



**THE  
RIGHT  
WAY  
OF  
DEATH**

**ERIC  
LAYER**

**Restoring the  
American Funeral Business  
to Its True Calling**

## Chapter 1

# The Split Personality of the Calling

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1963 was a rough year for funeral service.

Caitlin Doughty, the famous crematory-operator-turned-author, called it “cremation’s year.”<sup>1</sup> In July, the Catholic Church lifted its historical ban on cremation. The same year, the Funeral Consumers Alliance was founded, its stated goal to “keep tabs on the prices and practices of the funeral industry.”<sup>2</sup>

And it was in January of 1963 that *The American Way of Death* was published—Jessica Mitford’s meticulously researched, ruthlessly worded, virulent attack on funeral service. In her book, Mitford railed against everything from product sales to morticians as grief counselors. She blasted pricing tactics, bemoaned the structure of the industry, and took aim at the most sacred institutions of funeral service. Hardly a stone was left unturned, and there was scarcely a component of the funeral director’s work with which Mitford did not take issue.

The FTC’s Funeral Rule was enacted two decades later, and in her 1996 updated revision, Mitford all but accepted responsibility for the sweeping legislation that redefined funeral service as we know it and put every mortuary in America on a short leash. She may well have been right to take credit. Directly or indirectly, her book gave America its perspective on, and suspicion of, funeral service. Mitford did for Americans planning funerals what Upton Sinclair did for Americans eating bologna.

For all her research and conviction, it’s tough to tell what Jessica

Mitford intended as the result of her work. Her frustration with funeral service was clear; less so was her objective. To reform the business? To end it? The only calls to action Mitford offers are methods for consumers to avoid or outmaneuver funeral professionals; she never offers a roadmap for professionals to reform their trade.

Whatever her intent, the result has certainly been destruction. The industry has not been reformed. In many ways, it has been cornered into doubling down on Mitford's original complaints. Weighed down by the Funeral Rule, bad press, and an ugly consumer suspicion of practitioners, funeral service seems mired in personal shame and unable to pull itself out of the pit. Funeral care in America may be more heavily regulated, more deeply distrusted, and less lucrative than it was in 1963, but it is by no means better equipped to serve the public. Ironically, many of Mitford's sharpest critiques (merchandise revenue, sales techniques) are ostensibly the only ways for the modern funeral home to survive amidst the uncertainty and pressure wrought by her work. Even today, the online reviews of *The American Way of Death* read like a complaint forum against the local mortuary. Everybody, it would seem, has a bone to pick and a story to tell.

While Mitford was never sympathetic to funeral directors, she did unwittingly describe one of the most daunting challenges facing them. Funeral professionals, Mitford wrote, would "vastly prefer to be looked upon as 'trained professionals with high standards of ethical conduct,' but the exigencies of their trade still force them into the role of 'merchants of a rather grubby order.'"<sup>3</sup> Mitford concludes that funeral service is marked by "...the split personality of the calling, arising out of its inherent contradictions."<sup>4</sup>

While her description is by no means flattering, it raises an important question: what exactly should funeral directors be? Are they akin to waiters, with a responsibility to deliver exactly what a family asks but never suggest anything else? Or are they leaders, duty-bound to guide a family toward the decisions that will serve them best? Do they exist only

for the deceased, to quietly handle the body and its disposition? Or is the surviving family's health and well-being something with which they should concern themselves? Are they counselors with a role of providing compassionate guidance? Or salespeople with numbers to hit? Should they be empathetic to reflect the family's state of mind? Or stoic, true to the fact that they have done this a thousand times? Should they act like the trustworthy servants they are? Or should they acknowledge that they know they're perceived as self-interested and untrustworthy?

Every time they answer "both," America's morticians find their mission increasingly diluted and obscured. They must train their employees to handle a confusing and daunting list of paradoxes, and their customers expect them to impossibly become all of the above. What Mitford called "the split personality of the calling"<sup>5</sup> has led to the paralysis of funeral directors since even before her book hit shelves. Funeral directors live in a precarious situation. Mitford, of all people, seemed to recognize this, even while she was disparaging them. The role of being simultaneously guardian and salesperson, leader and attendant, confidant and business owner—it's a terribly thin line to walk. All funeral directors know it; they can hardly introduce themselves or answer the friendly question of, "What do you do?" without being put on the defensive. They are instantly associated with someone's worst experience of death and subjected to a stern lecture on the worst assumptions about the business. What are they to do?

All of this has led me, over the last few years, to ask a question of funeral directors and funeral home owners every time I get the chance. It started as a way to get a particular client on the record, but when the response was the opposite of what I expected, it grew into a sort of national experiment. My data is purely anecdotal, but the question—and how you answer it—betrays an important understanding about modern funeral service.

*"Is there a right way to grieve?"*

If the answer is yes, that has implications for your business. Certain products, approaches, and even customers are “righter” than others, and your work is infused with a moral imperative to support them. Doctors, builders, mechanics—those professions in which there is a “right way” to do things—are duty-bound to do it right, and to provide for their customers a degree of consultative expertise. If there is a right way, then a funeral director is hired not just to get the job done, but to do it right, and to make recommendations to help the family do the same.

If the answer is no, that too has implications. The job must simply get done, and there’s no objectivity beyond what the customer wants. Retailers and restaurants come to mind here. The customer shows up when they want something, and it’s essentially the duty of the provider to give them what they ask for. In all but the finest restaurants, it doesn’t matter if the chef believes potatoes would pair perfectly with that dish; if the customer wishes to substitute a side salad, then that’s what they must receive. In food service and retail, the customer is always right. Conversely, in medicine and engineering, that concept is laughable; the expert is hired precisely because of the customer’s lack of expertise. So, we must ask into which category funeral service falls. Is there a right way to do this? Or are we simply retailers who serve at the pleasure of the customer?

Mitford’s book—and in many ways, her life’s work—was built on the premise that there is no “right” way to do death. She contended that funeral service had duped the public into believing there is solely as a means to swindle them out of money. The families you serve, and arguably our culture at large, has swallowed this perspective hook, line, and sinker. When she died in 1996, Mitford’s husband had her cremated for \$475. No funeral, no family present, no celebration or recognition of any kind.<sup>6</sup> Just a direct cremation. Mitford was dead set on debunking the notions that morticians are experts in grief and that there are psychological benefits to a funeral or viewing. If she was right, that has important implications for how you should do business. It would mean you need to

focus on whatever is going to sell the most products or meet demand the most expediently. It would mean you should build your company around the product *du jour*. If jewelry is in, then jewelry should be stocked on the walls. If the market wants direct cremation, then you should close up shop on the full-service side. It's a clean, straightforward approach—and one to which many of your competitors (including some very well-funded ones) are unapologetically committed.

On the other hand, if Mitford was wrong, and if there really is a right way to handle death, that has implications too. For one, it would mean that the ever-less-popular traditions against which Mitford railed so sharply really do have value, and that mortuaries were never wrong to promote them. It would also mean that a mortician's work is not simply to deliver what clients *want*, but to work toward providing what they *need*. This is a more complicated road, but it's arguably a more fulfilling one, and even a more lucrative one. It's said, apocryphally but nonetheless poignantly, that Henry Ford was suspicious of design by focus group: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."<sup>7</sup> If you're looking for innovation—and success—the place to start probably isn't a customer satisfaction survey.

No, if there's a right way to do this, it means looking to something higher than the whims of public tastes. Most of us intuitively understand that a business has to be grounded in something with more staying power than what will move product this month. This is the very definition of a mission. No doubt you have a mission statement of your own in your office or on your website somewhere. But there's a difference between having a mission statement and working missionally. A mission is not a product or a model or an approach. Your mission is what you exist to do. Your reason for being. A moral imperative. In the last century, this shouldn't have changed, and in another century, it will still be the same. Great companies have great missions, and they set a permanent foundation upon which to build.

In January of 1977, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak wrote down the mission statement of Apple Computer Inc. “Apple is dedicated to the empowerment of man—to making personal computing accessible to each and every individual so as to help change the way we think, work, learn, and communicate.”<sup>8</sup>

The statement reads as remarkably prescient. It’s hard to imagine that Jobs and Wozniak really understood just how much would be achieved by their company to this end over the next four decades. But that’s exactly what a mission statement should be: unbounded by a particular time or situation. In 1977, Jobs and Wozniak had a specific idea in mind of what individually accessible personal computing meant—and in 1977, it involved computers the size of dressers. By the ’90s, that had evolved into something very different. In 2001, it meant the iPod, and by 2007, the iPhone. The company that was building computers in 1977 was by the early 2000s a service company with only a fraction of its revenue coming from computer sales. More than half of Apple’s margins in 2020 came from storage services, app subscriptions, licensing, and warranties—platforms that didn’t even exist in 1977.

If Jobs and Wozniak’s mission statement had been “to sell personal computers,” Apple would be a very different company today. Instead, they looked beyond their business model, upward at an idea that transcended what they could have imagined at the time. In the same way, your mission shouldn’t be tied to any assumptions about how you’ll work, what you’ll sell, or how you’ll make money.

When you think about your mission, don’t become distracted by that gold-framed mission *statement* hanging on your wall. Usually those are simply an exercise in wordsmithing, a fixation of a board of directors 20 years ago that employees don’t remember and that management doesn’t apply. Instead, think about the mission itself. Why do you get out of bed in the morning? What would be lost to your community, besides your revenue stream and a few jobs, if you closed up for good? What would be different

if your next owner were a big conglomerate instead of your son or daughter, or your hand-picked successor? Chances are you have some strong feelings about those questions, and chances are those are clues to your mission.

Your *model*, on the other hand, is something completely different. Your model is the *means* by which you are working toward that mission. The model will change. In fact, the model must never stop changing. Apple's model was product sales in 1977, service revenues in 2020, and will be something else entirely in 2070.

The trick is understanding the difference between mission and model. And as my firm has researched hundreds of private mortuaries around the country, I've become convinced that almost nobody in the business truly understands that distinction. Shockingly, less than half of mortuary owners nationwide agree with the statement that they need a new business model.<sup>9</sup> This is a shocking, indefensible position, because *every* business needs a new business model. And death care's current model is a century old, rooted in societal norms and structures that no longer exist. Almost everything your children buy works differently than it did a decade ago. Don't expect them to plan your funeral the same way your grandfather planned his father's.

It doesn't end there. An incredible 71 percent of funeral home owners believe that their customers fully understand the value they provide. If that was true, direct cremation wouldn't be on the rise, Jessica Mitford's book wouldn't have been a bestseller, and Silicon Valley wouldn't be investing millions to provide an alternative.<sup>10</sup> Four out of five funeral home owners believe they embrace change—again, a shocking figure considering how little the way they do business has really changed, even amidst rapidly evolving customer expectations.<sup>11</sup> The ubiquitous belief in this industry is that it will be able to do things the way it always has, ad infinitum.

In other words, funeral service is treating its model like its mission. It's no wonder why. So little has changed in the model over the past century that the products and services have become synonymous with the needs they



meet. And the two are confused. The industry talks a great deal about percentages of direct cremation while thinking relatively little about how many families were actually helped to confront their loss. Many owners can tell you what sales did month over month but have no idea whether Mrs. Smith went back to visit her husband's grave on Memorial Day. And they know that Legacy Touch trinkets sell like hotcakes, but they aren't really sure whether they are actually cherished as the treasured memorials as which they're sold.

Confusing model and mission is a twofold danger for this business. First, funeral service has grown foggy regarding that for which it really exists. The lack of clarity regarding its mission is not entirely the industry's fault, but it is certainly a problem. The mission (again, not the framed placard on the wall but the actual idea we communicate) of most funeral homes today is a thick, cloudy gumbo: a good helping of tradition, some salesmanship and business best-practice, a wistful remembrance of the golden years three decades ago, a fuzzy reading of futurism and social commentary, and a heap-  
ing dose of fear—fear of family's displeasure, of bankruptcy, of lawsuits, and of an FTC inspector with an obscure reading of the Funeral Rule.

One branch manager I interviewed told a story about a grumpy old cynic who came in to make arrangements for his wife. It was clear to my client that the gentleman was in denial over his loss, and despite the funeral director's best efforts, he wasn't budging. Direct cremation, no funeral. At length, the funeral director discussed the psychological ramifications of not having a chance to say goodbye, the power of a viewing, and the importance of a ceremony for the deceased's grandchildren, if not for the gentleman himself. Still, nothing. Just as the skeptic was leaving, he noticed a few pieces of thumbprint jewelry on the merchandise display, and agreed to buy a few for his granddaughters. The funeral director was ready to high-five me for "a breakthrough."

I hated to be cynical, but I couldn't help but be confused by his elation. The man was still avoiding a funeral for his wife, and it seemed doubtful that a few baubles were going to change his denial. But such is the position of an

industry on the ropes. With so many different and even conflicting missions (don't upset the family, don't let us go out of business, don't let them do a direct cremation, don't let them walk across the street) and an impossible situation to navigate, we sometimes celebrate for even the most minimal (and opposing) reasons. This is the world of missionlessness. We're unsure what exactly we're aiming for, so we take whatever we can get.

The other side of that double-edged sword is just as sharp. If we conflate mission and model, we will die on meaningless hills, unwilling to change because we assign to models and tactics and tools the value that should be reserved for a higher purpose.

I once met with another highly regarded funeral director who shared with me that he felt the firm absolutely needed to evolve, but never at the expense of fundamentals. Wanting to clarify, I asked, "What are the fundamentals?"

"Wearing black suits," he responded with deadpan earnestness. "And caskets, and limousines, and holding doors open for families."

His answer stunned me, because it betrayed the same foundational misunderstanding that I have since found is common in the industry. Whether it's time to give up on black suits, limousines, and caskets is a valid question about which competent businesspeople can disagree. It might be time to let these things go in Phoenix, while they'll still be profitable for decades in rural Kentucky. But there is simply no room for disagreement on this: *these things are absolutely not fundamentals*. They are executions. Applications. Tools. They may or may not get you closer to the essential mission toward which you work. To confuse them with the mission itself is a fatal error because you'll then protect to the death things that simply aren't worth protecting. If a new product, or a different approach, allows you to accomplish the mission just as well, then let's move on. Refusing to change your mission is worth going out of business over, but refusing to change your model will *put* you out of business.

History is replete with companies which have mistaken the difference. Radio Shack enshrined with mission-like permanence its model of a cookie-cutter store size and format and refused to evolve when big-box stores, and then online retailers, attacked its space. Borders was so naively committed to its brick-and-mortar model that it handed Amazon the keys to its kingdom, not even recognizing the internet bookseller as a competitor. (Amazon, on the other hand, recognized shrewdly that the two companies had the same mission—selling books—but that Amazon had a far superior model by which to do so.) Within the quickly evolving world of fast-casual and home-delivery food service, fast food brands (whose drive-through model no longer quite delivers on their mission of convenient dining) have struggled to keep up.

Caskets. Viewings. Rosaries. Openings and closings. Graves. Niches. Urns. Limos. Hearses. Removals. Embalmings. Cremations. GPLs. Funerals. Celebrations of life. Chapels. Black suits. Ties. Lapel pins. Every single one of these is part of a model. An approach. A tool. An implement. Some of them are in high demand. Others are still the right way to do things. Others are downright outdated. (I won't tell you which is which; that's up to you.) The fact that something is part of a model doesn't mean that we must abandon it. It just means that we acknowledge it's subservient to a higher mission. It's *not* non-negotiable.

When we treat our model as non-negotiable, we become unwilling to change, which simply doesn't work. No industry in human history has ever been able to apply the same model for any considerable period of time without evolution. There is a 100 percent mortality rate for businesses who don't change their model. Sears was once synonymous with retail. Today it's history.

Consider this: If your mission was to provide heat to homes, one thousand years ago your model would have been selling firewood. A hundred years ago it would have been coal. Today, it's natural gas. Someday, it will be something else. But as the world changes, and technology

changes, so must the model, because new and better means of achieving the mission constantly become available. You might have the sharpest axe in town, but as soon as your competition has a chainsaw, you must either change or die.

Back to my big question.

Every time I meet with funeral directors, I ask whether there is actually a right way to grieve. Usually I wait for a moment in the conversation when they're expressing frustration with social trends, or complaining that direct cremations are up, or arguing about whether deregulation in the industry is a good thing.

In other words, I wait for the moment when they're talking about families doing it wrong. I've asked the question from coast to coast, of dozens of different funeral directors, from tiny 100-case firms to nationally-recognized major players. *Is there a right way to do the process of death?*

To this day, no one has ever told me that there is.

Usually, there's palpable awkwardness as they try to answer diplomatically. A few will answer outright with a "no," or an "of course not." Some will furrow their brows and think deeply, as though they've never consciously contemplated this before. But one hundred percent of the time, the answer is in the negative. The tragedy is the timing. I'm sitting in a room full of competent, skilled professionals, with decades (if not centuries) of experience amongst them, who have just been discussing with detail and expertise all of the consequences of doing death *wrong*. And yet they're hamstrung, whether by guilt, political correctness, confusion, or something else, absolutely unable to admit that there is a way to do it *right*.

Obviously, it's the word "right" that holds people up. Nobody wants to appear too rigid, too audacious, or too prejudiced. We've strayed from saying that there is a right way to do anything – from parenting to religion to career paths. Inclusion, tolerance, and open-mindedness are the watchwords of our culture. We're taught in school that there are no stupid questions. A century ago, pounding your fist on the table and proclaiming

a right way might have been expected; today it just feels rude and narrow-minded.

And yet...

There is a right way to conduct almost every professional process. If I'm going to have a cancer removed, I want my surgeon to believe firmly and confidently that his approach is the best way to do it. If I'm spending a few thousand dollars to have my transmission replaced, you better believe I want it done right. Even in more subjective practices, like interior design, marketing, or art, there are well-established norms for producing and critiquing good work. You would be hard-pressed to find a creative director or an architect or a museum curator who tolerates the notion of absolute subjectivity in their employees' work. There *is* bad art, bad design, and bad advertising, and those things result when the practitioner departs from the right, established, studied, true, and proven ways of plying one's craft.

It's vital to note that a "right way" does not imply rigidity and prescriptiveness. Within even a single school of architecture or design there are endless opportunities for innovation and creative expression. To say that the "right" way to do art is to carve marble statues in the Renaissance style would be ridiculous. But to extrapolate from that to say that there is no such thing as bad art would be equally ridiculous. I suspect that funeral directors have been so pigeonholed as rigid, cold, and unaccommodating that after decades of being browbeaten, they've thrown the baby out with the bathwater and are afraid and unclear about what constitutes right grief at all.

If there was a "split personality" in funeral service before Mitford wrote her book, then her efforts have only multiplied it. If it was confusing to be both a confidant and a salesman in 1963, try doing it in an era when both are considered out of bounds. It is nothing short of tragic that Mitford and other critics have hammered funeral service into its present deflated, confused state—not merely a split personality, but a shattered one.

There is a right way to do death. And there is a wrong way. Avoidance, nonconfrontation, fear of emotion, suppression—all of these are wrong and will result in a stunted grief process. You know this as a professional, you were taught it in mortuary college, and you have seen it borne out in experience. Confronting, communicating, gathering, memorializing, processing, reflecting—these are healthy. This isn't about picking one tradition or another, or one venue over another; you can do a funeral "right" in a place outside of a funeral home, and every culture on earth has rituals and norms in place to shepherd the bereaved through loss and back into routine.

Today we pretend that passively disposing of Mom without any ceremony is as valid a path as mourning her. We have accepted the ridiculous notion that someone who has never been to a funeral is equipped to decide for a person's entire extended community that the funeral isn't important. The comfort of the moment ("funerals are creepy") is inexplicably considered to bear equal weight to the health of the long-term ("I just wish I'd had a chance to say goodbye"). All of this is unprecedented in human history.

When COVID-19 or 9/11 deny us the opportunity to mourn together or with the body of our deceased, it is considered a tragedy, and tomes are written about grieving in such strange times. But when unintentionally harmful decisions on the part of a few uninformed family members deny that same opportunity to themselves and to others, not a word is said—and those who have the most valuable perspective and the greatest expertise find themselves under the most strongly-imposed gag order.

In "The Death of Expertise," Tom Nichols argues that the United States "is now a country obsessed with the worship of its own ignorance."<sup>12</sup> Nichols paints a sobering picture of a society crippled by the misguided view that the opinion of someone with ten minutes of online study is just as valid as the opinion of an expert with decades of experience. He tells a true story of a college sophomore arguing arrogantly with a revered astrophysicist. At one point, unable to convince the expert, the student

shrugs and huffs, “Well, your guess is as good as mine.” The astrophysicist wisely reminds him, “No, no, no. My guesses are much, *much* better than yours.”<sup>13</sup>

Funeral directors are experts, and it is high time they said so. You cannot serve thousands, or tens of thousands, of grieving families without picking up some clues about what works and what doesn't. If you help a couple scatter their son's ashes twenty years after his death, and then hold them as they weep with relief after finally being able to say goodbye, you're not wrong to advise the next family you meet that they should reconsider taking their child's remains home with them. If you see the changed expression in a young man's face after he's able to sob over the open casket of his brother, you're more than entitled to tell the next family that a viewing might be the hardest thing they ever do, but it will be worth it. And if you watch from your office when a young widow returns to visit her husband's grave, you're not obligated to sit quietly by when the next family in your office says that memorials and places to visit aren't really important.

There is hardly a psychologist alive who has spent more time studying mourning families than the average American funeral home owner. Your profession is licensed, trained, and regulated. There are schools dedicated to teaching your craft, and you spend decades honing it. You likely have personal experience with death—either you grew up around the profession or had a close personal loss that you had to deal with yourself. All of this adds up to a trade that far surpasses the threshold of what constitutes expertise. And that itself constitutes an undeniable moral imperative. You do know what's going to help, and what isn't. You do know what is healthy and what's not. You do know which families are going to be okay, and which are going to struggle.

You have to be willing to say so.

The pressures against you here are immense, to be sure. Society has been conditioned to distrust you. Many of the industry's assumptions and

approaches, as we will read, have solidified that distrust. Death care as a whole is confused over what to let go of and what to cling to. Funeral directors are like a baseball player in a slump, unsure about what to change and who to listen to, paralyzed by blow after blow to their confidence.

But the best way to get out of a slump is to acknowledge it and get back to the basics. The profession needs to do just that. To move forward, you must gather those fragmented pieces of the calling to rebuild a moral imperative for the industry. A true north to which people can look. The mission must again be made clear so that you can lead families, employees, and communities in the right direction. This is no small task, but it must be done. It must be done for the same reason your forebears founded your business, and likely for the reason you got into the business in the first place.

They need you.

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