers different rooms for families to choose from such as a *man cave* with leather recliners and the deceased's favorite sports team playing on a TV. Others include a 50s diner theme, or an elegant living room setting with grand fireplace and even an "outdoorsman" room.

The old days of selecting a casket and a cemetery lot are now being enhanced with selections of memorial jewelry, customized cards and register books, as well as personalized keepsakes. Who would have thought we'd be going to the local undertaker to buy jewelry? The keepsakes that funeral homes are offering families today are everything from acrylic works of art, Nambe designed mementos, to formal portraits made from beloved family photos. And remember the smell of flowers in a funeral home? Not anymore! A funeral home in Ohio now cooks fresh baked cookies every morning in the foyer of their funeral home, creating an aroma that reminds visitors of fond memories when visiting their facility while paying respects to their loved one.

The point here is that most reputable funeral homes today are training their staff to truly become the wedding planners of the death industry. Our job as undertakers encompasses so much more than preparing a loved one for a visitation, cremation ceremony or burial service. Our job is now to walk a family through the process of developing a meaningful celebration of the life of their loved one.

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### Need Help Getting Started?

- Buy a journal. Try a fresh spring color or design that appeals to you.
- Fine-tune observations. Get outside and wake up your senses---all of them! With close and patient observation, attend to sights, smells, textures, sounds and even tastes.
- Use concrete images. Record observations such as the natural progression of weather, the emergence of new spring growth and the changing light of our lengthened days.
- Note your inner response. Nature offers rich metaphors and lessons for living our daily lives. Pay attention to the emotions, memories, insights and even the dreams that a close study of nature evokes in you.
- Add visual detail. Sketch, doodle or make a collage of photographs or clippings from a garden catalogue or on your journal pages. Use colored pencils or markers to write in circles or upside down. Have fun!
- Reserve a review. Wait to go over your work until the end of the month. If you peek earlier, your inner critic may sabotage your efforts. In the beginning, you may feel self-conscious on the page. However, by the end of the month, your creative juices will be flowing. And it is then fun to peruse your journal and appreciate your progress. It's like opening a surprise gift.
- Get inspired. Read more about nature journals by checking out these books:
  - *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* by Edith Holden
  - *A Trail Through Leaves: The Journal as a Path to Place* by Hannah Hinchman
  - *Leaf Bird Days and Firefly Nights: Personal Renewal Through Nature Journaling* by Beverly J. Letchworth
  - *Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World Around You* by Claire Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth

### OutLook's Bits & Bytes

Would you like to watch a movie on your computer? Go to [www.hulu.com](http://www.hulu.com) These aren't always first-run movies, but they're free and you're bound to find a few that you'd like to watch.