

BECOMING AN EMBALMER'S APPRENTICE: AN
ASSESSMENT AND APPLICATION OF
EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

By

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CHAPTER I

THE INTERVIEW: AN EXISTENTIAL SELF-CONCEPT

You are dead. Think about this statement for a moment, try to visualize yourself as a corpse, accept it as real, and do not evade the notion. Keep in mind there is no room here for afterlife beliefs because that knowledge could only be revealed in a later incorporeal possibility and right now the idea is that you are dead. There is no relevance for leaving behind a gene pool, a label for family lineage, symbolic representations of your identity or personality in photographs, paintings, or even your *cremains* in the cover of your favorite book. You are dead. Being dead is not beautiful, glorious, grotesque, morbid, at the right time, at the wrong time, or without meaning simply because it is considered a natural transformation of energy, you are dead. Your religion will not save you, nor will the achievement of Nirvana, meeting your Maker, the Creator, God, Allah, or deceased relatives on the other side because here in this immediate moment you are dead. How does that make you feel? What thoughts come to mind when you consider yourself this way?

An Autobiographical Account

For several years I have contended that thoughts about being dead were a greater challenge to sense of self than thoughts about death as a concept; being dead and death were not considered one and the same. Death was thought to be a social, more general conception, whereas, thoughts about being dead were more personal or concrete. Like

many children that begin to comprehend the conception of death between the years of five and nine (Norris-Shortle and Williams 1993; O'Halloran & Altmaier 1996; Gil 1998), my earliest intrigue or contemplation of the subject began around five years old with a nightmare. I awoke in the middle of the night from a dream where my parents were dead and then ran into their room crying. My mother provided comfort by wrapping me in her arms and explaining they were not dead or going to die. Once calmed down, I requested to sleep with them for the remainder of the night at which point, my father very sternly said everything was fine and to get back to my room and go to bed. He was right, and by morning it really was nothing more than a dream.

The next few years would bring personal experience with the death of my grandfather, uncle, and friends of siblings, but possibly the greatest influence in the conceptual development of death resulted from the many funerals attended or served during my years in parochial school. At that time, only boys were permitted to be altar servers for funerals and we always looked forward to the possibility because it meant being excused from classes, a small monetary gift, and often lunch when the rest of the students had to dine at the regular eatery, the public high school. Though we were not emotionally attached to the individuals at these funerals, it still provided silent moments to observe and think.

When I began to verbalize these curiosities about death during my adolescent and high school years it became apparent that the subject was almost taboo, and if not met with disregard or laughter from friends and family, then it raised suspicion of my character. Since it was rarely taken seriously, most of my thoughts during this time were kept to myself in amazement that something so universal could be treated as if it did not

exist. There was no Internet and no one suggesting articles or books to read, therefore it was pleasing to enter college and learn that people both wrote and studied the concept, even if only relieving my stigmatized identity of peculiarity. Other than personal thoughts, no real academic efforts were put toward increasing knowledge about death until graduate school, but I was equally amazed to find out almost a decade later that attitudes even in academia had not really changed. My interest in pursuing the concept as a thesis again was met with disregard, laughter and suspicion especially when discussing the possibility of questioning people about their corpse. Obviously, the humor was understood even sometimes beginning with me, but at least this time there was Internet access and people that could make academic suggestions. The greatest implication from all of this was that even in academic settings, when a conversation turned from discussions about a general concept of death to one that requested people to consider the biological aspects of their corpse, there was a recognizable difference in attitude and understanding, a finding also consistent in my thesis.

The Corpse and Existential Self

A synonym for the corpse is body, and dead or alive my corpse is nearly everything to me. Every physiological, biological, and social aspect of it is incorporated into my current disposition of life. From the thin epidermal layer shrouding the blood, organs, coursing veins and pump that fuel it to the recognizable physical mass that moves in space making verbal utterances of intonation and reflecting self-identity, my corpse is the social embodiment of me. And no matter where the condition of the body falls within the matrix of socially and biologically alive, socially and biologically dead, socially alive and biologically dead, or socially dead and biologically alive (Hallam, Hockey and

Howarth 1999) the social significance and relation to identity remains. In other words, a person could be an upright fully functional typical human being, a quadriplegic, an amputee, terminally ill, a ghost, deaf, living with Alzheimer's, an embalmed body, or brain dead in a permanent vegetative state. In any case of existence, the body provides the vehicle, the shell, the visible representation of the self that is theoretically contained within it. Moreover, the condition of the body inevitably shapes and molds the perception and presentation of self-identity throughout the life course and sociologically continues to exert influence on the living after an individual has been embalmed, buried, cryogenically suspended or cremated.

Despite the relevance of the body, researchers from traditional sociology have held a propensity to ignore the body in life (Shilling, 1994) and even today continue to look beyond the social significance of the corpse or biological body in death (Hallam et al. 1999). Though we lack empirical facts for the concept of self, it seems there is no greater place to acquire evidential implications for it than in the one aspect of life that indicates or represents probably the most significant transformation in self for both the living and the deceased, that is, in the inevitable destruction of the most prominent feature of identity, the body or corpse.

However, it is a well-known fact that, in America, ideas of morbidity surround discussions of death (Leming and Dickinson 2002; Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2003), especially for people that claim handling the dead as a professional occupation. Why do people have trouble discussing the end of their own lives? Why do people think handling the dead is an abnormal thing to do when it is such a natural and necessary process? Why do individuals experience a certain degree of stigma after speaking of an interest in such

matters? Does an individual confronted with these issues experience changes in self-concept? Do changes occur in self for people that choose to immerse themselves in situational contexts for dealing with the dead?

Giddens (1991) might argue that answers to these types of questions are correlated with the rise of modernity where the body existing in consumer culture became central to personal self-identity as a sort of work in progress until its eventual demise. The problem then, for individuals living in contemporary society, is they lack a conceptual framework for the perceived control over their bodies as it relates to identity and death (Shilling 1994). In other words, traditional society provided a more defined, recognizable, or stable sense of self for individuals due to roles and ritualized practices affiliated with a community based orientation. People understood who they were, why they existed, the meaning of their death, and the way it would be handled by other members of the family, tribe, or community. However, with technological advancements and shifts in the familial and communal structures, people living in contemporary society are in a constant reflexive process of identity as a response to an array of possibilities and opportunities. Though equipped with more knowledge of the body than in times passed, they are now forced to negotiate lifestyle choices and determine their relevance (Giddens 1991). As a result, individuals lifestyle choices both create and reinforce self-identity, and provide a greater sense of control over their bodies (Shilling 1994); however it is these same choices throughout the life course, taken in combination with the notion of their impending death that disrupt this more comfortable self reality, thus leaving them once again to pose more fundamental questions of existence. Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose?

This type of socio-cultural argument creates aggregated individuals neither providing much information for the specific kinds of questions being posed nor assessment of any insights or conclusions to these questions that might have been drawn in relation to dynamics of self when confronted by its demise. And since death in this perspective, is often perceived as one of the greatest challenges to individual sense of self, it only seems appropriate to assess this relationship by participating in an occupation that is virtually defined by it. It is by being-in-the-every-day-world of an embalmer's apprentice that greater acknowledgement and understanding of the existential self-concept will occur.

The existential self refers to "an individual's unique experience of being within the context of contemporary social conditions, an experience most notably marked by an incessant sense of becoming and an active participation of social change (Kotarba 1984: 225)." It is an incarnate entity that is embodied with feelings and emotions, disembodied through its established identity with referent groups in the social world; concurrently, it is both articulated and ineffable (Fontana 1984; Lyman 1984). This is a 'real' or 'authentic' self and dominated by feelings that are fused with rational thought (Lester 1984) in a continual progression or process of becoming. Therefore, the existential self consistently changes as it is confronted with uncertainty by the real or constructed ongoing alterations recognized in everyday life social situations that include changes in technology, attitudes, values and etceteras (Kotarba 1984). How then does one make adjustments to self-concept when confronted with the most critical transformation in their life, that is, their own death? Does this threaten the individual subjective security of self?

According to Martin Heidegger in his work *Being and Time*, philosophically even when individuals critically assess ontological issues surrounding death, they have merely established an *inauthentic* interpretation in their treatment of it as something *not-as-yet* that separates individuals from the ‘facticity’ of their *ownmost possibility, that is non-relational, certain, indefinite, and not to be outstripped*. More simply, speaking of death as an event has the implications of empirical definiteness embedded in social construction that merely conceals the reality of death that represents an indefinite yet universal characteristic of Being. Sociologically, however, people could make adjustments or incorporate a death identity into their self-concept by immersing themselves into situations involving death, that force them to reflect more regularly on their mortality and possibly establish greater comprehension of death and the relationship it has to self in the process of living out a life. In this way, the self can transform and reestablish stability in the same way it does when confronted with more common everyday social situations of uncertainty. This is where an existential sociology could possibly explicate real concerns surrounding issues of death by revealing the emotions, feelings, and rational thoughts in the redefinition of self. It is these types of considerations that provided the impetus for becoming an embalmer’s apprentice.

Potential Individual Benefits and Sociological Contributions

I applied and was registered by the state of Oklahoma for a funeral director/embalmer apprenticeship in compliance with a local funeral director. The apprenticeship enabled me to see or understand the variations of thoughts, feelings, or emotions that occurred while immersed in the everyday life of this occupation. Too much of what had been written regarding the funeral home and embalmers was from the

standpoint of an objective researcher either interviewing people involved in the industry, through the assessment of published literature, participant observation, or historical explanations of the development and structure of funerals (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Mitford 1963, 1998; Pine 1975; Howarth 1996; Hayslip, Sewell and Riddle 2003; Salomone 2003). The subject of this study differed from previous literature, as the data was collected from a subjective individual who was essentially training to become a funeral director/ embalmer. Several perceived benefits that result from this approach include theoretical and methodological contributions regarding the use of existentialism in the field of sociology, social psychological and experiential information that could potentially extend the literature on the concept of self, and insight into critical challenges and redefinition of self as a response to death related situations that might be useful to both educators and individuals involved with grief or bereavement.

First, this study could contribute to the field of sociology in terms of theoretical implications. Aside from a collection of readings organized by Joseph A. Kotarba and John M. Johnson (2002) entitled *Postmodern Existential Sociology* there really was not a lot of literature that utilized an existential sociology. This study offers insight into the utility and legitimacy of this theoretical perspective or at least contributes to the parameters around this concept by exploring questions about the possibility of an existential sociology, appropriateness of it, and characteristics that might distinguish it from other everyday life theories.

Second, there were social psychological possibilities considered from direct experience. Most people do not spend much time involved within contexts of death despite the fact it is a necessary and certain aspect of social life. Individuals often speak

of death with euphemism (Leming and Dickinson 2002; Corr et al. 2003); leave their loved ones to die in institutions and to be prepared and buried by other organizations (Norris-Shortle and Williams 1993; Charkow 1998), and then merely show up briefly to say goodbye to a body they would rather not view. Historically speaking, it has not always been this way (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Pine 1975), and in this manner exists the propensity to avoid the real issue, the confrontation with our own mortality and unknown consequences to self. The apprenticeship provided concrete situations of death and exposed these consequences to self as it changed. This more active approach highlighted some of the emotions, feelings, thoughts, or more specific kinds of knowledge that developed in response to handling the dead. Additionally, it possibly could contribute to different management strategies of these emotions, for both individuals working in death related occupations and human beings that must experience the death of loved ones or various types of grief.

Third, there were potential benefits for research concerning grief and bereavement. As previously suggested it is well known that people in America often have difficulties accepting the realities of death and generally avert the concept in a variety of ways. It was Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) who asserted that human beings are incapable of comprehending the ending of their own life even when they think they have it mastered on many levels, thus people have a significant amount of difficulty addressing the loss of loved ones or the confrontation of their own mortality once in a dying status or terminal situation. Rather than confronting these sorts of issues as a process throughout life, people wait until something happens to make these considerations. Bereavement conducted in this context disrupts physical functioning,

cognitive functioning, and behavior, thus manifesting itself in a variety of ways such as chills, fatigue, memory distortions, attention deficits, excessive drinking, and sleep disturbances (Balk 1999). Someone grieving over death may elicit these types of responses as she or he adjusts to both a drastic change and permanent absence (Haussamen 1998). Therefore, the tasks of grieving or mourning that include accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing the emotions associated with the loss, adjusting to the environment in which the significant person is no longer there, and withdrawing the energy used in dealing with the loss so it can be reinvested in new relationships and life events (Charkow 1998), usually represent an active process empowering the bereaved to take control of a rather uncontrollable circumstance (Freeman and Ward 1998). A study focused on the more irrational aspects of human behavior while immersed in situations of death potentially offers new insights to ameliorate coping techniques offered by grief counselors or the strategies being used by individuals in their personal death related grief.

Finally, in cooperation with the funeral director, the apprenticeship provided the opportunity for involvement in other aspects of the funeral business such as funeral arrangements, body removal, graveside rituals and etceteras, each being significant in the shaping and description about the experiences of an embalmer's apprentice. Any conflicts, frustrations, emotions, or other social psychological responses occurred from the process of becoming or living out this way of life. This was where an existential sociology could extend death and dying literature as it required the individual to be immersed in the concrete social situation of handling dead bodies in what could be considered the final transition of self in corporeal life. In this context, the individual was forced to confront mortality on a regular basis rather than waiting for a more tragic

incident to occur such as the death of a loved one. From this position, any challenges to self security that generated questions and caused changes could be presented in an experiential story as it unfolded rather than from a descriptive or explanatory study focused on a pre-determined position within a funeral home from an objective observer that stood over and against the situation as more of a detached entity to determine what it meant to other people that do the work.

The Initial Self Concept and Existential Tasks

Thinking of myself as a corpse created sadness, intrigue, and perplexity. But was this a truthful response? Could it have simply been the presentation of self-identity based in social construction and knowledge that other people would review it? Maybe a more honest response would have been less appropriate for this setting and too detrimental to my sense of self for consideration. Could it have been the response of an individual thinking about death from the safe confines of his home well away from the sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound or more concrete aspects of it? Possibly it was more representative of observations conducted from personal experience and the reading of published literature. How would an individual even know she or he was being deceitful about the self? These were the tasks of an existential sociology. Perhaps taking a job as an embalmer's apprentice without experience in death related occupations might reveal substantive information about the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that occurred while working in contact with the dead, or it might reveal reasons why the public finds discussions of death, funeral directors, and the thought of being dead as morbid rather than as a natural process and necessary component of being human. The possibilities of this study were yet to be known.

CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY TO EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

Although existential philosophy and existential sociology are obviously interrelated the following types of questions still remain: What is existential sociology? Does it really differ from an existential philosophy? If so, what are the methodological differences when existentialism is utilized within a sociological framework? Further, how could existential ways of thought contribute to sociology?

In order to address these types of questions, a general overview of existential philosophy has been provided followed by a discussion of existential sociology that is based primarily from the foundations proposed by Jack Douglas and John M. Johnson (1977) in their book *Existential Sociology*.

Existential Philosophy

It is difficult to discern just what existentialism represents because it is not necessarily governed by a general set of tenets (Kaufmann 1952; Schrader Jr. 1967; Guignon and Pereboom 1995), in fact, the term 'existentialism' was not even coined until the twentieth century by Jean Paul Sartre well after its initial underpinnings had been established during the nineteenth century. However, some may even want to argue it began much further back in history with the early Greeks or Sophists, for instance, when Protagoras of Abdera stated, "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are," which was used to imply that the soul or

human essence could not be distinguished from the senses (Dillon and Gergel 2003).

Any depiction of existential philosophy that does not address the question "Of Whom do you speak?" would be equivalent to entering a classroom full of feminists and requesting information about some general tenets of "Feminist Theory" in order for you to put on your feminist hat or lens for a starting point of comprehension; it just does not go over well with advocates and experts of the discipline. For philosophers involved with existentialism, a person that presents general tenets basically annihilates the possibility for understanding the existential way of thought.

Despite the absence of a general consensus for an existential paradigm, many scholars have arranged writers that have been deemed existentialists into groups they feel share some intellectual interest or similar approach to human beings in the social world. For example, Wyatt (1995) developed an Internet resource entitled the "Existential Primer" (<http://www.tameri/csw/exist/>) where one may see Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger grouped together as a sort of a metaphysical trio that argued 'faith' was not something logical and determined by scientific methodology. Another group might be Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, or the secular group of existentialists with considerations for politics and literature. One could possibly see Ludwig Binswanger, Rollo May, and Viktor E. Frankl grouped together as the psychotherapy existentialists or any other combination of names that may include Gabriel Marcel, Aleksandrovich Berdyaev, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, and Jose Ortega y Gasset. Whether or not consensus will ever exist among scholars for any type of existential grouping, despite its impossibility, each of these writers, among many others, contributed to the formulation and development of existential thought. This is without

consideration for all the phenomenological and pragmatic thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and William James that influenced the initial existential movement, but that would be an entirely different paper altogether.

For the early writers of existentialism such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, existentialism was a response to the modernist ideals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Weinstein 1968; Oaklander 1992; Guignon and Pereboom 1995) that was criticized for the structuralization of the world and reduction of the individual to a mere passive or objective being. They wrote in response to philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Von Schelling, and Georg W.F. Hegel who attempted to write as part of their philosophies a definition of 'faith' as something logical and explainable (Friedman 1964; Oaklander 1992). For Nietzsche, the positivistic viewpoint represented "The Death of God" or a world that fragmented everything into ritualistic notions of social order to a point that eliminated the basic foundations to our lives by reducing individuals and society to a plenitude of dualisms within definable situations. In other words, if there is no accord in a transcendent basis for our values (i.e. God), no verity in terms of culture, religion, or normative principles, and no consensus on what is right or wrong, criminal or non-criminal, moral or immoral, then human beings are marching down a pathway to nihilism. Nihilism could then be interpreted negatively or positively by means of 'The Will to Power' where individuals creatively appropriate new cultural and social forms of life. In this manner, responsibility for interpretation, meaning, and human behavior is placed back into the brute being or individual that is immersed in everyday life situations and equipped with her or his emotions, drives, and passions as an active participant in the consistent state of becoming or in a more

authentic social reality, a similar position taken by many existential writers. It is this point that leads to another approach shared among existential thinkers, transcendence.

Basically, existentialists have characterized human existence as involving a continuous struggle between opposing elements (Guignon and Pereboom 1995). For Kierkegaard, these opposing elements were ‘facticity’ and ‘transcendence’ or what we are and can be. In other words, humans have basic biological and physiological needs, but in addition to these needs, they have the capability to transcend them by means of consciousness. More specifically, humans can reflect and evaluate themselves in terms of goals, plans, or a vision of the additive elements of their life and what this means for their future. Therefore, individuals are always immersed in some social context, self-creating, interpreting, reflecting, and evaluating, thus being defined by their actions in the course of living out their lives (Weinstein 1968; Hayim 1980). For existentialists, then, the ability of individuals to recognize themselves as subjects of experience indicates they are more than just a mind or field of consciousness that is distinct from the field of experience or social context and should be understood as individuals that create their own self by exercising the freedom to stand over or against their mere physiological limitations or ‘facticity’ through the interpretation of objects in particular situations and decisions to act based on any number of possibilities or goals (Manning 1973; Heller 1980). This is how responsibility for behavior is placed back into the individual rather than existing externally as proposed by modernist sciences. The acceptance of positivistic rationale for individual choices and human behavior renders a person *inauthentic* or as a practitioner of "Bad Faith," a general result to mass society and something one must guard against to live out a more *authentic* existence.

To do this, people must take into account their actual being, the lucidity of knowledge, and potentialities of belief (Jaspers 1951). This means that individuals are thrown into an existence without transcendent truths to serve as foundations for their inquiries; they are sociologically restricted to particular environments and do not participate equally in each, respectively. However, with an increase in scientific and technological advancements, concurrently, people have a greater accessibility to choices or models to follow while embedded in various situational contexts, and since there is not a generalizable situation for individuals, relations between selfhoods occur in the intimacy and absolute historicity of those encountered that can engender unbreakable personal ties and a sense of self. What must be understood, aside from the factual being, is that self or being is only what individuals make of it and what is made continually alters in response to everyday situations that perpetually change over the life course; therefore, people will never be what they become. As Sartre recognized, human beings are concerned about their future selves, but they only exist as a projection into the realm of possibilities, thus representing both the self they will be and not the self they will be. In other words, the concepts of identity and self are made through the freedom of choice and recognized as a continual process of becoming, not as immutable entities. Individuals can only achieve what is possible by recognizing the impossibility of their existence (Jaspers 1951) and the realization that life is an unending process of possibilities until the ultimate, inevitable feature of being human, death. For Kierkegaard, truth or authenticity is subjectivity and this does not represent a denial of objective facts, rather, it indicates the precedence of individual satiation regarding wants, desires, passion or needs whether one is actually right about some empirical fact. As

Ortega said "rhetoric is the cemetery of human realities or at any rate a Home for the Ages" (1930/1932, p. 117) and in order to live authentically people must feel lost, accept this reality, and comport themselves toward their surroundings as a means to create some sense of order to their lives despite the fact these decisions may not cohere to the "Noise," the "Public," "They," or "Mass-Man." Even when situated in a social structure and forced to abide by social rules due to a current condition, people must not surrender their freedom to choose through recognition of their ability and potential to transform their condition with actions.

Though existential thinkers may not view the world in precisely the same way, they do have some consistency in terms of existential concepts they choose to examine such as the freedom of individuals to choose their reality from multiple possibilities, the external influences from being in relation to others or the leveling process, and the ability to become more than 'facticity' by means of transcendence in a consistent state of becoming via the myriad of possibilities. Existentially, then, people seek to reveal the truth to their existence and must realize as Jaspers noted that existence is only a possibility, not something possessed or guaranteed.

Existential Sociology

According to Kotarba and Johnson (2002), existentialism generally emphasizes the nature of human beings and the responsibilities of their freedom to choose that is often enacted by emotions and passions or the centrality of the more irrational aspects of human life. Within this tradition, inquiries are often about the various ways people live, feel, and think about the personal situations that envelop them. For example: Who am I? What is the nature of human life? What is the nature of human experience? Existential

sociology then developed along with researchers' attempts to adequately comprehend and explain these types of questions when working with concrete phenomena experienced both in their everyday life activities and research (Douglas and Johnson 1977); it was not just an academic exercise within a definitive existential framework of sociology or philosophy.

The primary impetus of existential work is maintaining the integrity of the phenomena; therefore, it always begins within the individual worlds of experience with the brute, finite being that is dominated and motivated to act by feelings, emotions, passions or drives somewhat independently from the more rational evaluations and suggestions from empirical science. Existential sociologists seek to understand the total human being (Douglas and Johnson 1977) that entails immersion into the respective social environment. In other words, existential sociology begins with the individual's experience as an active participant in concrete social situations proceeded by his or her attempts to generalize, theorize, and apply this interaction to social life.

Data collection is based in experience and accomplished from any method demanded by the subject matter in the immediacy of a social context and the naturally inquisitive person trying to access more general truths about self and human existence (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Heller 1980). Essentially, how people come to know things is based on their experiences as flesh and bone men and women in any variation of concrete situations. There is no scientific prejudgment, observable truth, hypothesis or reliability testing because knowledge remains partially relative, situated, and reflexive even in the human drive to comprehend beyond the immediate experience (Manning 1973; Douglas and Johnson 1977; Heller 1980).

Human existence is fundamentally problematic, both for an actor and anyone who would try to understand their existence. Human beings are varied, mutable, uncertain, continually met with conflict, and partially free to choose what they will do and become because they must be able to exist in a world that is just the same (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Heller 1980). The only way people have been able to survive their individual worlds, both the physical and social, is through the adaptation of themselves to the worldly situations they end up inhabiting. The human being is fundamentally grounded, transcendent, emergent, situational or existential (Douglas and Johnson 1977).

Douglas (1971) tried to understand how rules were used and order was constructed by political actors in society. From his work, Douglas surmised that the phenomenological works of both philosophers and sociologists had misunderstood the pluralistic nature of society; the conflict embedded in meanings even within individuals; the importance of emotions and social rules regarding individual decision making; the deceitful manner of actors and their adeptness at constructing fronts in both primary and secondary groups, and the difficulty involved with determining proposed truthful information from other people during interaction, and whether individuals themselves were even clear about their understanding for the constitution of truth.

In existential sociology, it is proposed that feelings are the foundation or goal of all thought as they pervade and fuse with thought, as well as inspire and sometimes destroy it (Douglas and Johnson 1977). It is presupposed that reason and rationality serve as guides to feelings in the symbolic construction of expression and growth. Though proponents of this theory have a greater interest in irrationality, they recognize that the resolutions of everyday life do have patterns such as driving to work while

daydreaming or having a cup of coffee and a bagel each morning while reading the paper. And this is precisely the problem involved in analyzing this cyclical interaction because most of human experience in everyday life is semi-conscious behavior. The consciousness of human action emerges as individuals perform the behavior, it does not precede the action. Though this somewhat contradicts the Sartrean notion of “existence precedes essence,” it also suggests that when conducting an existential sociology, researchers must immerse themselves into a situation without thinking about it in some theoretical term before or during the experience as a means to grasp it and then later should observe themselves retrospectively to symbolically describe it (Douglas and Johnson 1977). If individuals attempt to determine their observations before engaging in the experience, then the findings become rationalistic in context and less representative of self in everyday life.

The brute being equipped with thoughts, emotions, feelings, passions and drives is continually challenged by the rationality of other people, social structures and ideals expressed in a particular epoch, that contributes to the naturally problematic and conflict oriented characteristic of being human (Scott and Douglas 1972) when involved in the ordering of their social life. The problem occurs in the basic fact that no amount of human rationalization or hegemonic attempt to control situations or people can anticipate and prepare for all potentiality in a given situational context. Regardless of any desire or will for predictability and structural restraints established, individuals will always emerge and vary in their experience while embedded in ever changing situations. The goal for researchers of existential sociology, then, is to self-observe their experiences in order to

generalize about people from the natural settings and in the same way that meaning typically develops.

CHAPTER III

THE TRANSGRESSION FROM CARETAKER OF THE DEAD TO THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR IN NORTH AMERICA

A stranger in a designated home has not always been the primary care taker of the dead. However, this was also during a time when dealing with death was more of an understanding rather than a taboo. With the changing times, mobilization, and industrialization came the rise of the mortician, a specialist or tradesman who undertook the responsibility of dealing with the dead.

Historical Development of the Funeral Industry

Early American communities did not view death as an individual problem; rather, they responded to it as a collective crisis (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993). Any death affected the entire community, not just the family of the deceased. In this regard, death was more of an adversary, a foe, or indiscriminant villain rather than a peacemaker, welcomed friend, or savior from the physicality of life. The death watch, funeral, and burial were often community events and family members or friends were in charge of the arrangements (Pine 1975; Cahill 1995; Nygard and Reilly 2003). The care of the dead was primarily in the hands of the female family members and household servants or specialized “shrouding women” in the local community (Cahill, 1999). During this time period, these individuals were the

undertakers, a term that was in use by 1698, and defined as one who “undertook” to make funeral arrangements and to keep a body safe (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Iserson, 1994). Bowman (1959) contended that early communities were smaller and rural whereby death was handled with greater ease due to frequent experience with animal deaths. However, this experience dwindled with the rise of industrialization and the modern factory as rural community members began working further away from home. In turn, specialized undertakers gradually assumed the community’s social responsibility for dealing with the dead (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993; Nygard and Reilly 2003; Salomone 2003).

In Britain 17th century, the sale of funeral paraphernalia began and a few entrepreneurs acquired the occupational title undertaker (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Pine 1975; Cahill 1995). Discourse of death in North America and Europe was very blunt and terrifying throughout this time period. Clergymen routinely used discursive images of death to remind the living of their sinfulness and ultimate powerlessness (Cahill 1995). These types of rants made death seem fearful, and undertakers were soon to be in high demand, as people no longer wanted to be associated with death by any means.

By the 1800s it became evident that funeral practices such as preparation of the corpse, viewing the corpse, burial container, burial sight, consolation literature, and community involvement which typified dominant American society were shifting away from family and friends toward professional preparation of the body (Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993; Nygard and Reilly 2003). This was in part due to the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and scientific advances. The autopsy, embalming, and

cadavers became increasingly important investigative and instructional tools within the aspiring profession of medicine; however, such intimacy with death and the dead conjured up images that were far from helpful in securing physicians' claim to professional authority over human health and life (Cahill 1995). Making adjustments to the cultural changes toward the meaning of death, undertakers increasingly offered their own “parlors” which were typically more spacious (Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993).

The Civil War brought with it a new preparation for the dead. During this time, Dr. Thomas Holmes was hired by the Union Government to devise a method of preservation as a means to get dead soldiers home for their burial (Coriolis 1967; Johnson-Williams 2003; Salomone 2003). This was accomplished by embalming the dead with a mercury-based solution. Following the War embalming was seldom used. The local carpenter was the undertaker who was equipped with a metal “icebox,” but he seldom made any further arrangements. The livery stable provided the hearse and horse team (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Coriolis 1967) for the transfer of the dead to their final destination. However, some of these people and other entrepreneurs became exclusively occupied in undertaking. They consequently also became more rhetorically occupied (Cahill 1995). As talk about the dead changed, so too did the traditional funeral practices. Concurrently, furniture dealers began to stock caskets and arrange funerals (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Coriolis 1967), and a new rhetoric for death offered the funeral occupation its foundation (Cahill 1995), one that entailed images of beauty.

In 1882, the National Funeral Directors' Association was created. By 1885, the undertaker became the funeral director (Iseron 1994), although, it has taken some time

for this term to be recognized. The new rhetoric removed the discursive images of dark retribution, agony, and decay, and replaced them with images of beauty, gentleness, and a welcomed release from life's trials and tribulations (Cahill 1995). Death was no longer a mournful event; it was to be viewed as a celebration. By the close of the 19th century, most of North American funeral directors had embraced embalming as one of their definitive occupational skills and services (Cahill 1995). They also became adept at sales (Habenstein and Lamers 1962; Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993). However, as people began concentrating into larger cities, public health concerns suggested that it would be safer to locate cemeteries in rural areas. These concerns would begin changing the social attitude toward dealing with the dead once again.

During the 20th century, as more and more dead bodies were handled by the funeral director, death became increasingly invisible and discursively dirty (Cahill 1995). Basically there were two primary reasons for this rhetorical change. First, pathological anatomy, cadavers, and autopsies gradually became physicians' dirty little secrets from the public, and surgeons abandoned embalming to funeral directors (Cahill 1995). With the funeral directors' adoption of embalming came an even greater association with death. In Europe and North America, this occupational specialty became rhetorically entangled in the discourse of the public health movement, in Europe and North America, whose primary concern were the potential threats to public health posed by the diseased and decaying bodies of the dead (Coriolis 1967; Cahill 1995).

The second detriment to the funeral directors' rhetoric was the advancement of medical science (Rowland-Maguire and Maguire 1993). People were living longer and losing sight of the inevitability of death. Also, with the decline in death rates, North

Americans had fewer occasions to contract funeral services and witness the occupational performances of funeral directors (Cahill 1999), and the lay public's increasing unfamiliarity with funeral directors arguably bred, if not disgrace, then at least suspicion and discomfort. Death now commonly came at the end of a long life and long illness in a lonely setting, and funeral directors' monetary dependence upon and intimacy with death made them seem polluted, callous, and strange (Thompson 1991; Cahill 1995).

Today, the occupational titles of undertaker, funeral director, mortician, and embalmer are used interchangeably. It is even specified as such on my state certificate (See Appendix A). These types of rhetorical changes have been used over the history of the mortician as a means to ease the discomfort of the general public and probably represent the greatest indicator of the dramaturgical displays the industry now sees as a necessity to perform (Turner and Edgley 1976). This was not only for monetary benefit but for personal and social reasons as well. Now, both associated professionals and clients tend to agree that the custody and care of corpses are funeral directors professional prerogatives (Cahill 1999).

Although, modern society recognizes that funeral directors fulfill a necessary function in society (Iseron 1994; Thompson 1991), the occupation is still viewed as an unfavorable role, and talk of it is generally avoided. This is the point where Goffman's notion of stigma is understood and exerts its greatest influence. The successful funeral director must speak publicly in order to acquire business, but also must remain discrete since the public does not want to speak of such considerations. From the moment of death notification through the body removal, funeral arrangement, embalming, ceremony, and graveside ritual, funeral directors must stage dramas that are meaningful to their

audience in order to contribute to a public image that is more favorable (Turner and Edgley 1976; Howarth 1996). And though this production will cost money during each phase, far too many individuals continue to find it morally wrong to advertise these services in order to acquire profit and provide for the community. "These confusing identities based on an array of occupational activities are the historical burden of North American funeral direction's twisted occupational roots and rhetorical entanglements" (Cahill 1995).

Contemporary Trends of the Funeral Industry

In the twenty first century the funeral director still is recognized to have three primary roles: business person, funeral director or caretaker of the dead, and grief counselor, although many critics disregard the latter two. Probably their greatest antagonist comes in the form of Jessica Mitford from her eminent work *The American Way of Death* (1963) later revised as *The American Way of Death Revisited* (1998). These books both incriminate and highlight the role of the funeral director within an ever increasing complex structural network known as the death care industry and serve as the centerpiece for the following discussion.

The Corporate Influence

The largest corporations involved in the economics of funeral homes and services are Service Corporation International (SCI), Loewen Group, and Stewart Enterprises. Despite market fluctuations that forced the sell of European funeral homes in such places as France, Switzerland, Belgium and the Czech Republic, SCI still remains the largest corporation operating in the funeral industry of North America with 1190 funeral service locations, 390 cemeteries and a service capability for nearly 80% of all households in the

United States (Source: <http://www.sci-corp.com>). The corporate presence and dominance in the funeral market resulted from a concept known as clustering (Mitford, 1998; Salomone 2003) made available with a crucial decision by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that opened the market to the funeral service industry, thus reducing the amount of control and power funeral directors previously held.

Traditionally, funeral directors controlled the market on caskets and often used only one primary manufacturer at their set prices. In the event a client would purchase or provide their own casket, funeral directors would then add a "casket handling" fee (Mitford 1998) in order to compensate for the lack of profit. In 1994, the FTC ruled against this practice, thus enabling competitors into the market. This also opened the door to other aspects of the funeral service that included flowers, make-up, monuments, and vaults, and entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to enter these service sectors in order to acquire profit. However, probably the greatest investment one could make would be for non-taxable land or private cemeteries.

According to Mitford (1998) the process of acquiring a cemetery to make a significant amount of money is rather basic. First, cemeteries are non-profit organizations, and that is why they are tax-free because the land is no longer usable. In order to turn a profit, an entrepreneur opens a cemetery company that cares for the property and is responsible for selling both mausoleums and graves or land plots. However, in order to provide this service, they must enter into a contract with landowners to whom they will have to offer a fee for the permanent use of their land. It just so happens that the landowners are the same people that set up the company to maintain the cemetery. As landowners they are entitled to a 50% share of the graves and a 60% share

of the mausoleums. This, of course, only represents the purchase of land. Later there will be other fees that include a digging fee with a minimal rate of equivalency at approximately \$2400/hour. If any other organizations attempted to move in on the profits, such as the monument and vault companies, then additional fees would be enforced on them, a strategy employed once state laws enabled cemeteries to make their own rules.

Further, since a private cemetery is not even partially subsidized by community members, owners can advertise to the public for their services, something the municipal cemeteries or their primary competition are not entitled to do. State laws and clever maneuvering by corporate leaders has enabled them to control more services of the funeral industry, and the ownership of the cemetery has a strong influence on the development of the clustering model.

Mitford (1998) explains that clustering begins by moving into a metropolitan area followed by the strategic purchase of funeral homes, cemeteries, flower shops, crematoria, utility cars and etceteras. With all the component parts in place for profit, a small number of workers (i.e. dispatchers, embalmers, drivers) can now operate and control multiple establishments in a cluster of operations. In this way, what is considered to be part time work with full time help can be readily accomplished more efficiently. Although this practice only represented 10% of the nation's funeral homes at the turn of the century, they accounted for approximately 20% of the country's funerals (Mitford 1998; Salomone 2003). As these markets came under greater control of the corporation, previous funeral operator/owners were transformed into salaried managers that worked in the same funeral home with the same name as a means to maintain the trust or integrity

with the community. Other developments would eventually be cemeteries with crematoriums, funeral parlors, flower shops, monument lots, and gift shops all conveniently located on the same property, as evidenced in the cemetery of much notoriety, *Forest Lawn Memorial Park*, located in Southern California.

It is interesting to note that all this development has occurred over the basic fact of competition for the corpse. Though the circumstances are different in the American corpse hustle, the competition still bears a close resemblance to the South African ‘DeathTown’ where individuals scurry around to retrieve the abandoned corpses of AIDS victims to earn monetary benefits from the government (Masland 2001). However, with annual cremation rates on the rise, entrepreneurs, business owners, and funeral directors have been forced into new organizational relations and developmental venues for innovations to generate profits from disintegrated human remains or cremains. Today, the consumer, dead or alive, has a multitude of possibilities.

The Potentiality of the Corpse

Preparations and arrangements for the corpse can be made while living or by next of kin in the absence of advanced directives or wills. A person can choose to preserve their corpse by means of mummification (Quigley 1996; Gauthier, Chadoir and Evans 2003; Smith 2003) or cryonic suspension (Iseron 1994; Quigley 1996; Gauthier et. al 2003), or one can choose to dispose of it by burial at sea (Iseron 1994; Quigley 1996; Gauthier et. al 2003), by green burial (Gauthier et. al 2003; Smith 2003), by donation to research such as organ donation, putrefaction, or medical and mortuary science programs (Iseron 1994; Gauthier et. al 2003; Leming and Dickinson 2003; Joyce and Williamson 2003), or even by cremation whereby the ashes are added to numerous types of objects

such as coral reefs sunk into the ocean (Gauthier et. al 2003; Smith 2003; Rehfeld 2005), lockets or jewelry (Smith 2003; Kushlan 2004), the pages of a favorite book, fireworks (Gauthier et. al 2003; Rehfeld 2005), or duck decoys (Gauthier et. al 2003; Rehfeld 2005), or the cremains can be launched into space (Gauthier et. al 2003; Smith 2003; Rehfeld 2005). Despite steps taken for the disposal or preservation of your corpse while living, ultimately what becomes of it is dependent upon any next of kin willing to accept the responsibility to see your intentions carried through, because the dead have no rights. Maybe a person filed an advanced directive for cremation or prepaid for it with a particular funeral home, but after death the loved ones decide they want to display the body before putting it in the ground. Chances are this person will end up embalmed, because what can he or she do about it? After all, once dead “the sad and well-known fact of the matter is that most of us will stay in our caskets and be dead a long time, and that our urns and graves will never make a sound...the meaning of our lives, and memories of them, belong to the living, just as our funerals do (Lynch 1997: 13).” This final possibility for corpse prompts the question, "With all the innovations currently available for disposing of the corpse, why would some individuals still find it necessary to embalm and display their loved ones before submitting them to the ground?"

Traditionally, in America, people embalmed the body before the wake for two primary reasons: hygiene or public health and mental health or public viewing by the bereaved (Iseron 1994; Mitford 1998; Johnson-Williams 2003). At current, no law requires an individual to be embalmed, excluding some circumstances such as a transfer of a body from Florida to California, and the benefits to the bereaved for viewing the body before burial are continually debated. However, consider the following factors

surrounding a dead body, especially if a family desires to view it and conduct some kind of ceremony.

When a person dies his or her body must have proper disposal because within 2-3 days, putrefaction begins; that is, unless this individual died from an overwhelming bacterial infection, in which case putrefaction might occur within twelve hours (Iseron 1994). Initially, the skin turns greenish in color dissipating a putrid odor created by intestinal bacteria that later causes the skin to turn purple then black, the tongue and eyes to protrude, the intestines to be pushed out through the vagina or rectum, and dark fluid that leaks from the nose, mouth, or other orifices (Iseron 1994; Quigley 1996). Of course cooling the body can slow this process but how many individuals are equipped to do that from home? What does the modern American know about these processes of decomposition? Would she or he even be willing to invest the necessary time to take responsibility for disposal of the body? Several aspects of modern American life suggest otherwise.

First, again consider the way death is discussed and handled in America. People generally have not made preparations for their corpse and tend not to discuss or know the intentions for the corpses belonging to their friends and families either. Further, due to the geographical mobility of the modern human being, it is not uncommon for people to die in locations far removed from their family members (Gauthier et al. 2003). This might require additional time for making decisions for the corpse and possibly to get family members who live in various locations in the United States or abroad together for a wake and funeral. Essentially, the average person living in contemporary society is not adequately equipped intellectually, pragmatically, experientially or emotionally for

disposing of dead bodies belonging to people they know and care about. Possibly this is the result of living in an increasingly fragmented and specialized culture that sequesters death as something morbid; nonetheless, in the unexpected event of death, maybe it is more rational for the everyday citizen to turn the corpse over to funeral directors who are known and perceived to be experts for preparation and disposal of the dead.

CHAPTER IV

BECOMING AN EMBALMER'S APPRENTICE

In order to report on the experience of becoming an embalmer's apprentice there were basically two areas of interest for consideration: state regulations and the more ethnographic responsibilities of a social researcher. Both were necessary in the establishment of the most important criteria of existential sociology, maintaining the integrity of the phenomena (Douglas 1977). Before the approval from my dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), it was necessary for me to determine if this study would even be permissible. The first step in this process would be obtaining the cooperation of a funeral director, and this would prove to be more difficult than initially anticipated.

Meeting the Funeral Directors and State Expectations

Nearly two years after reading an advertisement in a local newspaper for an embalmer's apprentice the decision was made to pursue this possibility. As a social researcher in full recognition of the stigma funeral directors bear and the research parameters of the IRB, I thought it would be appropriate to first seek the cooperation of the funeral directors by informing them of my intentions, rather than attempting to infiltrate their establishment incognito. After all, an inability to acquire a funeral director's cooperation would have immediately terminated this research endeavor. The

methodical approach for requesting their cooperation presented the first dilemma as it was uncertain how funeral directors might respond to this type of request. The fourth attempt for cooperation would prove to be successful but was the result of adjustments to knowledge obtained with each successive attempt and a little help from a colleague.

Becoming Stigmatized: The First Attempt

The decisive method for the first attempt was an informal phone call in order to make an appointment for a face-to-face meeting with the funeral director where the specifics of the project would be discussed. The phone call appeared to be more appropriate because it was thought that some long-haired guy that just shows up off the street requesting the opportunity to aid in the embalming of other people might get perceived as some peculiar, possibly gothic individual who plans to live out his fantasy world of necrophilia by playing with the dead, thus eliminating any chances of participating or representing himself accurately. In other words, based on previous experience in relations with others, it was not uncommon for people to find my interests in death related research strange or peculiar, often due to my age or to their perceived lack of rationale for my having an interest in these matters, such as previous work status in any death related industry or what some may consider significant experiences with death by means of the nuclear family, a spouse, a near-death experience, or while in the military. The phone call, then, would remove the possibility of generalizations about my age or character from their perception and permit me to speak first in hopes of setting an appointment to discuss the project as a well-intentioned researcher. However, the phone call proved to be detrimental.

The phone call was made around 1 p.m. on Friday, the 11th of February and *Mila, who was presumed to be the secretary or front room specialist, answered the phone. Dennis, the funeral director was out of the office, and despite my efforts to simply arrange an appointment, Mila took down my information stating he would call me as soon as possible. Within the hour Dennis returned the phone call at which point he was offered my name, affiliation, and interest in working at his establishment. His initial response went something like this, “I guess my immediate response, or simple answer is no. I know all about you Sociologists and what you do and do not think I want you conducting your work around my funeral home.” This was said in a somewhat sardonic tone of voice, but led to a more detailed conversation that lasted about twenty minutes. Dennis discussed his familiarity with various types of writing in sociology and concerns as witnessed from reading Humphrie's Tea Room Trade study. Generally, he felt too many sociologists show up to work in an establishment about three months for a study and then publish material on it as if they are experts. Acknowledgement of the IRB, anonymity, and confidentiality was not enough to persuade his decision otherwise despite his appreciation for some sociological work and his encouragement toward this current work. It was interesting to note that in all my preparations for this conversation regarding the stigma a funeral director must manage, in the end the stigma of a sociologist would have to be overcome, and in many regards it was somewhat refreshing to be defending myself as such. It also meant that the next approach would have to be altered.

* All names used throughout this section are fictional and have no relation to the funeral home personnel referenced in this study.

A Set Back: Rejection Number Two

It was thought, with the first attempt, that concerns about stigma and the idea of showing up unannounced to interrupt a normal workday could decrease the chances of obtaining cooperation. Making a phone call first to set an appointment was thought to circumvent this problem but only led to a different one, in that, the negotiation ended up taking place via phone. A face-to-face interaction had always seemed to be the best approach and a more important aspect to utilize when seeking cooperation. Whether or not stigma would become an issue, it was decided that this attempt would take place simply by showing up, unannounced and requesting their services.

With this approach came at least two considerations: a funeral director probably would not want to make a decision on the spot and there was the possibility that she or he would not be present. Therefore, an overview of the project would be provided in a more formal letter that offered information about the objectives, anonymity, confidentiality, and contact information for both my dissertation committee and me (See Appendix B). In either case, the letter would enable the funeral director to make an informed decision about my participation, and he or she could contact me in the event new questions arose. Unbeknownst to me, the new questions to arise would be mine.

It was Monday, the 14th of March, and I was decked out in my black trousers, a red, long sleeved button down shirt with my hair pulled back, and mentally prepared for dealing with stigma on either side of the discussion. In addition, I was full of hope and armed with a letter of legitimacy in the event it was necessary. However, there was one additional problem that surfaced during the mental preparation for the request. Regardless of my intentions, the letter of legitimacy, and belief in the significance of this

research endeavor, due to the more jocular part of my personality, the iterations of satirical scenarios about the approach continually projected in my head even up to the point the car was parked in the lot belonging to the next funeral home nearly thirty miles away. Possibly this was the indication of discomfort. These thoughts were transferred into a childlike self-image of immaturity where it may have been better to be walking into this establishment with a confident, legitimate, and professional self-image. Nonetheless, each foot continued to move forward.

Upon first entering the funeral home I was quickly met by Mike, who upon my insistence to speak with a funeral director, then referred me to the funeral director, Melissa. After a brief handshake, introduction, and initial explanation of my intentions she referred me back to Mike, who apparently was the primary funeral director/operator of this establishment. Mike then invited me back to a conference area in order to discuss this project further. At this point, the feelings of immaturity had disappeared and the focus returned to my status and intentions for becoming an embalmer's apprentice. In a manner to that, before gaining any knowledge regarding the study, his reply was a simple "no." His next comment referenced state requirements to be met and though he was uncertain, he thought that Oklahoma State Law expected at least a year of mortuary science school in order to even be permitted into the preparation room. It was noted that the previous funeral director, who turned out to be the one who had submitted the advertisement from two years prior, never mentioned this.

Next he suggested that he had enough problems to deal with already and would prefer not to add any more. This time attempts were made to legitimize myself as a death educator in full awareness of the stigma they must manage and followed again with a

brief discussion of the IRB requirements pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity. He concurred about the "thin line" they must walk and about my understanding of this, but after 41 years in a business he built up from the bottom, despite social criticism as concocted in Mitford's work and elsewhere, he could not rationalize the possibility of something going wrong to jeopardize all he had worked so hard for; it was not worth the risk. He also reiterated several times that most funeral directors were public servants and reputable people and their rejections to my request were not being done due to something they had to hide.

Mike was then interested in the reason for my previous rejection. It was shared that the greatest concern of the first funeral director was less about distrusting me, and more about what the public may do with that information in the future. Additionally, he was informed that in all likelihood any publications that come from this work would probably be limited to academic journals that were rarely read by the general public. Basically, he claimed to share the same kinds of concerns and echoed what the previous funeral director said, that he respected the motivation behind the research endeavor and might even be interested in reading it, but did not want the research to take place in his business establishment.

By the end of this conversation at least one theme became evident; on more than one occasion, Mike made comparative assessments about perceptions of death for his age cohort versus my age cohort and concerns about having nothing to hide. This seemed to offer at least minor support for my previous thoughts that age and status as a sociologist might be a stigma that has to be managed appropriately in order to gain acceptance or develop rapport with a funeral director. To test this possibility another alternative would

be utilized for the third approach, but not before investigating Oklahoma State Law to determine if one would need at least a year of mortuary science school, as it would be significant regarding the continuation of this dissertation topic.

Expectations of the State

Before the approval from my dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), it was necessary to determine if this study would even be permissible or plausible within the time frame established. The Funeral Board of Oklahoma was contacted and provided the following criteria for qualifications and registration shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualifications and Registration Requirements for Apprenticeship

Qualifications	
Age	Applicant must be 17 years of age
Education	High School Graduate or Graduate Equivalent Diploma
Sound Moral Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No felony conviction (of any kind) • No misdemeanor (related to funeral service) • Cancellation (if you fail to reveal conviction at time of application)
Registration	
Documented Proof	A diploma, transcript, G.E.D. Certificate or other documented proof acceptable to the Board for high school requirements
Affidavit	An employment affidavit form provided by the Board completed by the apprentice and the establishment of expected employment
Fee	The required registration fee at beginning of each year of apprenticeship (for 2005 it was \$150).

Source: Oklahoma Funeral Board <http://www.okfuneral.com>

As you can see from Table 1, no special requirements exist for pursuit of an apprenticeship as an embalmer other than being a good criminal or no criminal at all with

the appropriate documentation for a high school equivalent education. It was correct to begin by pursuing the cooperation from a funeral director and of course the fee would not be paid until that agreement had been reached. Now the only thing left was to determine the criteria and expectations of the apprenticeship (See Table 2).

Table 2. Criteria for Apprenticeship and Purposes of Licensing

Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No part time supervision (cannot be trained by part time funeral director or embalmer) • Place of Service (the licensing for funeral director & embalmer can be served at the same place at the same time)
Reports	Apprentice must file 12 monthly reports documenting employment and completion of embalming/funeral directing experiences
Due Date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each report is due the 1st and must be filed no later than the 10th day of the month it is due
Postmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The postmark shall determine the date of filing for the monthly reports and case reports
Late Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports received shall not count toward the total number required for licensing
Cancellation	An apprenticeship automatically cancelled by failure to file 2 monthly reports consecutively, unless an exception granted by the Board Office
Renewal	Subject to other provisions of this Subsection, apprentice registration is valid only for 12 months. Registration may be renewed once if such application is accompanied with adequate support documentation, satisfactory to Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Board, that such applicant is a graduate from or then active student enrolled in an accredited school or mortuary science, any payment of required fee.
Supervision	No apprentice shall perform embalming or funeral directing unless he is doing so under the direction and supervision of a licensed embalmer or funeral director.
Assistance	An apprentice shall, under supervision, assist in the embalming of at least 25 human remains and/or under supervision assist in the direction of at least 25 funerals for Oklahoma (varies by state).

Source: Oklahoma Funeral Board <http://www.okfuneral.com>

As indicated in Table 2, the apprentice can only work under the supervision of a full-time, licensed embalmer or funeral director. Reports of work must be filed regularly and on time in order to keep the apprenticeship (See Appendix C). Those who wish to obtain a license must assist with 25 embalmings and/or funerals and be enrolled or planning to enroll in a mortuary science program by the end of their annual apprenticeship term.

With knowledge of the state specifications, it was quite apparent that obtaining the cooperation of a funeral director would be the most difficult and important task. Additionally, it was clear that with the bureaucratic structure of the IRB, that all state specifications and documents would be necessary before submitting a research application. It was time for the third attempt at gaining acceptance.

Addressing Uncertainty

Since age, appearance, and profession still seemed to be influential factors in this process one more alternative would be attempted before strictly resorting to the face-to-face, unanticipated approach utilized the second time. Although the face-to-face approach was still considered most appropriate, a new variable had entered the situation, one of uncertainty. In other words, this third approach seemed to be the result, at least in part, of relinquishing potential insecurities with the unknown. This concern, in combination with the factors mentioned above, led to the method of mailing the more formal letter first (See Appendix B) and then following up with a phone call a few days later. It was thought that this would permit the funeral director enough time, at his or her leisure, to get an overview of the project in order to prepare for the conversation that would follow. This would eliminate any pressure they may feel about making an in-the-

moment decision with a stranger that could affect their business. Also, it would save me money and time in the event my drives to various locations in Oklahoma would be met with the absence of funeral directors on any particular day. So, On Wednesday the 23rd of March, the letter was mailed to another funeral home.

A week later on Wednesday, the 30th of March, the funeral home was called to find out if they had received the letter and would be willing to discuss it with me. David, who either was responsible for scheduling or just filling in while their secretary was on break, answered the call. He said the funeral director was busy with a family and he had no knowledge of any letter. He then took down my information and stated that the funeral director would return the call. Anxiety set in while waiting for the phone to ring and thoughts about his disinterest in the study began to surface. An hour had passed when the second phone call was made.

This time Sondra answered the phone and claimed to have no knowledge of the letter or note taken in the previous phone call. She also stated the funeral director had just entered another session with a family, so she took down my information and claimed he would return the call. Two more hours passed as my confidence in this situation dwindled, and it was decided a third call would not be made, as it was perceived to be too persistent, especially since it was now after 5 p.m. There was a plan to make one more attempt the following day, but in my mind it was already confirmed that this funeral director was not interested, and any more phone calls or time put forth to speak with him would be futile. However, a trip to school and a conversation with a colleague offered another opportunity.

Martin happened to know a former acquaintance that was now a funeral director and after hearing of my problems, he offered to mention my name to this gentleman to see if he might possibly be interested. The relief that was felt when he made the suggestion was noted, as it seemed to remove the unknown factor of approaching strangers about an idea that was a bit peculiar, embalming. It seemed that a friendship or work related network would put the funeral director at ease because my existence would be legitimated somewhat with his friend as a character witness, and it would put me at ease because it was known that the funeral director was willing to hear me out. Two days later, Martin mentioned that his former acquaintance had been informed and was willing to speak with me about the project. With this information, a follow up phone call was never made to the previous funeral home under the presumption that it would not matter anyway.

Access Granted

Finally, on Wednesday the 6th of April, the funeral director Logan was called, and after a brief conversation he agreed to work with me on this project pending all legal aspects were covered such as payment for services, shots, and registration with the state. I was not certain whether or not it was required to receive money for my services or if the shots were indeed necessary, so Logan offered me the number to the mortuary science school to find out. Two phone calls were made with a messages left; neither phone call was returned. Next an email was sent to the Oklahoma Funeral Board, and by Thursday, it was determined that payment could be negotiated between the funeral director and the apprentice and shots would not be required as long as the apprentice did not assist in the embalming of individuals with contagions (i.e. hepatitis B, HIV). It was also discovered

by a later phone call with a board member that my college degrees meant nothing, as they only required high school transcripts to be sent directly to the board from my high school. The board member also informed me that the board meets the second Thursday of every month to decide on things such as apprenticeship, and they would need my application at least three days before the meeting. It was important to make that deadline due to my intentions to begin the apprenticeship in June. So, the apprentice affidavit was downloaded from the Oklahoma Funeral Board website, Logan was called, and we made arrangements to meet on Monday, the 11th of April.

After a brief discussion of the project, Logan recommended getting involved in other aspects of the funeral home and not to limit my experience to just embalming. He informed me that funeral arrangements and graveside rituals were not only interesting but also a part of the experience of becoming an apprentice. He agreed to grant access to all services provided by the funeral home such as embalming, funeral arrangements, graveside rituals, and body removals as long as there existed a will to participate. Finally, Logan signed my affidavit, and that was followed by a drive to Oklahoma City to personally deliver all application materials as a means to eliminate any possibility of mail delivery inadequacies. Interestingly enough, on the drive to Oklahoma City a campaign sign for county commissioner alongside the road was noticed that read “Vote for Judy Graves.” It was somewhat humorous to me that immediately following the official signing of my apprenticeship affidavit, there would be a sign that read to me “Ju-need Graves” suggesting the requirements for the upcoming research project.

The funeral board met on Thursday, the 14th of April and approved my application. The official certification was received by mail confirming my apprenticeship

to begin April 14th 2005 and to end April 13th 2006. It just so happens that President Lincoln was shot on April 14th and later was embalmed, thus marking probably the most significant moment in history for the development and practice of embalming (Johnson-Williams 2003). Perhaps these kinds of circumstances or coincidences were an inevitable part of becoming an embalmer's apprentice.

An Ethnography, Auto-Ethnography or Existential Story of Experience

Douglas (1977) suggested that existential sociology must begin in the world of experience and always remain before us as researchers. Any analyses, theory, or philosophy would be the result of this experience rather than the appropriation of a priori knowledge by means of the more deductive, hypothetical, and experimental processes of positivistic science. Of primary significance, was for the investigator to directly participate in a particular social experience and to develop an understanding of it, concurrently, with the development of methods for assessment. In other words, it was not advisable to enter a social experience with devised methods and strategies because you might end up employing strategies that lead to a hypothesized or specific kind of knowledge, rather than acquiring a knowledge generated from the methods that resulted from the demands of the experience in the moments that it occurred. This keeps the investigator embedded in the experience, rather than participating merely as a reporter of an experience that was separated and left distinct from it as such.

After reading this rather brief section, other social scientists may be asking themselves a variety of questions about this methodology. The most prominent considerations are probably about distinctions of this methodology from other types of theories and methods used by researchers that might include ethnography,

phenomenology, ethnomethodology, participant observation or even strategies of grounded theory. A short answer to this inquiry is that existential sociology shares various characteristics with each of these approaches; however, a legitimate analysis extends beyond the scope of this study. In recognition of greater similarities to ethnography and autoethnography that scholars often place within a participatory paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 2000), some general distinctions are made followed by the personal experience methods that were utilized in this study.

Ethnographic Considerations

A very simple definition of *ethnography* can be obtained within any general methods book in a single line or two, for example, “a study that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation” (Babbie 2001: 281). It is important to note that the term *ethnography* does not evoke the same meaning as ‘qualitative,’ and in doing ethnography or describing a particular social environment, a researcher may choose to build an ethnographic record utilizing methods of fieldwork, library work, by watching, or listening, and thus produces quantitative or qualitative results (Bernard 1995).

In consideration of this point and for the ongoing debate of whether *ethnography* is a philosophical paradigm or distinctive methodology, Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley (1998) identified at least four characteristics of it: 1) an emphasis on exploring social phenomena in a natural setting without hypotheses testing; 2) working with unstructured data that is free from analytical categories or coded references; 3) the investigation of a smaller number of cases, but in greater detail; and 4) an analysis of data with explicit interpretations of meaning for human behavior through use of verbal descriptions and explanations where quantitative analyses are considered a secondary or

optional function. Each of these characteristics are similar to the methodology used in existential sociology, however, they differ with respect to the subject. Rather than immersing oneself into a particular social situation to report about other subjects, the researcher is the subject that collects data through self-observation and the written narrative story of personal experience. Examples approximating this kind of research can be found in Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives' book (1996) *The World Observed*, which includes a collection of writings with emphasis on the significance of the thinking process during fieldwork, how the imagination talks to researchers, and how individuals learned what they learned through the use of narratives or epiphanies throughout various moments of experience. However, the methodology that most closely resembles existential sociology is autoethnography due to its breadth or scope of studies recognized as a part of this approach and the similarities regarding criticisms from scholars that have assessed it.

Auto-Ethnographic Considerations and the Participatory Paradigm

Many researchers in this area consider autoethnography to be an autobiographical ethnography that takes many forms such as art, poetry, short stories, film, personal essays, photography, and social science prose with Self being utilized as the primary and sometimes only data source in a narrative that links the personal to the cultural (Ellis 1995; Reed-Danahay 1997; Russel 1998; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Holt 2003; Duncan 2004; Muncey 2005; Smith 2005). Obviously, this methodology has been met with many criticisms, especially for the forms on the fringes of the genre that are reviewed as drifting further away from rigor, reliability, and generalizability criteria used in more positivistic science. One might argue these criticisms begin with the notion that whether

a work is recognized as autoethnography depends on author discretion and on individuals who choose to write about those works with appraisal or degradation (Ellis and Bochner 2000). In my assessment, an existential sociology could be referred to as a *personal experience narrative* autoethnography (Denzin 1989) due to its autobiographical depiction of personal experience within some context of everyday life (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Though both methodologies are based in the existential struggle of any person immersed in a daily social situation, the autoethnography more often applies to some ongoing self-help, self-discovery or self-creation concept with a therapeutic value (Ellis and Bochner 2000) while an existential sociology has greater emphasis on describing experience first, where any alterations to self might come later in retrospect. This makes the autoethnography appear more intended or reminiscent of the consciously experienced world of phenomenology. Douglas (1976, 1977) suggested this kind of introspection leads to a very symbolized and intended experience when the objective should be an understanding of how over-symbolized and over-intentional introspection can be when retrospectively comparing it with a normal, defocused, everyday life. In other words, an existential sociology is a practice in self-observation of experience that is later theorized and understood in terms of non-symbolic, semi-conscious actions that took place on a given day. For example, a factory worker on a particular piece of machinery goes to work, does her job, and returns home. Asking this factory worker to describe her day produces different results than asking the worker to explain what it meant to her or if she experienced oppression. In the first instance, the worker would self-observe her actions, thoughts, and feelings whereas the latter situation would have the worker contemplating

conscious and symbolized representations of self or greater society. Though the suggested difference in the two approaches may be very subtle, or in more critical arguments not exist at all, it does suggest that maybe autoethnography due to an assortment of styles, and existential sociology would be best understood by placing them separately into the Heron and Reason (1997) participatory paradigm referenced in the work *Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences* by Lincoln and Guba (2000) that was developed to expand the parameters of methodology that ended with constructivism in the previous model (Guba and Lincoln 1994). The basic beliefs are identified below in Table 3.

Table 3. Basic Beliefs of Participatory Inquiry

	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Axiology
Participatory Paradigm	Participative reality, subjective/objective reality, cocreated by mind and given cosmos	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional, and practical knowing; cocreated findings	Political participation in collaborative action inquiry; primacy of the practical; use of language grounded in shared experiential context	Practical knowing how to flourish with a balance of autonomy, cooperation, and hierarchy in a culture, is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable

Sources: Heron and Reason 1997; Lincoln and Guba 2000

Probably the most noticeable contribution from Table 3 is the fourth defining characteristic of an inquiry paradigm, axiology. The axiology questions the intrinsic value in human life and the kind of knowledge that might be considered intrinsically valuable; however, Heron and Reason (1997) suggest it can only be understood in relation to the other characteristics of inquiry: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Though at first glance some of these notions appear to be problematic, their explanations that follow clarify the way an existential sociology coincides with a participatory paradigm.

For Heron and Reason (1997) the subjective/objective ontology refers to both being and ways of being. There exists a given reality; individuals actively participate in this reality, and through transactional encounters via the senses with Other, they subjectively articulate the meaning of this interaction to self as well as determine its objective stance relationally. Experiential knowing, then, represents the interrelatedness and co-presence of being within a situational context and serves as a foundation, though not in sense of the Absolute, for symbolic conceptual knowledge that is often determined by consensus in other paradigms.

According to the authors, critical subjectivity forms an extended epistemology that suggests interaction and meaning are determined by the participation of the knower in the known in four independent ways: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical. Experientially individuals engage in face-to-face interaction with Other in all its forms and acquire knowledge through participation and empathic understanding that resonates with their sense of Self in a way that makes them feel both connected to an object, place, person or thing and separate from it. The individual is actively involved in shaping a world, as he or she perceives it to be. These perceptions or understanding of a specific world are then articulated in a variety of presentational forms such as writing, art, graphics, or music. Propositions then develop from the presentational forms and incur the description of some object, place, process, person, or thing as it is in a particular situation. A person cannot provide this kind of description or knowledge without having demonstrated skills or aptitude for the way some interaction took place. This practical knowing is an understanding of how to do something that is based in the personal experience being researched (Reason 1994). The confluence of these four aspects for

knowing enables a non-restrictive articulation of subjectivity with a base in experience. In this manner, critical subjectivity becomes critical inter-subjectivity since knowledge is based in personal experience and always situated in both a cultural language and shared experience that includes dialogue, feedback, and social interaction with other individuals or the proposed methodology of cooperative inquiry.

Heron and Reason (1997) derive their methodology from two forms of participation called the epistemic and political principle. The epistemic principle states that any conclusions drawn from the study were based in the researcher's experiential knowledge. The political principle means that subjects involved with the research have a basic human right to a voice in the development of research methodology that was set to acquire knowledge about them. Researchers are subjects, subjects are researchers, and co-researchers are co-subjects involved in democratic decision making about operational criteria and content. At first, this statement appeared to be incongruent with an existential sociology having significance only in Phase 3 of the initial discussion of cooperative inquiry methods (Reason 1994). However, the authors later noted the rarity of committed collaboration efforts regarding research method and that generally in practice it simply meant the use of informed consent forms offering the right to suggest modifications to the operational plan for all informants involved in the study.

The methodology deserves further exploration, but in meeting the demands of the IRB an existential sociology is almost forced into this democratic participation of consent even though the researcher is the primary subject (See Appendix D). If collaboration also included the adjustments made to operational practice that developed from the demands of the situation, or as a result of interaction among individuals in a particular environment

that did not involve a specific conversation among all individuals regarding the subject, then it would appear to more closely resemble an existential sociology.

Finally, from Table 3 the axiological question inquires about the value of being, the kind of human states to be valued for their way of being, and whether the paradigm "regards knowing the truth in propositional form as an end in itself, and as the only end in itself" (Heron and Reason 1997: 287). Human flourishing becomes an end in itself because it establishes balance among people in a hierarchy through the process of choice and action that develops both autonomy and cooperation. This practical knowing or understanding regarding how to choose and act in a given social situation begins with experiential being and ends through the consummation of the other three basic beliefs. Radical empiricism of this sort as contended by the authors has its greatest strength from emphasis on integration of action with knowing. Therefore, a researcher immersed in a social situation, that reports on the cooperation and conflict encountered both personally and socially while being in relation with other individuals in a given context, offers a validity that cannot be provided in other types of inquiry. Additionally, it becomes necessary in an existential sociology for maintaining the integrity of the phenomena.

The participatory paradigm may not provide the reliability and generalizability to autoethnography or existential sociology in a way satisfying to critics of the methodology, but it does offer an alternative means for rigor. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest one method of reliability that requires a researcher to take his or her work back to the other people involved in the experience for comments and possible modifications to the experiential narrative. Further, they feel the readers test generalizability when the narrative provides knowledge about unfamiliar culture, people, or lives and aids them in a

vicarious experience of that world. In other words, the personal, subjective experience of a researcher becomes socially significant when readers understand and identify with the thoughts, feelings and emotions described in it. If the potentiality exists to promote thought, reflection, dialogue, or motivation toward the development of alternative methods for acquiring knowledge about the worlds researchers study, then it would appear to be generalizable.

Though this study has given the other participants the power to alter the experiential narrative as stated in the required consent letters, caution must be used in consideration for the employment of reliability measures. These types of measures are a better fit in an autoethnography where there is greater emphasis on self but seem to transform an existential sociology into a more conservative autoethnography by making adjustments or establishing a methodology as a response to something outside the demands of the situation or personal experience.

Methods and Risk Factors for Personal Experience

When a person thinks about his or her life lessons or passes on traditions and information from their elders, it is often done through the process of narrative. When individuals share information and stories with friends, colleagues, or family members, they often share it in the narrative form, and things learned are repeated based on what was recalled from those conversations. Generally, people do not retain everything heard or read and tend to repeat a story in their own words. The suggestion is that when attempting to learn about the everyday life experience it is important to acquire the information in the same manner that everyday life conversations take place, through various story lines, retention, and repetition. In this manner a researcher gets as close to

reality as possible because this is what it means to be a human interacting in a social context on a given day.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (1998) personal experience methods develop from this notion with the suggestion that the lives of people are basically stories, and when the topics of their lives are discussed in relation with others, these individuals reaffirm the story, modify it, and even create new ones. Further, these stories can educate people about self and others. They go on to explain the methods of personal experience as being focused in four directions: inward, outward, backward and forward. This refers to the feelings, emotions, and emergent reactions in existential conditions or social contexts that take place in a given moment of time during a given moment of history. From this interrelated, concurrent action, the researcher develops the meaning of experience through methods of *field texts* that may include oral histories, annals, family stories, photographs or family artifacts, research interviews, journals, autobiographical writing, letters, conversations, or field notes.

In this research endeavor, three field text methods were used: journal, conversations, and field notes. This did not mean that other methods would not be employed, but if they were used, it would be as a response to the situation that demanded it. For example, on different days the funeral directors provided an oral history about how they became funeral directors and why. In these circumstances, and as a part of conversation, the funeral directors were permitted to tell the story in their own words without interruption. This oral history was then recorded as part of my experience later in my journal. Essentially, this study was a qualitative ethnography or fieldwork that examined the researcher's thought process and dynamics of self as experienced in

relations with others within particular social contexts. The details of the selected methods are described below.

Subject Selection and Appointment

The study took place in an Oklahoma funeral home with my employment as a funeral director/embalmer apprentice from April 14 2005 – April 13 2006 (See Appendix A) and active apprenticeship data collection took place from July-December 2005.

Unlike other more ethnographic approaches, existential sociology established me as the primary subject and as such the work expectations were to be the same as any state approved funeral director/embalmer apprentice. These services included aiding the direction of funeral arrangements, embalming, body removal, graveside rituals and etceteras. The nature of the industry dictated an ‘on-call’ requirement rather than a nine to five work schedule operating Monday through Friday; however, by the end of the study the latter became the most appropriate means for assistance. Three funeral director/embalmers worked at this establishment and each could have called at any moment of any day as the opportunity to work arose.

Recording Experience

Since this research endeavor was about "becoming" an embalmer's apprentice, note taking in an electronic journal already had already begun after each step along the way and a similar method was used throughout the working process. For example, state registration was required to take an apprenticeship and it was necessary to find a funeral director to agree to this relationship before applying with the state. Therefore, after each interview with a funeral director, the experience was recorded immediately upon the

return home in an electronic journal, as was the case after each job experience in this funeral home.

Additionally, a tape-recorder was used to achieve greater validity in what was thought and felt about a particular experience. It took approximately thirty to forty minutes to drive to this funeral home; therefore, on the drive home after a work experience the tape-recorder was used in a self-report regarding my thoughts, feelings, reactions, observations and experiences as close to the experience as possible. This recorded information was transcribed or transferred to computer immediately upon the return home to further replicate a daily journal with some intermittent assessment.

A second method utilized was a small pocket notepad that was kept on my person at all times in order to jot down reminders or indicators of thoughts and situations that occurred while working. Again, these field notes were to be transferred to computer immediately upon the return home. This method was to be used only when appropriate and necessary given the context of the situation. For example, it was not appropriate to write down notes in full view of grieving individuals during a funeral arrangement, at a wake ceremony, or graveside ritual. However, the situational contexts were never conducive for the use of a small pocket notepad.

A third method of experience was through conversations or informal interviewing and observation. Obviously, co-workers interacted and shared information before, during, and after various work settings. These conversations and observations were a part of the learning process and personal experience both in the intended context regarding specific questions about the work being done and in unintended situations as indicative of everyday life interaction. It is important to note that there was no use of

structured interview questions to acquire specific kinds of information. The methodology for existential sociology develops during the process of the experience. In other words, any information obtained from conversations about the workers themselves, the structural and organizational components of the funeral home, or techniques and practices involved with specific kinds of jobs was derived from conversations that were already taking place in that regard and only recorded when thought to be a necessary part of the experience for a particular day. How would one know what was pertinent to the situation without being there to make that determination?

Human Subject Issues

Though I was participating as the primary subject of this study, there were at least two other groups of people that could be at minor risk: my co-workers and the community members that chose to use this establishment for its services.

By using an existential sociology the epistemology was somewhat transactional whereby parts of my findings generated from interaction linked to my co-workers in this process of becoming an embalmer's apprentice and learning the trade. For example, there were times when a specific story that a co-worker shared seemed significant to my experience for that given day, so later the choice was made to anonymously write something about it excluding specific names and locations. At some point; however, it was possible that when this information was revealed it could create emotional dissonance with either the co-worker or someone else mentioned in the story.

A second possibility was the gamut of potential questions that emerge during any given work experience. Obviously, I had questions about the work itself, but in addition to that, questions were generated from pure curiosity or even from things that resulted

from the type of interaction that was taking place. However, my co-workers needed an outlet in the event they felt threatened by questions that might be perceived as inappropriate, insincere, or manipulative. To minimize this type of risk to the co-workers they were informed about these potentialities and left with a letter that was kept in my work file at their establishment. The letter basically explained my intention; it permitted them to read everything written, and it explained the discretion they had to have something removed if they felt it was inappropriate (See Appendix B). To further minimize this risk, it was necessary to provide a modification to that letter, thus transforming it into a consent letter that elaborated on the procedures and risks, data storage, my expectations of them, and their rights to refuse participation. This was explained to each employee a second time and they were asked to read and sign this consent form (See Appendix D). Copies of these forms were kept both at my apartment and at their establishment.

Next there were perceived minor risks for the community members that chose this funeral home for services regarding potential contextual descriptions about the situations of my involvement in funeral arrangements and ceremonies. For example, maybe a particular individual was uncomfortable with my presence due to my status as a social researcher. Another possibility was that a family member such as a cousin recognized me as a sociologist during the funeral arrangement or service and this information gave the impression of a dispassionate, objective researcher conducting observations without consent or permission. To alleviate these types of concerns the funeral director requested their consent by first introducing me as a co-worker and social researcher with a statement similar to the following:

This is Meghan Probstfield, he is an OSU doctoral student and death educator who is currently employed with us for educational purposes. He is conducting a dissertation project and is here to report on his experiences while working in a funeral home. He is legally obligated to keep any information he uses strictly anonymous and confidential. Do you agree to his participation?

The consent was acquired in the same manner as their consent for embalming, by verbal consent where their signature, the time and date are jotted down for verification on the appropriate form. This method was preferred by the funeral director as a means to reduce the significant amount of paper work already expected of the individual. Basically, the funeral director converted the privacy act form into a consent form by writing down their consent or rejection to my participation and his initials (See Appendix E). A copy of this statement was kept both with the customer and at the establishment. If any person in a particular family or group had been uncomfortable with my presence then I would not have participated in their case. This would have included all activities of it from funeral arrangement and slumber room services to graveside rituals.

Another potential concern would be in published work resulting from this research endeavor. For example, what if my written depictions of the experience were recognizable or similar to the experiences of individuals that used this establishment at some point during my data collection period but did not offer consent? As a result, any type of emotional response of anger, frustration, or disappointment might have occurred. The following consideration reduce this type of risk.

Typically in the United States the top ten causes of death from greatest to least according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention include: diseases of heart, malignant neoplasms, cerebrovascular diseases, chronic lower respiratory diseases, accidents, diabetes mellitus, influenza and pneumonia, Alzheimer's disease, nephritis, nephritic syndrome and nephrosis, and intentional self-harm, but sometimes, the tenth

spot is septicemia or chronic liver disease (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/deaths.html>).

Similar results can be found in the state of Oklahoma for any given year amidst the 450 funeral homes. This alone contributed to anonymity because other individuals using the same funeral home may have to bear witness to the same kind of death.

Second, for many of these cases, the funeral directors were only given ambiguous details for the consequences or stories behind the death of these individuals, so many of my experiential descriptions would not include this kind of specific information.

However, there was a possibility for some causes of death that may stand out if described such as intentional self-harm, accidents, or even in the slightly less occurrence of murder.

First, if consent was offered by the loved ones of individuals who come to their demise in these ways, then it was my professional obligation to ethically determine what and how something was written. Second, the funeral director had the opportunity to review everything that was written about these funeral arrangement situations to confer that it had been done respectfully, with optimal anonymity, and within the legal codes of their privacy notice. Finally, cases that become highly publicized in the local or national media such as rape or murder were to be excluded.

CHAPTER V

BECOMING AND WORKING AS AN APPRENTICE

I could simply list the various tasks undertaken while working with the funeral home; for example, I participated and aided in embalming the deceased, dressed and casketed dead bodies, assisted in meeting with families and arranging funeral services for them, retrieved caskets from another state that were not in stock at the funeral home, transferred a body from another state for services and burial in Oklahoma, assisted with funeral services in the funeral home, at various churches, and gravesides among a number of cemeteries. I saw caskets into the ground, saw urns into the ground, collected and delivered flowers to homes after funeral services were completed, transferred flowers from chapels and funeral homes to lay upon graves in various cemeteries, and was given the opportunity to assist with services in tribal cemeteries for graveside rituals and burial of the casket. In addition to this, there were days I helped in answering phones, read books and newspapers, or simply chatted with co-workers about a variety of things. These are the kinds of tasks and events that could be taking place at any funeral home in the United States on any particular day of the week. However, each of these tasks impacted me as an individual. Each of these tasks, on some level, challenged me as a worker and individual. Each of these tasks taught me a little more about myself. But

were these quiet reflections nothing more than the rationally constructed reality of experience from postscript? Maybe in an attempt to remain existentially grounded this would be all there was to know.

However, when I first entered this working environment, my primary concerns centered on the human corpse and how working in close proximity to it on a more regulatory basis may affect my life or sense of self. Could I handle the sight and smell of various dead bodies? Would the things I see affect my sleep? Would the things I see affect my general thoughts of death? Would I discover some unknown attraction to this type of work? And what about the possibility of ghosts or spirits? I was fascinated, intrigued, and primarily wanted to work in the preparation room only embalming bodies. The thought of meeting families and doing more of the funeral directing was more intimidating or, at least, less appealing. Plus it would require me to wear a suit, something I had not done in many years. By the last day of work in this funeral home, I came to realize that probably my favorite part was meeting with the families and that any case meant so much more when involved in most or all aspects, from embalming, to arrangement, to funeral service, and eventually seeing the casket into the ground. In the end, becoming an embalmer's apprentice seemed to be more than just what was done on a given day; it also included what was thought about or felt. These more emotional or irrational aspects of being human, for example, sadness, discomfort, happiness, frustration, curiosity, intrigue, fascination, etceteras, also influenced and transformed what would be considered myself today.

The Work Environment and Staff

During my time with this particular funeral home, there were five full-time workers, two part-time workers, and myself. Three of the full-time individuals were licensed funeral directors and embalmers; each was male, and varied in age and experience. The head or managing director, *Logan, who had been in the industry approximately twenty-five years and had met with me initially to determine our working relationship, had his greatest responsibilities linked directly to the Alderwoods Group or corporation that now owned this funeral home. This left the primary responsibility of meeting with families and embalming to the other two licensed directors, Caleb and Jantzen, though all three did their share of paper work, arrangements, services, body removals and embalming.

A fourth full time worker, Lefty, who had done embalming prior to the requirement of mortuary science school, assisted in nearly every aspect of this funeral home. The only things he did not do generally were meeting with families during the official arrangement and, of course, the paper work that required a licensed funeral director to complete. Lefty kept the cars maintained, assisted in embalming, body removal, funeral services, casket retrievals, body transfers, upkeep of the funeral home that could include anything from vacuuming floors to making sure embalming supplies were in stock to greeting individuals that came through the front door, and he probably was the most socially adept person in the funeral home.

Finally, there was Nancy the fifth full-time worker. She was also a licensed insurance agent that could meet with families for pre-need arrangements or arrangements

* All names used throughout this section are fictional and have no relation to the funeral personnel referenced in this study.

before the person had actually died. Two of the funeral directors were also licensed for insurance with the third not finding it worth his time to obtain at current. Nancy was the self-proclaimed "Mother Hen" in the roost and worked mostly in the front office but would also assist with funeral services when necessary and had experience with embalming and arranging funeral services as well. She spent a lot of time on the phone and at her computer working out pre-need arrangements, insurance, and payment issues, basically keeping everyone and the office in order.

The two part-time workers, Paul and Stephen, worked mostly on-call. Though they were expected to have only part-time hours, during times when the funeral home was servicing multiple families simultaneously, they were expected to work more hours, and often did. Paul and Stephen would come in to aid in a funeral service, to retrieve a casket in another state, to aid in a body removal, and were on-call after hours a couple times a week.

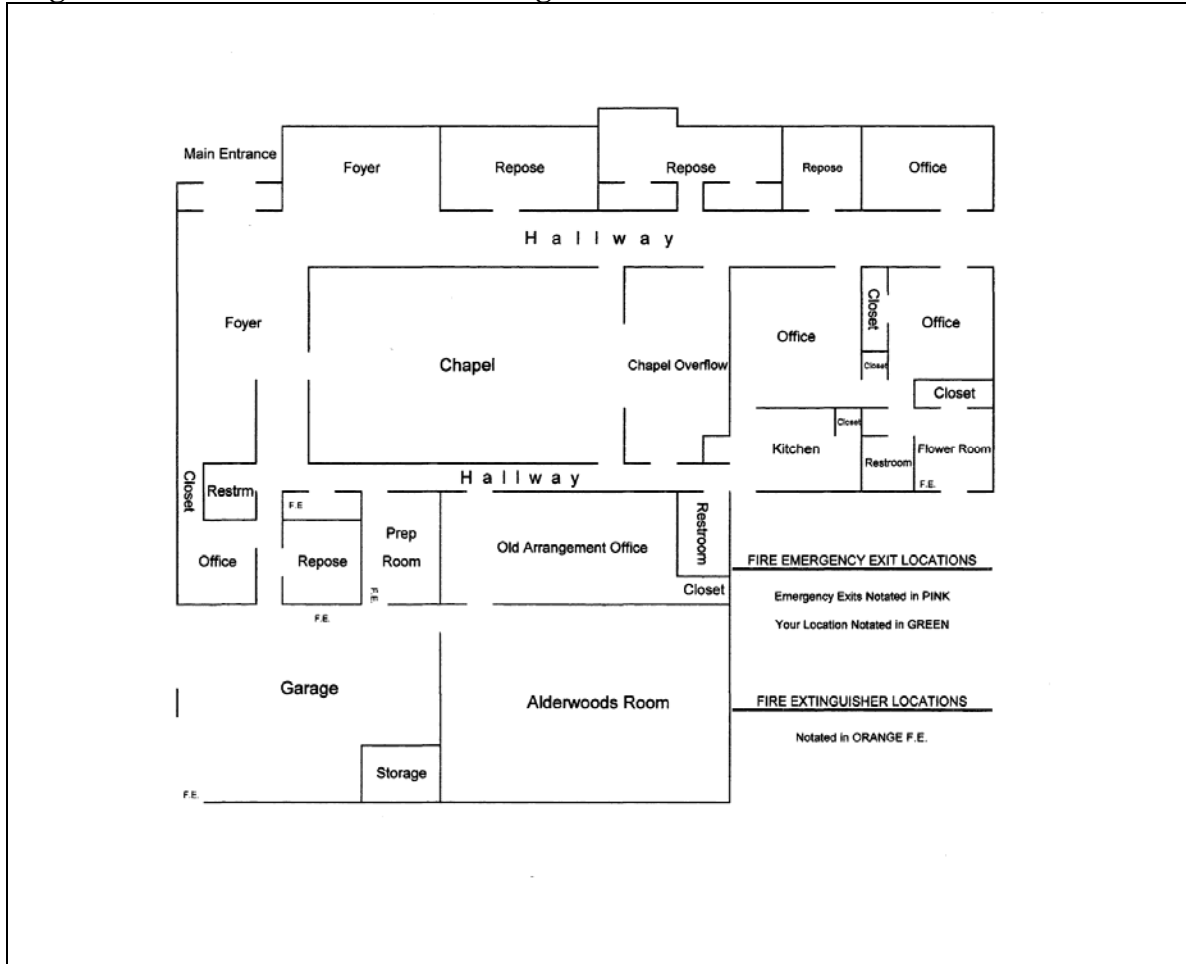
Only Nancy was excluded from after hours on-call duty which basically meant two individuals would be called in the event someone died and needed to be picked up, whether it was on the road, in a hospital, or in a home. If one person could handle the removal, then there would be no need to call on the second person on-call and this created problems at times when individuals had differing opinions about whether or not an extra set of hands was needed for the removal. Each team of two would rotate about every two days in order to give each of them a break from being on-call every night. Of course if more than one call came in, then the next person up would be called to cover that responsibility. Bottom line, if you were not on vacation, then there was a possibility

that you may have to come in and work after hours or even on your scheduled day off because people generally did not die on any one person's schedule.

There were six primary vehicles used at this establishment that included two Dodge vans used mostly for body removals with metal racks in them for stretchers. These vans could be used to retrieve caskets as well. There was a suburban that was used primarily to haul flowers and equipment to funeral services and families, sometimes considered the flower car. Then there were two Cadillac limousines used to pick up family members when desired, something determined in the funeral arrangement. Sometimes one would carry the pallbearers as a means to keep them together and the other would carry immediate family members about six to eight per car. And finally there was the coach, or hearse for carrying the body or cremains to its final destination.

Care of the families and dead bodies all took place within the establishment depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Floor Diagram for the Funeral Home



Source: Designed by Jantzen

As you can see in Figure 1 there were five potential repose rooms or state rooms where dead bodies would lie in state for families to view during visitation, or the hours between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m., though the office space and repose room next to the garage were not set up for this yet. There were three women, Michaela, Macy, and Mary, that rotated on an on-call basis to be present for visitations after 5 p.m. and to answer phone calls or questions from patrons. They only worked when a body was in the house between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m. during the weekday and whatever time slots were needed when arrangements took place over the weekend. When we were not working in the

preparation room or casketing a body, most of our time was spent in the front office and kitchen area where we did the majority of our socializing often over some sort of refreshments.

Defining the Role of Embalmer's Apprentice

As previously mentioned the first meeting with Logan took place via telephone during the first week of April, and a face-to-face meeting was then arranged for the following week. Once these meetings were completed, it was thought that both of us had a clear understanding of what would become my work relationship pending dissertation committee and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Several factors were revealed by the end of my working experience in this funeral home that suggested miscommunication and incongruence regarding my role as an apprentice, despite attempts at various stages to clarify my intentions.

Anxiety and Waiting to Work

Armed with a state certification, a funeral home to work in, a cell phone for on-call status, and committee/IRB approval, I was ready to begin working in the funeral home. It was the third week of July when a phone call was made to Logan to inform him everything was clear and work could begin. Following a very short conversation, he stated my name would be put on the board and to await their calls. I reiterated to him that my availability was any time on any day and then hung up the phone.

During this time I was feeling a little anxious over unknown expectations, relieved that the work had started, and excited to get involved. However, as the days continued to pass by without a phone call, all of these thoughts and feelings began to shift to frustration, concern, and confusion. Why were they not calling? Had no one died

lately? Should I call them to find out what was going on? Had they changed their minds about working with me? Did less people die during the summer months? These kinds of questions along with the self-assurance that everything was okay, patience was needed, and there was no need to appear overzealous about working with dead bodies, as it might not look very professional and appear somewhat insensitive, gradually built into a greater sense of concern. By the third week of August, my suspicions needed to be addressed and Logan was contacted with a follow up phone call.

Much to my surprise, the first thing he said was they actually had not worked a single funeral in the month of August up to that point, though some pre-need arrangements had been conducted. In all his years, he had never had a dry spell of that length, nearly three weeks without a phone call. Again, he reassured me that my name was on the board and that as soon as something occurred they would be calling with work. This phone call provided relief because it confirmed that maybe I was a little overzealous and paranoid about something going wrong; however, this calmness or relief would be short-lived.

Days continued to go by and my anxiety gradually began to build once again. Not only was I anxious waiting for the phone to ring, especially when it sat by my bed at night, but we were now ending the first week of September, and I had not worked a single case. What was going on? Was it possible that no one died in the entire month of August? During the last phone call, was he telling a lie just to satisfy my curiosities? Have they changed their minds about having a researcher working with them? Should I call him back? Would a follow up phone call create an appearance of insensitivity in their eyes due to eagerness to know if people have died? The hesitation in calling Logan

again resulted mostly from my feeling or perception that a multitude of phone calls to find out if someone had died would be insensitive. However, thoughts of delaying research further outweighed perceptions of insensitivity, so a follow up phone call was made during the second week of September.

This time Logan apologized and suggested they had been very distracted due to the roofing repairs that had been taking place, having them all somewhat disorganized and frustrated. An inquiry was made about whether he thought I would be able to participate in at least twenty cases by the end of the year. It was thought that if he had a number or quota in mind, then maybe it would encourage more phone calls. He hesitated and then stated it was possible, but they would have to begin calling on every case. To do this he would write the message on a marker board with instructions to call regarding any work received in order to increase my involvement. I felt more confident at the end of this conversation than I had from the previous phone call and fully anticipated getting some work soon. It only took approximately one more week before the phone calls began.

The First Call: A Funeral Arrangement

Even today when I hear birds chirping outside or on a television program that resemble the ring tone on my cell phone, there is a quick surge of adrenaline. Call it Pavlov's Dog if you will, but it got annoying to the point that my cell phone was switched to vibration, where it remains even now. It was a Tuesday morning approximately 8 a.m. when the birds started chirping to indicate my first phone call to work. It was Caleb, who was the second most experienced director at this establishment, and he was going to conduct a funeral arrangement. Caleb sounded a little apprehensive and uncertain about

why he was calling and explained that this arrangement was probably going to be relatively quick, so if it was not something of interest or pertinent to the study, then there really would be no need to drive out there. After a short explanation for the second time he seemed a little more comfortable with my participation and then only wanted to be informed about how he was to introduce me. Each had briefly been informed about my project and in the second meeting with Logan, I offered to speak to them again in more detail when he suggested that would not be necessary because he could do it. This brief conversation with Caleb marked the first indicator that communication had been lost somewhere along the way and that they may not have been as informed as initially thought. Since I was feeling a bit of anxiety or excitement from both being awoken from sleep to finally see the funeral home number appear on the phone and was about to participate in my first case, this particular issue was not addressed here.

Once at the funeral home and seated in the front office, Caleb requested an explanation for the study once again since we had a little time before the arrangement. He seemed to understand the explanation but eventually suggested it was a little above his head. This was probably more in reference to the theoretical descriptions or my problem with offering too much information all at once. It did seem to make him more comfortable before actually heading in to meet the family.

Walking into the arrangement felt a little like walking onto a stage. There was a little bit of tension generated from unknown expectations from not knowing if these individuals would agree to my participation in their arrangement. Overall, I was relatively comfortable and felt as if I was walking straighter than normal due to the suit and tie around my neck. My presentation of self felt somewhat strong yet friendly. After

the initial introduction and permission to participate we were interrupted by the hairdresser who came in just to inform the two sisters engaged in the meeting that she had finished cutting their father's hair and it looked real nice. One sister was still sitting at the table as we were standing and after a minute passed, I began to feel uncomfortable in the silence and took it upon myself to begin speaking with her about some pictures and music she had brought. This sort of interjection would continue throughout the arrangement whenever it seemed appropriate, though at times I must admit fading in and out of conversation due to my secondary status to the funeral director who was in charge of the arrangement and had specific concerns to address.

It was interesting to note the conscious thought that went into anything I was about to say, as a means to keep the focus on what was important. For example, some things described about this man were very similar to my own father. There was a story I considered sharing with them about my father but did not after considering the relevance to sharing the story with people who in that moment wanted to focus on the real story for them, the death and funeral arrangement of their father. There were times of impatience though, that were triggered primarily from the physiological discomforts of my blistered feet in new shoes, lack of sleep, and the heat, due to problems with the air conditioning.

Overall, the arrangement went very smoothly and felt quite comfortable throughout, even though no one had provided any kind of preparation or standards by which to abide before meeting with the family. As a matter of fact the only sociable person on this first day was Nancy who later acted as a tour guide around the place at my request. Following the arrangement, Nancy was the only one to ask for my thoughts on the experience. Even as we walked to the cars at the end of the day, I had to invite

myself to the funeral service just arranged because Caleb never made the suggestion and simply agreed to my participation if it was desired. So by the end of the day, I felt a little estranged from everyone and uncertain as to whether they would be calling as frequent as anticipated.

The Next Few Cases and Role Recognition

Over the next few weeks I was able to participate in several more funeral arrangements, funeral services, and in embalming two bodies. During this time, I worked at least one twelve hour day that included a funeral arrangement, funeral service, embalming, and body removal. At this point I had worked with every member of the establishment and had developed more rapport with each of them. This seemed to be the partial result of a conversation held with Jantzen on my second case when he asked if there was an interest in embalming as well. This marked the second indicator of a miscommunication with Logan because, when I explained that embalming was the primary reason for attempting this kind of study, Jantzen looked quite surprised and said they had been led to believe that I had a greater interest in funeral arrangements, probably due to the social aspects of it, and it was their impression that I would just participate in arrangements and observe from time to time. With this new information, Jantzen affirmed he would begin calling for embalming and explained they probably would not call if after hours or extremely late because they would not expect me to drive that distance during later hours nor would they want to wait before beginning an embalming. He did claim that if they were embalming during the day then he would be sure to call. Additionally, all of the calls over those few weeks came from Jantzen, and it created a

suspicion that possibly I had crossed a line somewhere with Caleb when assisting him in the first funeral arrangement. This suspicion was never confirmed.

It was at this point the initial occupational parameters were realized that included an on-call status between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday if conducting a funeral service or time permitted for arrangements, and there was no need to worry about receiving calls after hours. Two general reasons were responsible for this working relationship: 1) most of the work really only required one individual and usually two were present for each job without my aid and 2) there was too much distance between here and the funeral home. In other words, coming in after hours encroached on their everyday life and they wanted to do the job as quickly and efficiently as possible. For example, an embalming without complications might take only an hour and a half to complete and it would take me nearly an hour to get there, that is, if I were dressed and ready to go when the call came through. How many people want to get out of bed at 3 a.m. after a long day of work and wait an extra hour to begin the job at hand; especially, when they have to go back to work by 8 a.m. the next morning? Nonetheless, this created some concern because I had already completed twice as many arrangements and funerals to embalming when the latter was the original focus of this project.

What I came to realize though was my certification was for a funeral director/embalmer apprenticeship. The point of an apprenticeship was to obtain a license to practice mortuary science. As part of the apprenticeship an individual was required to participate in at least twenty-six cases of funeral services and/or embalming along with enrollment into a mortuary science program within a one year time period. That was it.

An apprentice was expected to gain experience in both directing and embalming but the ratio was irrelevant as long as the quota was met. This specification taken in combination with the existentially based research simply meant that everything being done was precisely what should be done, and my experiences would ultimately define what my job, as an apprentice would be. Becoming an embalmer's apprentice, then, was based on a number of factors that were mostly determined by the needs and resources of the funeral home. This meant my apprenticeship took place in the same way as any apprenticeship even though some expectations beyond the quota stipulations of the state might not have been precisely the same. Just when my role began to develop into something more recognizable, once again it was about to change.

More Work Delays and Role Redirection

The twelve-hour day mentioned above would mark the last day of work for the next couple of weeks. I now understood my role and hours, but was not receiving any phone calls. Were people not dying again? Had I been forgotten? Were they getting annoyed with my presence? Are they conducting a lot of pre-need arrangements but not actually handling any bodies? I never confirmed going to the sociological conference mentioned, was it possible they think I am out of town? My insecurity and hesitation for calling back about the lack of phone calls developed from the last arrangement I had assisted with where I made a mistake commenting to the family in front of the managing director. It was not really a significant mistake, but he did comment on it later during the embalming. So, I began thinking possibly that had something to do with the lack of calls. Again it was my concern for being perceived as someone overzealous about working with dead bodies, especially, when I was aware of the many reasons why there could be a

lack of phone calls; for example, no death calls between my 8-5 schedule, pre-need arrangements, exclusive after hours work, cases that might have fallen on the fringes of the day (i.e. 4:30 p.m.), or simply no one had died. After three weeks without a phone call and not even half way to my recommended number of cases, I decided to call back to suggest coming to the funeral home Monday - Friday during the regular work hours as a means to eliminate the problem of coordinating schedules and to be present in the event something suddenly happened.

Jantzen answered the phone and agreed that would be more sensible as often they would just simply not think about calling in the immediacy of the moment, however he could not confirm if that would be acceptable until consensus was achieved with Logan, the managing funeral director. He transferred the call to Nancy who then took down the information, claimed she would relay it to Logan, and suggested for me to call back the following Monday for confirmation. I mentioned being inconspicuous and she thought it would probably be fine as long as I remained that way. This conversation completely removed any established sense of security regarding rapport development and I questioned the level of concern they had about a researcher working there or at least hanging around during their work hours. It was thought the phone call, after three weeks without communication, to request working on a daily basis might have made them think I had discussed some things with my committee, devised a new plan of action, and would return to eaves drop on them or use some form of manipulative behavior to acquire more information. As it turned out, I did not call again until Tuesday and the first thing out of Nancy's mouth was, "Where are you? I thought you were coming in this week." This erased those concerns almost immediately. There was no problem with the daily work

schedule, and this role adjustment began the following day proving to be just the thing necessary to increase the number of cases and experience.

A Lot More Cases and the Concluding Role

By the end of the year, I had nearly quadrupled the number of hours of work that Jantzen claimed would be necessary for mortuary science school and had assisted in twenty-five funerals and/or embalming. My work schedule for the month of December was basically seven days a week due to the number of calls, and my attitude really started to change about the whole experience with frustration becoming a regular part of each day. This seemed to be the result of working a lot of cases, followed by the transcription after work, limited sleep and no sort of debriefing session about any of the experiences other than talking to myself. A lot of this was directly related to keeping up with the demands of an existential methodology.

The rapport that had developed with the funeral staff was much more solid at this point; that had a lot to do with my reliability and new monomer given to me by Logan, "old faithful." I was feeling much like a regular employee and enjoyed being more integrated, but I was beginning to get satiated with it all and understood how easily one could become numb or indifferent to this work over a longer period of time. Basically, the novelty of the work was wearing thinner and it really did feel just like the daily grind of any type of job one might work. At least now I had a more recognizable role, and after several conversations with various staff members, all the early problems with participation made much more sense.

In the beginning it was agreed that an on-call status would be appropriate because having me out there on a daily basis would be a waste of my time. There was really not

much to do when there were no bodies in the house with the exception of cleaning cars, vacuuming, answering phones or doing paper work. The managing director did not see any sense in a non-paid apprentice doing these sorts of things when he has paid full time help on the clock that are fully capable. Additionally, the other workers would actually want to do these things because days such as this went by very slowly. However, the phone calls were not coming in; thus, my curiosity and suspicions increased to a level that suggested there was an issue to be addressed. This issue turned out to be primarily the result of misunderstanding or miscommunication, my position on a priority list of things to do whenever a death call took place, and the distance of travel to get to the funeral home in a timely fashion.

The greatest problem getting work initially was they had no script or definition available for an apprenticeship. The managing director at this funeral home was accustomed to working with limited help that was paid, so in the beginning, there was not a clear plan of action for an apprentice that would work for free. The notion of working free created the misunderstanding. In his mind, they could just call me whenever a case arose and could be somewhat selective as to whether they thought it would be something different for me to learn. My master status was perceived as a researcher who simply wanted to observe, rather than a status as a co-worker. This translation was passed on to the other staff members and then a sort of nonchalance about getting me involved followed. In other words, even after assisting in a few funeral arrangements they were less likely to call on cases that were thought to be atypical. It was not until I began participating daily that they truly understood my desire to be a fellow worker and not just an observer. By being present daily they were able to learn of my interest and

commitment to assisting with anything and everything as well as my willingness to work as many hours as necessary without pay. This meant that from this point onward each of us was actively involved in a process of interpretation and definition of my status as an apprentice or co-worker. And gradually a role became apparent.

Generally, my regular work hours would start anywhere between 8-10 a.m. Monday - Friday depending on whether there was an early arrangement or funeral scheduled and would end anywhere between 5-10 p.m. depending on whether any work came available toward the end of a regular shift that ended at 5 p.m. Of course, it was always my option to remain and work or go home though my choice was always the prior. For Saturday and Sunday, I was on-call for embalming or funeral arrangements that would take place between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. and for any funerals that were arranged during the week. The work available on any given day could be accomplished by any combination of workers and sometimes followed a sort of hierarchy of employment. The only exception was assistance in funeral arrangements that were conducted only by licensed funeral directors and myself, a state registered apprentice, pending permission from the family.

The distribution of work was always relevant to the number of people present on a given day, what someone was doing, and what task was considered necessary to complete. For example, Jantzen and I might be meeting a family in an arrangement while Caleb and Lefty were in the preparation room dressing and casketing the deceased. On another day, Lefty might be retrieving a casket from another state and Caleb could be scheduled off during the arrangement, so that Jantzen and I dressed and casketed the body following the arrangement. Another possibility would be that Caleb and I were

conducting an arrangement while Jantzen would be embalming and vice versa. There was even a time, while conducting an arrangement with Logan after hours, when I was called out of the room by after-hours-help Mary to be informed about a death call because she did not have the number to the on-call individual, Stephen, who was scheduled to be second to respond. Once we were able to provide the number, it was not long before Stephen arrived, approximately at the same time as the completion of the arrangement, so I went with him on the body removal in order to give Logan the opportunity to finish up with paper work and the obituary. Once we returned, all three of us then worked on the embalming, whereby, I was given the option to leave due to my working free status. Basically, Logan wanted Stephen to assist because it was going to cost the company three hours pay at a minimum to have him assist with the removal and he wanted to get his worth in money since the removal took less than an hour. And this was how the unspoken hierarchy of employment or roles would take place.

There were also times when several of us were present but there was not much work to do. In these circumstances, when a death call took place then the hierarchy of employment would again determine the roles that would ensue. This hierarchy basically trickled down from the funeral director. For instance, if we were sitting around after completing any kind of task with nothing to do and a death call came through, usually two individuals would respond to the call. There were only two places to sit in the removal van so if more assistance were needed, then an extra vehicle would have to be driven which really was not necessary. The funeral director would be first and then he would usually expect or even ask the most experienced worker present to assist. That person, in most cases, would be the other full time worker, Lefty, who had the most

experience and had been there longer. If Lefty happened to be away or doing something else when the call came through and one of the part-time helpers were present, then they would be asked to assist because they were on the clock, had more experience, and expected to earn their money. Finally, as it seldom happened, if I were the only person available along with the funeral director, then I would be asked to assist as a means to save money and time instead of waiting for someone that was on-call to get there. This kind of hierarchy of employment pattern was also demonstrated during funeral services when the director assigned each of us a role with the most pertinent roles being offered to the paid individuals in order of their experience.

In my concluding role there were only two things that separated me from the other workers in this establishment. The first was that I was a registered apprentice with the state and would participate in funeral arrangements, sometimes successively with different funeral directors. Second, as a non-paid employee or researcher, I always had the option of participating whereas the others were expected to do specific kinds of work when present or called in to work. Though my hours may have been set to some degree, often it was not known what would be done on any particular day or when that day might actually end. However, my daily presence eliminated problems with miscommunication, my position on a priority list, and the question of whether there was enough time to drive the necessary distance because I was there, ready to work in any situation that might arise, and this permitted the possibility to assist with a variety of day-to-day tasks or duties that might have been missed otherwise. Aside from this each, funeral staff member was equally intrigued or interested in helping the funeral directors with new

cases and anything else that needed to be done, even if it was just a way to make the day move by more quickly.

A Regular Day Without Bodies

A typical weekday in the funeral home without a dead body generally included two funeral directors, Lefty, Nancy, and myself. Days such as this required a lot of patience and the ability to remain awake. Sometimes, these days offered opportunities to learn more about each other and other days it often involved fighting sleep or finding various ways to elude ennui.

Daily Duties, Tasks, and Roles

If it were not for those moments of camaraderie with my co-workers and the nature of an existential sociology, then being present on a daily basis would have been a much greater challenge because there really was not much for an apprentice to do. My co-workers could always occupy themselves with some tedious task or job, but I often found myself sitting alone in the kitchen or office area reading a book or the newspaper in soft light to the quiet hum of the air conditioner or heater during the colder months. During the a.m. hours, waiting for lunch might be the most exciting event whereas in the p.m. hours it was the end of the day. And if sitting around reading and having short casual conversations were the greatest accomplishments of the day, then by 3:30 p.m. I was no longer interested in assisting with anything, hopeful that we would not get a call, and ready to go home. However, after previously missing a death call because I was told to leave a little early, how I felt at 3:30 p.m. was irrelevant until 5 p.m. And this feeling was shared by each of us.

The fact of the matter was we worked in a funeral home, and just like any home there were mundane household chores to do. For example, floors needed to be swept, windows needed to be cleaned, dishes needed to be washed, vehicles needed to be washed, waxed, and gassed, and inventory needed to be taken on chemicals, caskets, and other funerary items. In addition to all of this there were plenty of phone calls to receive and service to people that might drop by for information or pre-need arrangements. However, these were not things that needed to be accomplished every, single day and how many individuals does it really take to complete these sorts of tasks during an eight-hour shift?

Now the funeral directors could also keep busy with paperwork, copying video memorials to compact discs, or phone calls to and from their significant others. Lefty was generally responsible for the vehicles and kept an eye on inventory while Nancy remained in her office mostly and primarily answered the phone and worked on money, insurance, and other organizational issues. These were the kind of days that we actually wished for someone to call, as disturbing as that might sound. It was not a desire for someone to be dead, it was just the desire to be relieved from boredom, to have something to do, someone to help. And it was always funny to witness how much one wished for something when it was absent and how little it was desired when over abundant.

The significance of the telephone ringing on these days with little to do was equally humorous or noteworthy. One day Lefty, Nancy, Caleb, and I were having lunch in the kitchen when the phone suddenly rang and all three of them wanted to answer it. Caleb and Lefty started to get up from their seat and told the other not to worry about it

as they planned to answer the phone. Nancy eventually won the competition because she was walking by the phone to sit back down at the table when it rang. Even with her proximity to the phone Caleb still tried to offer his services by suggesting she sit for lunch and he would answer it. What made it so humorous was that on days when we were busy, there was not that same sort of competition or enthusiasm to answer the phone.

Despite the lack of activity, there was always something to learn, and I would use these down times to read some of the material they had lying around such as grief manuals offered to some families that were perceived to need it and other funeral related periodicals that included *The Director*, *International Cemetery & Funeral Management*, and *The Frontline Newsletter*. I also perused the funeral director training manual that explained and tested the individual on everything from caskets and vaults to grave markers and sales presentation.

My position in the front office or kitchen area proved to be beneficial for learning more about the business and individuals working in it. From this location I could be indirectly involved in conversations taking place among co-workers and often got directly involved with conversations such as cases we had worked, changes in prices brought down by corporate leaders, personal life stories, community relations, and just a variety of economic and social issues for the funeral home and in the lives of the individuals working there. This was the one place that we could actually talk about other things or reflect on the work we had done because most of the time we were immersed in some work situation and basically only discussed what needed to be done.

Socializing often included a lot of sarcastic bickering when we were all together in a group, and never lasted much longer than the time it would take to eat lunch, thus making it difficult to discuss anything in great detail. When left one-on-one with an individual more serious conversations would ensue. For example, Nancy and I had several discussions about the various individuals she had cared for outside of the funeral home during the remaining days of their lives including her former husband. Also, during my first couple of months, she was taking care of an older gentleman in a nursing home that added a lot of additional stress to her life. Working all day in a funeral home then leaving to assist a man with his eventual death was a lot for one person to manage. Interestingly enough, one morning we were talking about how individuals in hospitals, nursing homes, or on their deathbeds always seemed to show improvement right before they died. She had just explained that during the previous night the gentleman she had been caring for was feeling great and this was the same thing that happened to her late husband right before he died. Coincidentally, about an hour later we received a phone call that her friend had in fact died. Later in retrospect she claimed this was his going away present to her because she had been trying to resolve the dilemma of driving to Georgia to see her son graduate from the military, but feared he would die alone while she was away. His death occurred about a week before leaving to Georgia, thus relieving her of any self-imposed guilt.

Both Nancy and the managing director, Logan, knew this man so it was determined that Jantzen would handle the embalming with my assistance. We were expected to take extra care, as they would both be checking to see how well the job was done. It was not as if things were done with any less efficiency on someone they did not

know, it was more a way of displaying an attachment to the deceased. Though his death was timely for Nancy, it was just the opposite for us because we had one funeral scheduled about an hour after Nancy left; were short handed with helpers, and I was unable to drive a vehicle because of insurance issues. It demonstrated how quickly a day could move from a moderately scheduled, slow progression to instant action and adjustments in a matter of minutes due to the coming of another body. Emotion such as frustration, anger or boredom in this environment were also produced by temporal demands in the same way Fine (1996) described cooks responding to the kitchen rush at different times of the day.

Handling the Dead and Embalming

Despite the seldom days with an empty house, the ebb and flow of dead bodies was continual with some spending more time than others in the funeral home. A dead body really was the focal point or star of the show (Turner and Edgley 1976). From the moment it arrived, it was assessed and prepared for what must be done by funeral directors and interested assistants in accord with the respective family. Regardless the family decision for embalming, cremation, direct burial, or donation to science, the dead body was always cared for and handled to some degree. One thing was certain, each body that was handled, prepared, or delivered, had specific demands, and within a variety of situational contexts, impacted me at times socially, emotionally and physically.

The First Case: A Desire to See

One might note that each funeral director and staff member involved with a body, whether the individual partook in the removal, transport to the funeral home, or happened to be present when the body came through the doors, had a desire to see the body as it

was before any preparations were made. This was not a thorough inspection, as that would be reserved for the funeral director and usually one assistant when preparing the body for the family or transport. Rather, it was more like a greeting or curiosity to see the person that would possibly be with us for the next few days. To an outsider this might be perceived as a morbid curiosity, but for funeral personnel, in a lot of ways, it was helpful for tasks that would follow.

First, it was imperative for the funeral directors to identify the condition of the body and determine the line of action to pursue. Sometimes they would use the other funeral directors to confirm these decisions if present; however, after hours and on weekends a lot of times the director on-call would have to make these decisions alone. Second, even when there was no embalming chosen, there were practical necessities, such as cleaning a bleeding wound that resulted from surgery, in order for the family to view the body more appropriately before it was transported for cremation or interred by direct burial. Third, there was a skillful goal in mind about how well one could make the deceased appear for his or her funeral. This was especially important because despite the criticisms that surround embalming practices, loved ones can be very disappointed and angry with the way a dead person appears while lying in a casket. Beyond pleasing the family, each director also has a certain pride about his work with a great compliment coming when someone suggested how natural the body looked or how they truly appeared to simply be sleeping. And from my perspective, it really was amazing to see the transformation of a dead body from the way it was upon arrival to the way it looked by the time of the funeral. This even applied to the bodies for direct burial without embalming. As Nancy explained, "It was as if you remove the pain of their death"

because most people; especially those who cared for terminally ill individuals, do not want to re-live that experience at a funeral, and by viewing a person in a more tranquil state, it provided many with a peace of mind. Fourth, this was a death, oriented business and just like most people in their choice of movies or novels, there was an attraction to tragedy and interest in learning more about the story behind the person and his or her death. For me, the stories always seemed to make handling the dead easier and made me feel more connected to the individual rather than simply molding a large slump of flesh.

The first body encountered was for my second funeral arrangement that would be a cremation. Standard procedure for a cremation case was to check for pacemakers or anything that might explode while burning at the crematorium. For this case, Jantzen checked the body and prepared it for family viewing before its scheduled transport for cremation. Since my original intention was to be working with dead bodies, I eagerly followed along as a means to assist and to begin learning. I felt like a puppy dog following his master for a treat.

We entered the preparation room where the body lay on the stretcher used in the removal and put surgical gloves on our hands. We took the red, funeral home blanket off the body and pulled down the hospital blankets and sheets to inspect it. I noted how quiet and still everything suddenly became as we focused in on the work, how small the room appeared to be, only large enough to embalm one body at a time, and the air felt tighter. This was an older, adult, female who died following surgery leaving a lot of blood on the lower right side of her gown that had even soaked through the hospital blankets. Apparently, it was fairly common for hospital personnel to leave the body as it died and any necessary cleaning was left for the funeral director or embalmer. This became our

first task. We removed the soiled blankets and sheets, ensured the blood flow was stopped and placed a towel over the wound to absorb any further bleeding, wrapped her up to the head in new sheets, closed the eyes, then the mouth with a lip balm, and finally Jantzen wiped her eyes, nose, and mouth down with a disinfectant solution to temporarily impede the growth of bacteria, all as a means to have her more presentable for the granddaughter who wanted to see her one last time. Once this was completed, we moved her body into the chapel, adjusted the lighting, and closed the chapel doors.

It was difficult to discern exactly what I was feeling at this moment. It seemed when he was moving her head around to adjust it on the pillow, and moving her arms around to check for jewelry, it had an effect on me, or at least, had me saying internally, "damn this woman is dead!" and here we were moving her around and preparing her for cremation as if it was nothing. I did not really feel sadness, discomfort, or disgust, even when viewing all the blood, and it was not really odorous, but maybe just a bit peculiar, in that, I basically had just walked in the door for my second arrangement and within minutes was involved with a dead body of a complete stranger as if all in a days work for a regular employee, an attitude I would begin to embrace later.

Though relatively calm through it all, maybe I was just a little overwhelmed. In retrospect it was similar to the descriptive attempts about thoughts and feelings during my first time skydiving. It was thought one would need to do it again to actually discuss how it felt because in the moment everything happened so fast that a person really did not have time to think or feel anything. This was similar in ways because we just marched in there, cleaned the woman, wheeled her to the chapel, and walked out as if handling any kind job or merchandise. It all happened so quickly before one could process any of it.

Now, I had seen plenty of dead bodies at funerals over the years, but generally did not see them unprepared, out of a casket, or freshly dead and just needed more experience to determine the relevance or impact.

Probably the greatest discomfort from this first experience came outside of it. When I was leaving the funeral home for the day, Lefty reiterated the importance for wearing safety equipment when in the preparation room or handling bodies and the necessity of washing your hands. I had already sanitized my hands, but hearing him speak those words made me reconsider how well during the drive home. Once home, I actually washed my hands and arms again before cooking dinner to ensure their cleanliness, as images of the blood and the face of the woman would appear in my head. It was not until later when reviewing transcription notes that the absurdity toward this subtle sense of paranoia was understood and then my actions became humorous. What became clear was this woman had a family, people who loved her, people who would not be afraid to touch her when they pass by the casket, and there really was nothing grotesque or dirty about that. Basically, she had died of natural causes and there were no contagions of concern so the only difference in touching this body was the fact she was dead, and a stranger. Realistically, a person probably had a greater risk of contracting a bacterial or viral pathogen by shaking the hand of a stranger that was alive of whom they know nothing.

Embalming and Preparing the Dead for Viewing

The preparation room was relatively small, approximately a twelve foot square space with a white tiled floor, fluorescent lighting, a spot light, a fan located near the ceiling, and wall cabinets that housed chemicals, gloves, aprons, booties for the shoes,

towels, sheets, thread for sutures, scalpels, eye caps, mouth guards, arterial valves, and a variety of other instruments that could be used for embalming procedures. It was only equipped to embalm one body at a time; however, three bodies could lie in state if necessary. In the middle of the room there was a long, white, porcelain table where the corpse would lie during embalming, and one end would be tilted downward into the sink in order to facilitate drainage. Underneath the cabinets along one wall stood a metal stretcher/table that was used for transferring a body from stretchers that may not belong to the funeral home in order to move it from a removal vehicle into the preparation room. If we conducted the body removal, then the stretcher would just be brought into the preparation room and placed flush against the embalming table; then, we would slide the body onto it using the plastic body boards that were often slid underneath a body to aid in moving it. The stretcher/table would also be used if more than one body was in the room. Once a body was embalmed it would remain in the preparation room underneath a sheet until the next day when the funeral director would check to see how well the features had set and make any possible necessary adjustments before dressing and casketing the body.

I was fortunate enough to work with two of the three embalmers and though each displayed a different style, the general procedure was as follows. We would begin by getting dressed in a full body apron, surgical gloves, and paper booties over our shoes. Once dressed we would move the body from the stretcher to the embalming table, remove all the sheets and clothing covering the body, then would place a hose at the top of the table to continuously run water down into the drain. This would provide a smoother surface for moving the body when necessary and would also keep any blood or fluid running to the drain rather than drying on the table. The head would then be placed

on a plastic u-block that would keep it up, as the arms would be folded in the traditional position across the stomach. Sometimes, rigor mortis had started to stiffen the arms or legs into bent positions that would require us to bend them back and forth as a means to loosen them enough for the body to lay flush with the table. It was not always possible to straighten the limbs completely and this would require the embalmer to improvise as a means to make the process go more smoothly. In other words, if the legs were bent it was difficult to keep the body in place to inject the embalming fluid and set the features. This was also why embalming as soon as possible after death was preferred.

Once the body was in place, the eyes nose and mouth were sanitized with a disinfectant spray and it was completely rinsed down with water followed by some facial grooming. This might involve shaving men and removing what might be considered undesirable facial hair for women, cleaning away any blood, mucous, or purge, a fluid resulting from gases and bacteria breaking down the inside of a body, dipping a cotton swab in anti-bacterial solution to clean around the gums and inside the nasal passages, and leaving cotton pieces in both the nasal passages and throat to catch any remaining fluid that might escape. Cotton pieces would also be placed behind the earlobes to keep them from falling back toward the head and then would be removed later after the features set.

Now a corpse usually comes in with the eyes and mouth opened to some degree. Eye caps were placed on the eyes to keep the eyelids from sinking followed by the closing of the mouth. Each embalmer closed the mouth differently using a suture, wire-barb, or a less invasive metal clamp method. The mouth was considered to be the most important feature to "get right" and all of them always paid close attention to it before

administering the embalming fluid. If a family member had a complaint more often it was about the mouth.

Taking thread and passing it through the upper and lower gums and lips, up through the nasal passage inside the mouth, and then tying it off to close the mouth permanently, accomplished the suture method. The wire-barb method involved a hammer gun that hammered a screw into the upper and lower jaw that was connected to a metal wire. The wires were then cut and twisted together to close the mouth. The metal clamp was an older method used only by the oldest director and involved two metal hook shaped pieces that attached inside the nose and were connected to a metal plate that went underneath the chin. It would hold the mouth in position until removed during the arterial embalming. One would have to pay attention to it though because if left on too long it would leave a dip in the chin where the metal plate was pressed against it and once the feature was set there was no going back. Sometimes a mouth former had to be used to substitute missing teeth or dentures that were removed in hospitals, otherwise, the mouth would not look natural when closed. It was easier to use the mouth former than to worry about putting dentures back in and sometimes the family would not bring the dentures until well after the embalming.

Once the embalmer was satisfied with the facial features, the body would be rinsed down again with water and the hair would be washed. A soapy, germicidal solution was then applied all over the body as we prepared to make the incision for arterial embalming. Generally, either the carotid artery in the neck or the femoral artery in the thigh area were raised, but if necessary one could raise the radial arteries in the arms as well. Jantzen preferred the femoral artery because it was easier for him being left

handed and also was closer to the bottom of the table which meant blood and fluid would run right into the drain rather than down the table and backside of the body from the neck. In other words, in some ways it kept things a little cleaner. However, the femoral artery was not always cooperative, forcing him to also raise the carotid artery a couple of times. This was the reason the other two embalmers preferred the carotid artery because it generally had fewer complications. Usually, the incision made was about four inches long and the necessary fat and muscle would be cut through and moved aside to locate both the artery and vein. The artery was used for the formaldehyde solution going in, and the vein was held open with forceps and joggled periodically to keep the blood flowing or draining out. For me, it was difficult to identify either one because they both looked white and appeared similar in texture. Jantzen explained that the vein was always on the medial side and felt a little different or spongy, something I noted when given the chance to feel them myself.

If Lefty were also assisting in the embalming, the chemicals would be mixed while the embalmer worked on the facial features; otherwise, the chemicals were mixed just before the incisions were made. In this funeral home, one was expected to begin with three total gallons of solution and then adjustments were made based on body type and condition. Some would need a little more solution while others would need less. The solution consisted of a gallon of water and then a combination of anti-coagulant, water softener, and chemicals that could provide variations of color to the skin or put life back into it. The amount and type of chemical again varied among embalmers based on what each believed was necessary and provided the best results in texture and color. There was no precise scale or model to follow because each body received was different

and the embalmer had to make proper adjustments in chemical quantity accordingly.

This was an area of debate among a number of newer and older embalmers. Some older embalmers had a preference to continue embalming by original standards, whereby, the same amount of solution was used in each body. The newer embalmers that had completed a mortuary science program tended to have a greater preference for making adjustments in chemicals based on what were perceived to be the demands of the body. In other words, an embalmer now has a lot more possibilities to consider when preparing a body for viewing that were not available two decades ago.

Once the chemicals were mixed, the artery and vein had been lifted, and the arterial valve that was connected to the hose leading to the pump was in place, the pump was turned on to begin injecting the embalming solution, usually at a slower rate of about three to five pounds of pressure per square inch. Concurrently, I would begin massaging and bending the limbs to aid in moving the fluid to the extremities. The embalming was going well when we could see color coming back into the skin and there was continual flow of blood from the vein. To determine if it was complete or if there was enough solution we would look at the color, consider how quickly it reached the limbs, and pinch the skin in various locations. If the skin would snap back into place, as it would do on any living persons arm then it was a good indicator to continue injecting fluid into that part of the body. The pump would then be turned off and the final stages of the process would begin.

A cavity embalming would follow when the embalmer took the trochar, a similar instrument used in liposuction, inserted it into the belly to drain out any gas or fluid that remained in the organs such as the stomach, lungs and intestines. Once the trochar was

inserted, he would make a series of quick jabs downward into the intestinal area then upward into the chest and lung area, pausing at various points to allow a vacuum to build up for suction.

This was probably the least appealing aspect of the embalming process, but a necessary supplement to arterial embalming, as it would diminish later complications with purge or putrefaction. It was especially important for bodies that would remain in the home for a week. Finally, a chemical preservative would be inserted into the body cavity with the trochar to dry or seal any kind of fluid or tissue that remained. The embalmer was extremely careful with this product because if any were spilled the fumes alone were strong enough to force everyone out of the room, and they were not even using the strongest product made. To close the hole, a trochar button was used in the same way one would put a lid on a jar or a screw in a board, by twisting it down into place.

At this stage, the embalming was completed and all that remained was to suture the incision made for arterial embalming and to clean everything that was touched or handled. First, a granulated embalming powder would be poured into the incision to dry or seal any remaining fluid; then, the embalmer would suture the incision shut. Then we soaped and scrubbed the body down; both front side and backside as well as the embalming table with regular scrubbing pads one might use to do dishes. The entire table with the body on it was then pushed flush against the wall in order for us to clean the floors, cabinet handles, sink or anything that was touched during the embalming with anti-bacterial solution and bleach. By the time this was completed, the body was dry enough to place a sheet over it up to the head, and then a moisturizing lotion was wiped over the face. We concluded by turning off the fan, removing our protective gear, and

then headed to the door. The next morning the embalmer would return to inspect his work.

Effects to Self and Interaction

Though assisting less with embalming than both funeral arrangements and services, I had developed a somewhat apathetic attitude toward it by case number five. The typical embalming was losing appeal and I found myself only wanting to participate in more unique cases, such as accidents that would provide challenges to the embalmer, as it was always impressive and interesting to see the transformation of the body. By the end of my embalming experiences, the suggestion Logan made in the initial meeting regarding the importance of getting involved in all aspects of the business was more fully understood.

Jantzen called me around 11:30 a.m. on a Monday for my first embalming, and as he later suggested, it provided a little bit of everything. It was an older adult female that had died at a hospital, and as we moved her to the preparation table, a very strong odor of defecation immediately filled the air that later, as it mixed with the smell of chemicals, remained in my senses until falling asleep in my bed that night. The flow of defecation continued periodically throughout the embalming process, leaving me with continual thoughts of just washing it away as quickly as possible. By the end of the embalming, to ensure no more leaking would take place, Jantzen had to insert cotton pieces into the anus as well as the granulated embalming powder that would help dry any remaining fluid or moisture. This was not a regular procedure but only done when thought necessary as in this case because imagine how the family would feel when viewing the body if they were surrounded by a very foul smell.

The femoral incisions created a second problem as she kept bleeding profusely and we could not identify the source. Finally, after about twenty minutes of digging he found the artery but thought it might be too tough to use. Eager to learn, and fascinated by viewing the layers inside the incision, I asked if he would let me feel the artery to determine what he meant by being too tough. He let me feel the artery and then decided to try embalming through it anyway, to no avail. As a matter of fact, the embalming tube actually ruptured right by the valve shooting fluid across the room and onto my apron thus reminding us both of the importance for protective gear. It also added a little sting to the eyes and nose temporarily. With these problems, eventually it was determined that Jantzen would have to raise the carotid artery instead. Once the artery was lifted, Jantzen let me feel it as well and one could definitely feel the difference between a tougher artery and one that was more flaccid or usable. Finally, the embalming tube was inserted and the fluid began to disseminate through the body.

It was very interesting to see her color begin to change immediately. The veins coming out on different parts of her body, the lips getting fuller, her face gaining color, the bluish skin tone, fingernails, and toenails all turning to white were indicators that the fluid was progressively moving throughout the body. We put soap all over her body and began massaging the extremities to aid this process but were unable to get fluid down into her right leg. This problem would be addressed after aspirating the body or conducting the cavity embalming with the trochar by pushing it through the belly.

It was important to get fluid into that leg because putrefaction or decay could cause problems with purge and smell. To do this a third type of embalming was employed, called hypodermic embalming. Jantzen simply pushed the trochar under the

skin along the tibia or shinbone to inject preservatives directly into that area. He worked it upwards and downwards until color came back to that leg as well. Trochar buttons were then placed in the leg and the belly; the two incisions were sewn shut; the body was washed down again, and my first embalming experience was completed.

Going in for the embalming, I felt relatively relaxed and relieved to some degree that I would not have to wear my suit. This of course took place before the decision was made for me to be present in the funeral home everyday where the suit was required in the event anything happened. Having general knowledge about some of the tools and the process of embalming had prepared me somewhat, so going into this situation was not completely shocking or overwhelming. The very first thing noted was her mouth and the way she looked lying there, dead and unprepared. In retrospect, this was a sort of an epiphany because later, as mentioned, Jantzen explained that the mouth was the most recognizable and important feature to set. Another almost haunting aspect of this case was that her high cheeks bones and eyes while still open displayed similar features to my mother as she might look in another twenty years. Of course, the most prominent aspect with an effect initially was simply the smell because it was very overwhelming and those with a weak stomach probably would not have withstood. To me, however, the whole process was fascinating from a biological standpoint, in the same way as watching a surgery on the learning channel. I was intrigued and asked a lot of questions as we moved forward with each stage in the process, and in a lot of ways I felt privileged or fortunate to be involved in something that most would prefer not to see, even if as a means to understand.

And then the reality of the situation would appear, for example, it was difficult to believe that all of this was real. This was a real woman that had a life, and here she was lying nude on a preparation table being embalmed by two young men who were strangers. In a different setting this would more often be considered inappropriate. As a matter of fact this point became abundantly clear while transcribing my notes from the day later that night. I was listening to a compact disc by Chant a group of monks that were chanting to soothing rhythms. I was in my office room with the rest of my apartment dark. Because it had been a long and stimulating day, I was tired and you could hear it in the tone of my voice that was monotonous, low, slow and soft, but could easily have been interpreted as someone trying to come across as seductive. And as I was listening to myself from the recorder and typing the notes, phrases such as "we rubbed the body down," "we were massaging the muscles and joints to get more flexibility," "it was very stiff of course and just felt smooth because of the soap that was on the body, so it just kind of slid down," "not break it physically but loosen it up that is what I mean when saying break it with fluid so once that was loosened up we got a little more mobility out of her" or "just the stiffness is really all that stood out," created a very strange experience in and of itself because religious music to images of embalming a stranger that if heard by someone without knowledge of the context might believe she or he were reading a passage from a romance novel or one of a serial rapist just became a rather surreal moment. In other words, two men with their hands on an unfamiliar naked woman was acceptable in this context because we were only doing what was necessary for a successful embalming with the most permissible factor being, that the woman was dead. This is one reason Mitford argued that embalming was a heinous activity.

Now the body was cold and stiff to the touch especially as the embalming fluid began to make everything firm. When massaging the hands it was a bit peculiar, I believe, because the hands have so much to do with touch, and here we were bending the fingers and wrists trying to get flexibility out of them in order to form them into a relaxed more lively position. Sometimes, when massaging the inner part of the hand, the person would literally squeeze back until the fingers began settling into place. So massaging the hand would often have the effect of bringing reality back to what we were doing.

Another noticeable characteristic in this first embalming, as well as in others that would follow, were the various scars on the body that permitted me to read some of the stories of her life, and sometimes it was interesting to learn during the arrangement, if my thoughts about them were actually true. Generally, throughout this first experience with embalming, I was inquisitive, investigative, intrigued, fascinated, and relatively comfortable with exception to the physiological discomforts of smell. However, probably the most interesting aspect of this embalming was how the body or human features of the body disappeared. There was no identity regarding age, gender, or condition once the work began. Focus seemed to naturally turn toward the immediate task at hand from turning on the water, setting the features, administering fluid, and cleaning everything from the instruments and table to the body. It was only during brief moments of massaging the hands, and when the embalming process was completed whereby the embalmer would ask my opinion, then we looked and assessed the work we had done, that a face and identity would then return or appear.

With so many different things occurring during the first embalming, the next couple went rather smoothly or straightforward. Probably the greatest discomfort was in

my feet and back because these experiences took place after hours following a full work shift. They were also different thoughts as an additional assistant helped, thus changing the group dynamic. These embalming sessions were filled with lots of conversation ranging from instruction, explanation, personal life stories, and plenty of teasing. As in other situations when more than two people were present a lot of sarcastic banter would be given and taken. It was important to note that the sarcasm was never directed at the corpse, as it always remained with the living and our personal lives. One such conversation involved teasing about wives and significant others being difficult and dominant as evidenced from the multiple times each would snap to answer their cell phone while still wearing their embalming gear and gloves. Other experiential stories were shared such as, the role of the funeral director and how careful one must be when arranging funerals regarding things they say, because grieving individuals react in a variety of ways, and the fact there have been recorded cases (not at this funeral home) where a person was incorrectly determined dead and it was not known until the embalmer received the shock of a lifetime, a presumed dead body waking up. At this point my interest and intrigue were still high, but with the continuous conversation, again it was difficult to accomplish much learning or more in depth understanding about any personal thoughts taking place. That was, until taking part in an embalming strictly as an observer.

A heavy set man had died around two or three in the morning and was brought to the funeral home by Logan but was not embalmed until the next day because the family had not decided on cremation or embalming. Since we did not know whether they would embalm, I decided to take part in the arrangement, and it took nearly two hours to finish

at which point I went to assist in the embalming that had already started an hour and half before, and they were having problems. Apparently, one of the times when Logan left the arrangement to get some forms in the front office, he informed Jantzen about their decision to embalm, so Jantzen began the embalming being assisted by Lefty. At first, I was a bit disappointed to learn of this because I had not assisted in embalming as much as funeral arrangements and thought they could have waited for me to finish before beginning, however by the end of it my thoughts and attitude had changed.

Upon entering the preparation room, the first sensation was the strong odor of embalming fluid because, after an hour and a half, the fumes were beginning to build up to a point that both Jantzen and Lefty opened the door and went into the garage to get some fresh air for a minute. The body had seven incisions on it, both femoral arteries, radial arteries, and the carotid artery had been lifted in failed attempts for arterial and hypodermic embalming. In addition to that, he had a colostomy bag where a hole would have to be closed and about a twelve inch incision right down the middle of his stomach from surgery that had been stapled shut but not very efficiently. It looked as though the doctors simply stapled him enough to keep his intestines and fat from falling out of the body; therefore, the staples would have to be removed and then his stomach sewn closed. I do not know how many stitches were actually used to close all the holes but, by the time Jantzen was done, his hands were numb and cramping. These incisions would create problems even during dressing and casketing with gradual leaking through the stitches due to the lack of embalming fluid. Though the problem was not completely identified, it was thought that lying too long after death combined with his weight created the coagulated blood that became impenetrable.

There was a little blood on his face and some drying on the table since, they had been in there nearly two hours already, and they still needed to aspirate him or conduct the cavity embalming. This could not be done until all incisions were sewn shut, so after taking in some breaths of fresh air, Jantzen began closing all the holes. Though he did not prefer to see the intestines and was not looking forward to sewing that incision shut, Lefty used it as an opportunity to compare the incision and layer of fat to a case he had worked, and I was fascinated and eager to view something new. Seeing the intestines and layer of fat reminded me of something I was thinking about after the previous embalming.

Whenever someone was told about how the body seemed to disappear while working on it, most would equate it to doctors and how they distance themselves from their subjects. However, I questioned whether we were really distancing ourselves or if it was more tolerable because the subject was dead. In some ways, working on a body was not much different than cleaning fish or venison for hunters with the exception that cleaning fish or deer was a lot more grotesque. When I thought about it, for me, the most difficult part of cleaning a fish was removing the head because it was still alive. Once the fish was dead cleaning it did not really have an effect. It was this thought that led to the question about whether embalming a body worked in a similar way. In other words, obviously a human being was different than a fish or animal, but the work we did, more often was less gruesome and did not involve killing. So maybe in the end, those little incisions made on the body and the fluid being pumped into the arteries were just like working with any kind of flesh. However, as previously mentioned, when working with the hands or assessing the job once accomplished, those human attributes came back and

they had definitive distinctions from cleaning a fish or animal. An acute reminder of this happened as they completed the remaining tasks for this embalming.

Since I entered the preparation room late, this embalming differed because I did not wear protective gear and only participated as an observer. Once Jantzen finished closing all the incisions he began to aspirate. The main thing recognized while he sutured and aspirated was the flimsiness of this man since there was very little embalming fluid injected to harden his limbs. I am not certain if it was the large incision on his stomach, the size of it, the flimsiness, or strong chemical smell, but as Jantzen probed his large belly with the trochar it seemed more grotesque; an effect that was not present before. For some reason watching him thrust the trochar made my shins hurt or tingle as it reminded me of the first embalming where he had to hypodermically embalm the woman's leg by running the trochar up and down her tibia. It was the kind of sensation one might feel when hearing fingernails scratching a chalkboard. Even later when recording my thoughts about it on the drive home, that same sensation returned along with visual images of a trochar being run up and down the tibia. Possibly this was the result of seeing the work rather than being focused on completing a specific task as a participant. Fortunately, the interaction that took place in the preparation room provided a welcomed distraction.

As the usual sarcasm was exchanged between Lefty and Jantzen, they always deliberately vexed each other the most, I was standing back being reflective in between sharing information with them about the dead man, that was learned during the arrangement. It was during these quiet reflections that I decided embalming did not have the appeal or intrigue that it once possessed when I first entered into this type of work,

and questions of meaning came forward. I was thinking something along the lines of "here is this man who has been to war, traveled the world, an entrepreneur, a loving and respected father, proud husband of sixty years, with all this life and experience, yet was now lying here on this table dead." For him to do all the things that were mentioned during the arrangement only to have an endpoint of lying on a table, being embalmed, just seemed sad, and questions about the meaning of it all arose. What was the point? Where does meaning reside in any of this? Though not thinking specifically about any nihilistic existential themes, it really represented a very existential moment, and in some ways felt fatalistic and meaningless.

Possibly my reactions during this embalming experience were a result of underestimated or unknown emotional effects that took place during the arrangement. When entering the preparation room I had just left a very good and interesting two-hour arrangement acquiring a lot of information about the life and meaning behind this man. And then in the next instance all that life lived was now reduced to a pile of flesh lying dead on a table with multiple, bleeding, incisions and a number of individuals, with no knowledge of him, speaking and working around him as if that life lived was irrelevant. Nobody was being disrespectful, but I believe my position as an observer and taking a part in all of this activity just created that meaningless effect and began changing my attitude toward a preference of assisting arrangements rather than embalming or at least in combination with embalming. Suddenly, it seemed important for the individual conducting the arrangement to also conduct the embalming.

The next few embalming cases would reaffirm this changing attitude or perspective. In a couple of them, I even deferred participation to the other assistant

because getting into protective gear to do a relatively normal embalming just did not seem that appealing and there really was no need to have three people dressing for one case, so I chose instead to observe and ask questions. As a result, these particular cases did proceed more like a classroom setting with Jantzen asking questions about what to do next, talking me through each step, and responding to questions I had not been able to ask in previous situations due to my participation in the interaction taking place. For example, these were times when he explained the importance of the mouth and how disinfecting it and the nose was necessary to sanitize as a precautionary measure both for the public and us because you never know what unseen pathogen or communicable disease could be exiting the mouth via the lungs, purge, or air pressure released that sounded like a sigh as we moved the body around. He also demonstrated how to appropriately measure with your hands to determine the place of the artery in order to make the incision along with other more technical information. The teacher/student episodes made the embalming interesting and move by more quickly; however, at this point the excitement was slipping away and the typical case became less interesting.

There was one important lesson learned from my observer position during a particular embalming. We had an older, adult male, without teeth and a badly shaped mouth to correct. Jantzen used a mouth former and really did an excellent job to correct it. However, from my position it seemed to be a little flawed, and it was thought that Jantzen would notice this as well. He did work on it a bit more and asked for our opinions whereby it was conferred it looked good enough. The difference was that when I went next to the body where he was working, the mouth looked normal. But, from my position further away it did not. I presumed their expertise was correct and made no

suggestions, so then we left. However, the next day I found out the wife was displeased with the mouth, and since Caleb was present when she viewed the body he had to correct it again. There was only so much he could do since the features were already set but it was enough. The point was it might not be a bad idea to take a distant and close look at the body being prepared and maybe I should have made the suggestion when noticed. Everything worked out though, and the family was very pleased with the services provided.

In the beginning, there were several problems with getting involved with embalming. First, in most cases, embalming a body was a one, person job though an extra set of hands was appreciated and could help complete the process a little quicker. Second, these embalmers took pride in their work so interest on some level was working alone to see how well they could individually transform a body. Third, due to the nature of the work and the distance for me to travel, often I was an afterthought in the immediacy of the moment. Additionally, a number of calls took place after hours, and whether they were coming from home or somewhere else they happened to be, my phone number was not in their cell phone memory until just before I stopped working, and once they made it to the funeral home with the body, they were not going to wait an hour or more for me to get there before beginning a process that generally only took an hour and half. Fourth, if an embalming would take place during the day; especially, on a day with very little happening, each employee would be eager to do some work, again failing to call or maybe conveniently forgetting to call. Also, it was important to embalm as quickly as possible because in this business it was never certain when you might go from a very dull day to one extremely busy day. Therefore, even days when I was present such

as during the arrangement when they started an embalming, they did it because each person still wanted to leave during the regular work shift and of course, they did not want to be stuck even later because they waited around on an embalming for me to participate, especially not with the possibility of receiving another call, thus making two bodies to embalm at a later hour with a capability to embalm only one at a time. Finally, when you consider these factors, along with my on-call status, initially, and the number of cremation, direct burials, and donation to science it did not leave a very large window of opportunity to participate.

Despite all these factors limiting my embalming experience, I was still able to assist in a variety of cases that taught the procedures and possibilities to this practice. It also demystified connotations and scenarios that were considered prior to working at this establishment. For example, there was the simple notion that "gross was still gross." I went into this thinking maybe funeral director/embalmers had a different perception about handling the dead and what many would consider the more grotesque aspects of the job. But, on various occasions, each embalmer at some point made a somewhat disgusted gesture at things like a long piece of mucous coming out when cleaning the nose, a piece of scab from a skin sore that got stuck on the rubber glove when wiping the body down, or the blackened mucous that came out from the gums of a smoker, and then getting caught in the air that pushed out of the same mouth when moving the body to the preparation table. Even reflective discussions of accidentally breaking bones when learning to handle corpses in mortuary science school would send chills down spines. There was also the smell of defecation, cleaning fungus out from under nails, purge dribbling from the corners of a mouth, or being able to see the blood and tissue flow

through the plastic tubing when the embalming tubes were replaced with clear ones; were just some of the things that even the embalmer still recognized as gross despite being necessary parts of the job. If one just removed the human element and considered that every body received was in a somewhat unhealthy condition, then it was understood why some things were just gross or dirty and had nothing to do with disrespect.

Another aspect that each of us agreed upon was that handling the dead body, though the more intriguing part for the general public and always motivating the most questions, was really the easiest part because the person was dead. In my experience, no corpse ever walked, talked, cried, screamed, jumped, opened its eyes, or in some way made strange things happen such as lights to go off, doors to slam shut or instruments to move. The corpse just lay there dead until we moved it. It did not matter if we were dressing a body, embalming a body, or moving it, the attitude was always focused on the task at hand. In the moment one did not think about this being a dead body or a dead person; it was viewed as work that needed to be done. Only in retrospect, or in my case at times as an observer, could one think about the reality of the situation. The rest of the time was spent trying to remain focused on the task and to complete it to the best of our ability and in the most professional manner possible. It was dealing with the loved ones or families and the living that was difficult or sometimes problematic.

Though excited, intrigued, and fascinated with the first few cases, by the end of the last one, the typical case and smell of chemicals in the room had become more of a chore than an opportunity. The end result was still impressive, and probably the greatest lesson learned was that each case or body was different with specific needs that sometimes required improvisation. Remember, the idea was to make the body appear

peaceful and as natural as possible. One problem that was sometimes faced was the female breasts, as gravity tends to pull things downward, and those individuals relatively large in stature would end up with their breasts on the sides of the body. Logan explained once during an embalming, an instrument they used to aid in this problem before it was lost when left on a body that was being transferred. It consisted of two rounded metal plates that would be placed over each areola and then hooked together to pull the breast up to their natural position until the embalming fluid would set them in place. However, for women with larger breasts pulling them to the middle would center them, but then the excess would fall toward the chin, creating another problem. What they began doing then was basically creating a pulley system with some rope whereby it would wrap around the metal connecting clamp between the breasts and then loop it around the faucet, thus pulling the breasts downward into their natural position and then tied off, again until the embalming fluid would set them in place. However, since losing this instrument as with most things in life, a little duct tape always helped.

What people should understand is a good embalmer will work to the best of his or her ability to make a dead person look as natural as possible in an effort to ease the grieving process for the family and friends, though sometimes there was not much one could do. It was not uncommon to hear horror stories about smell, posture, or the waxy look of a dead body, but it was important to note that each body did not always receive chemicals the same way, each often required a different quantity of solution, arrived in various conditions, and some were not even in a reparable condition; therefore, it was up to the embalmer to assess it and make sound decisions toward a plan of action, within a short time frame, and hope for the best because once the embalming solution set, there

was no going back. An embalmer had one opportunity to get it correct in a situation where the family and friends would later cast judgment about the naturalness or likeliness of a loved one they have never seen dead. Unlike other funeral homes studied (Turner and Edgley 1976), one certainty in this preparation room and among any one of us that worked in there, was that we all adhered to the motto hanging on the wall inside the preparation room that included this statement, "This preparation room becomes sacred when a family entrusts us with one of its most precious possessions," concluding with a summative text and suggestion to treat each body as if the family were present. Of course with my co-status as researcher people may have been on their best behavior as well.

Other Contexts for Handling a Dead Body

This was an industry about caring for the living yet handling their dead, so even if your preference was not embalming, while working in a funeral it should be expected to find oneself in various contexts with dead bodies, and often it was better accomplished with more than one worker. These situations would include body removals, dressing and casketing bodies, cosmetizing, moving casketed bodies from one room to another, preparing and moving bodies on stretchers to other rooms in order for family members to dress or view them before cremation, transporting bodies from one location to another, receiving bodies from other states by drivers not employed with this establishment, or simply having multiple bodies lying in state awaiting the day of the funeral. Sometimes there were even bodies in their cremated form. As an apprentice attempting to learn the trade, I was able to participate in each of these situations with the exception of transporting a body for cremation. This was something primarily reserved for non-

director assistants and it often overlapped with assisting in arrangements. For many people this ebb and flow of dead bodies might appear to be ghoulish, disconcerting, or even disgusting, but it was an environment that required acclimation and tolerance since it was often the part of a regular workday. With prior experience or presence at funerals and my academic interest in death related topics, this environment was not perceived to be peculiar or frightening; however, I was surprised on a couple of occasions by some unexpected or irrational reactions that occurred while working in close proximity with the dead. Even in these various contexts for handling the dead, the significance of improvisation became apparent or as Logan stated, "the ability to think on one's feet."

Dressing and casketing a body could be difficult at times and was always a delicate situation. One thing was certain; most people did not consider the level of difficulty involved in particular articles of clothing when attempting to dress a corpse that was weighted, stiff, and nearly inflexible. However, a director never refused the outfits selected by the family in full comprehension of the meaning it would hold for them to view their loved one in an image that most closely resembled their style or personality. Hip hugger jeans, tightly knitted, long sleeve, sweaters, t-shirts, undergarments, suits and ties or anything could be problematic especially when involving a heavier individual. Nonetheless, the funeral director would always find a way to make it work. And in cases when something was forgotten, there were plenty of socks, underwear, t-shirts and etceteras that were kept on hand to accommodate as a means to relieve the family of any additional concerns.

A family member, a local beautician that could be contacted by the funeral home, the hairstylist that cut the individual's hair while still alive, or the director himself, could

do hair and make-up. Of course when the director was left to do this it was not for styling the hair or applying make-up as worn by the individual necessarily, rather it was when there was not really a hair or make-up style to worry about. It was humorous at times when just two or three men were trying to decide on how well the hair or make-up looked on a woman, but we did our best. Generally though, a simple foundation and possibly added color to the lips was the most they would do unless requested otherwise by the family. Props were sometimes added such as canes, caps, pendants, and various types of jewelry, and the funeral director would usually arrange them in a manner that looked professional and orderly.

My first experience with dressing and casketing a body was one of intrigue and honor because it was considered a privilege to be doing this for what I called a human relic, a woman born at the turn of the twentieth century. I kept thinking to myself, how wonderful to be in the presence of someone that lived the entire twentieth century and then some, a theme that was reiterated by her family during the funeral service. She looked very good for her age, and aside from the sweater we had to maneuver into place, dressing her did not cause any problems because she was quite small in stature. My greatest concern regarded the delicacy of an embalmed body, especially, when they suggested being very careful with the fingers. The last thing you would want to happen was a broken bone or bruise because it would be difficult to fix if at all possible, and though seldom, this kind of accident has occurred to various funeral directors and embalmers. Therefore, with limited experience maneuvering dead bodies, I proceeded with extra care and caution in a similar way that men often handle a newborn baby. My greatest challenge was getting her hands through the small opening of the sweater.

Fortunately Lefty was very patient and good at keeping me relaxed by talking me through everything, since he noticed my increased anxiety from falling behind his efforts with the other hand. It was the kind of reaction one has when she or he feels hurried due to thoughts about impeding the progress of another person.

To dress her in pants, Lefty and I each slid a foot through the leg opening, then lifted her legs straight up until lifting her buttocks a little off the table, just enough to slide her pants underneath, and then pulled them the rest of the way after laying her legs back down on the table. This was the general method for dressing bodies in pants. Each then slid a hand through the arm opening and pulled the shirt up as high on the arms as possible. Finally, Lefty simultaneously pushed her head forward while pulling the opening up and over the head. This does not always work, sometimes requiring us to cut the shirt in the back, pulling it up over the arms and then forming it around the body to create the same appearance. In the last step, I grabbed her underneath the shoulder from behind her head and lifted her enough for Lefty to pull the sweater the rest of the way down and into place. Her jewelry was then placed and we lifted her together to lay her in the casket.

To lift the body, I had my right arm slid underneath both legs and my left arm slid halfway up and underneath the buttocks. Lefty then slid his right arm flush with mine underneath the buttocks and his left arm underneath the upper shoulders. We then lifted and turned her front side toward us in order for her to rest in the crevice of our arms sideways. Finally, we sidestepped to the casket and lay her in it as centered as possible. Once she was in the casket, we checked her positioning from both ends and made adjustments with two cranks, one that tilted right to left and one that raised the body

vertically. This was a standard procedure for lifting a body of smaller size. Two other techniques were employed for heavier individuals.

One way was by sliding them off the plastic body board and into the casket. A plastic body board would be laid on the stretcher then the deceased would be placed on it. The stretcher would be raised up until just a fraction higher than the casket opening. A sheet would be laid over the edge of the casket to prevent any scratching. Simultaneously, or on a count of three the two individuals would pull the plastic body board across and tilt it down so the body would slide right into the casket. Then adjustments were made for centering, clothing, and hair, thus creating a comfortable and restful appearance.

A second way would be with a body lift and was used only once when casketing an individual proposed to weigh approximately six hundred pounds, an effort that took two funeral directors, three assistants, and a specially ordered oversized casket. To do this, four vinyl straps attached to a metal lifting device with a crank were worked underneath the body to distribute weight evenly. One went underneath the legs around the calf area, one underneath the upper thighs, one underneath the lower to middle back, one under the upper back and shoulder area, and hands were used to support the head. The stretcher was then again placed flush with the casket and raised just above it. Then the funeral director would crank the lift raising the body off the stretcher about an inch. Finally, we pushed the stretcher out, rolled the casket underneath to what appeared to be centered and then slowly lowered the body into it. In this case, there was not much adjustment to be made once the body was in the casket, so the estimation had to be fairly accurate before lowering it.

Body transfers and removals were odd when the reality of the situation was considered. It is not everyday that average individuals find themselves driving down the interstate with a dead body in their vehicles. But when the other assistants drove bodies out of state for cremation, or even when I assisted in bringing a body back to Oklahoma from another state this sort of nonchalance was depicted as we cruised down the interstate in a white minivan talking about ourselves or the events of the day with a dead body lying right behind us. These trips were just to the crematorium, embalming centers, medical examiners office, or various county morgues run by other members of the death industry, but to remove a body from a residential home, a hospital or nursing home, resulted in an entirely different feeling.

I assisted Stephen on my first removal from a nursing home and it turned out to be quite an experience; especially, since both of us were basically amateurs using an older stretcher that caused problems regarding the mechanics. The nursing home had a specific door to enter, and as we walked toward the door a young teenage girl immediately met us there and led us down the hall and to a center desk where an older staff member explained where the room was and the path to follow. As we walked toward the room, various staff members began directing tenants to rooms, turning their wheelchairs toward the television in the front hall and closing doors along the hallway. There was even a woman that made eye contact with me and quickly turned her head down while moving into her room. It almost felt as if we were the plague and being quarantined or perceived as some kind of evil. However, two men dressed in black suits bearing an empty stretcher in this environment at a minimum were considered representatives of the grim reaper. Obviously, this was not a friendly house call, nor an unfamiliar circumstance.

All eyes were on us; it did feel somewhat like walking out on stage, and the desire to be distinct and professional began to rise from the shadowed temperament beneath. This was one time where Goffman's (1959) notion about the stage performance and presentation of self as well as the Lyman and Scott (1970) notion of stage fright were abundantly clear.

A quiet hush seemed to come over the place as we walked the hallway and it became more and more vacant by the time we departed with the body. This was all done as a means to keep it as discrete as possible. Once we made it to the room, some family members were still inside spending time with the body, so the daughter of the deceased woman entered and asked them to leave, as it was a very small room barely large enough to maneuver the stretcher flush against her bed. We managed to get the stretcher in the room and the older staff member entered and closed the door behind us to serve as a facilitator and witness. Her presence added pressure to my sense of self because the stretcher was not cooperative from my end when attempting to lower it, thus marking a failed attempt for a legitimate funerary worker projection. She warned us of the massive, leaking, fluid pouches on her elbows and placed a towel under each one. Despite her precautions, naturally, with the mechanical problems already taking place in lowering the stretcher, fluid from her elbows would get on my hands as well.

In recognition of the fluid that had seeped through some of the bedding and the fact a dead body lay in it, the staff member acknowledged the need to take the bedding along with the woman. So, we wrapped the woman in it by closing one end over the top of the body to the opposite side and then reached across the body grabbing the two ends and pulling her across onto the stretcher. Next, I would again fail to raise my end of the

stretcher. Fortunately, Stephen, under the watchful, hawk like eyes of the staff member, improvised to save face by making the repeated suggestion about this old stretcher and its tendency to jam. She did not seem impressed and my confident, professional, sense of self seemed to deteriorate with each failure of presentation. Additionally, though rationally it was understood to be harmless, I remained fixated on the fluid that had dried on my hands and thought about how nice it would be to wash them, concurrently, it was not worth the perception of disrespect or incompetence. Frustrated by my ignorance with stretcher mechanics and ridiculous paranoia about a water-based fluid, it was no surprise that our greatest error would follow despite having prior knowledge of the effect.

Once strapped into the stretcher we covered her head and face as a means to be respectful when moving her through the hallways. The problem with covering a dead, face was that the nose tended to flatten out even from the mere weight of a sheet and we had placed the extra pillow, sheet, and funeral home blanket over the entire arrangement. Fortunately the drive was not too far and upon arrival at the funeral home as was customary, Logan met us to view the body, noticed the mistake, and corrected it immediately. However, there was one other complication endured before getting to the funeral home.

The stretcher wheels would not fold underneath when attempting to push it into the removal van, and the dead woman's daughter was watching. Finally, when we found the latch that was locked and managed to get the stretcher in the vehicle, her daughter, somewhat laughing, suggested her mom probably would say, "Just give her a big push boys" as she was known for teasing and making things difficult. The blind leading the blind experience would come to an end by collecting the paper work forgotten inside and

we both headed that way before realization reminded us that one person needed to stay with the body, and that person would be me.

As I stood outside next to the removal van, thoughts about how pleasant the moon looked rising in the sky, mortality, and whether another staff member that walked by to her vehicle thought about her mortality with each experienced body removal occurred intermittently. These thoughts were soon shrouded with consideration toward my comfort level about sitting alone with a dead body right behind my head in the car. What would I do if that body suddenly rose up? It was determined that I was a little uncomfortable with sitting in the vehicle and that it would be perceived as less professional, though that easily could have been a method for rationalizing greater feelings of anxiety. In retrospect, it seemed to be related to my feelings about someone dying in a small room, alone, at a nursing home, the short amount of time lapsed from death and the concreteness of assistance in the actual place the body expired. This was my first recognition and experience of discomfort when in closer proximity to a dead body.

Body removals from a residential home would have similar impact, but one did not have to walk down a long hallway with fifty or more people around and on either side. Residential removals were more intimate or personal and conducted with prudence. Lifting dead weight and attempting to move a body sometimes without much room around sharp corners, under the gazing eyes of loved ones in their most immediate reaction to the death, could be a daunting task. Any remaining family members were given the opportunity to pay respects and sometimes gathered in one room as a means to avoid watching the removal. Generally, there were always a couple of bystanders that

would pay closer attention, and this could make a tricky removal around sharp corners a little intimidating; therefore, the director always carefully determined the line of action before anyone would place a hand on the body.

Probably the most interesting revelation about handling bodies during a removal occurred following my first experience at the nursing home. The first thing noticed whenever removing a body that was freshly dead, or approximately within two hours of death, was the warmth of it. This was more prominent because, up to that point, my experience with dead bodies involved those that were already cold and at the funeral home, a place perceived to be more appropriate for dead bodies. Something about the warmth of the body and it being surrounded by personal artifacts on a front stage setting increased the meaning and feeling or pressure on performance and just seemed to have greater impact. Death in this setting had the effect of being more concrete, more real. Once getting the body to the preparation room, stripped of clothing and lying on the table, my anxiety or discomfort decreased and it felt like a more natural fit, or at least like something more familiar, as if this was the place a dead body belonged. In a way, maybe it was about removing a body from reality and getting it to a place where those realities were remolded, shaped, and sometimes removed. Maybe it had more to do with a familiar and relaxed environment (backstage) under the direction of an experienced funeral director and out the view of family members (front stage). Whatever the case, it was a difference that was felt, and that unexpected anxiety would occur again.

It was Saturday and I was at the funeral home for what would become two funeral arrangements. On Friday, I helped transfer a body from out of state, and we received a phone call about another body that would be ready to transfer from the medical

examiners office. This day would come to represent my most difficult emotional experience among other unexpected reactions; that in many ways, were indescribable possibly due to the age, gender, status, and unknown cause of death in both cases.

Two young mothers lay dead in the preparation room, both autopsied, and embalmed out of town, simply awaiting arrangements for dressing and casketing. The first arrangement took place around 10 a.m. and the second arrangement time was not confirmed since funeral directors were unsuccessful in their attempts to get someone to meet for an arrangement. They only knew it would be this day, and eventually, it would begin around noon. The first arrangement with a Native American family lasted over an hour and I had mixed feelings of sadness for the family and disappointment with the way it was being conducted by the funeral director. Indian tribes were offered a significant discount for funeral services, and this particular tribe had not paid the funeral home in over a year, that left some of the staff feeling disdain when working with them. The arrangement would conclude with their decision to dress the woman in more traditional wear, so we left to inspect the body to ensure it was in an appropriate condition for them to handle.

We pulled the stretcher out of the preparation room and the sheet down off her face (sheet was over the face because she was already embalmed), and immediately I was taken aback by how youthful and good she looked considering all that had been done. Her eyes were dark and halfway opened, and for reasons unknown to me, I became somewhat transfixed on them. I kept feeling compelled to look into the eyes, something that had not occurred before, and it increased my feelings of sadness. The body looked fine with the only visible signs of autopsy being the y-incision and her head that rotated

from side to side loosely since there was no bone in place to keep it stable. This was something the funeral director explained to the family before bringing them in to dress the body as a means to minimize the level of potential shock at this motion. Around this time Paul, one of the part-time assistants who retrieved the body, was informed to drive the removal van out of the garage to give us room for moving the body into the chapel. Before the funeral director could explain to wait until we were ready, Paul pressed the button to open the garage door. This would put us in plain view of the public streets and was considered an extremely professional discourtesy to expose the remains of loved ones in this manner, and as a response we rushed the stretcher back into the preparation room until closing the door behind Paul. Now following a quick adrenaline rush and increased anxiety partially out of fears regarding what the family who were standing on the other side of the door praying could hear, and because of the potential for them to come into the garage, we began tucking the excess straps underneath the stretcher out of the way until the funeral director had to leave to get an item in the front office. Though not my first time, this left me alone in between two dead people about eight feet apart.

It could have been any combination of factors to influence my reaction that day, but my anxiety level did increase to some degree. For example, it might have resulted from the quiet hum of fluorescent lighting, the muffled sound of the family in the other room praying, the short lived adrenaline rush from concealing the body from the public, being in between two dead bodies, and already feeling sadness now with knowledge of the stories leading up to both deaths. Or maybe it was simply that I was alone holding the arm of a corpse in place because as I continued my job with the straps her arm fell off the stretcher. I tried to place it back but it would not stay and with my inexperience

moving bodies and lack of support on the opposite side of the stretcher, I did not want to shove the body over out of fear of dumping it onto the ground, so I simply held her arm in place until the funeral director returned. I was again was compelled to look at her eyes and face in between glances at the other woman lying in the preparation room. This was the moment that I could really feel a difference in heart rate and was unclear for the reasons. It was not about fear or a desire to run out of the room, however, I kept wondering about the amount of time the director had been gone, and it was really not very long. When he returned, he simply pulled the body toward him, I put the arm by her side, my anxiety went down, and we moved her to the chapel where she would be dressed before casketing. Though my reaction was unexpected and only similar to my first body removal experience, I wondered if it had to do with my feelings about the circumstances, two young, mothers being dead, and one that possibly could have been prevented. In any regard, it was near the halfway point of my time in this funeral establishment and this level of discomfort or anxiety would not be experienced again.

Nearly an hour would pass before the next arrangement would take place, and the front office interaction seemed too annoying due to the indifferent attitude displayed by the other staff members not involved. The typewriter noise, along with the sarcastic banter among the other staff members, even created a little agitation, to a point that I walked over to the end of the hallway where I could subtly hear the grieving family in the chapel. I felt compelled to be a part of it even though indirectly, or maybe, it was in some way personal compensation for what I perceived to be disrespect in the arrangement. The question on my mind was, "Why were you feeling so connected to this family that you do not even know?" An unexpected and bewildering need to do more for

them was felt. Soon the second arrangement would begin with a different funeral director and would last over three hours.

When first hearing of this case I was very interested in participating due to the circumstances surrounding it. We knew the arrangement would be difficult and the challenge or experience of that intrigued me. I was familiar with the body already because I helped transfer it the day before and now would have the opportunity to learn more about her. The story that would follow was quite tragic, leaving only our professional demeanor to hide the thoughts and feelings below. By the end of this arrangement, I definitely could physically feel the emotional impact of both arrangements and sat in the front office in silence for at least ten minutes. There were no real thoughts going through my head; it was just simply a pure moment of emotion, being numb, or maybe overwhelmed. The funeral director and I then went to dress the woman as a means to have her ready for the stepmother who would come in to style her hair and apply cosmetics. As it turned out the stepmother was neither happy with the outfit nor with the way her body looked, but we had not embalmed her, and due to a number of complications, there was not much one could do to correct it. Once she finished we then casketed the body and moved it into the repose room generally used for females. This was our last task of the day and as I turned down the lights in the repose room once again unexpected feelings of sadness related to detachment arose. It just seemed sad to leave her there alone, almost like an endpoint to a very long and troublesome road. Later when driving home, the melancholic tone of my voice that represented the general mood for the day was noted on my voice recorder and would lead to some form of paranoia and restless sleep later that night, as I was unable to remove the faces of the deceased from

my mind, and feelings of someone looking over my shoulder were most likely a manifestation of some form of vicarious grief.

The face was a noted prominent feature of the body, especially proceeding an embalming. After each embalming, I would randomly visualize the face throughout the night and then it would dissipate by the next day. They were not disturbing images and did not create any discomfort, but the way it looked would be revisited a few times before going to sleep. The most intriguing thing to me about the face was the expression it bared before being molded on the preparation table. The corpse often seemed to express thoughts and feelings for that final moment of life. For example, one younger man was brought in with an expression of fear and surprise; then, it was learned that he had died slumped back in his chair at home from unknown causes. Another older man brought in looked scared and unprepared; then, it was learned during the arrangement that he was not ready to die and it was unanticipated. A younger woman embalmed out of town still had a look of ruggedness and almost satisfaction on her face when it was learned later that she spent plenty of time in bars and died the way she always wanted or anticipated. Another older man expressed pain, and it was consistent with his cancerous way to death. One ninety-five year old woman almost looked mad as if to question the length of time it took for death to come. Later it was later learned she had been in a nursing home, all her friends were dead, and she was preferably living as a loner. There was even a younger man still baring a look of intensity after dying on a motorcycle. Each face had a story to tell and I began to wonder if the other funeral directors felt the same way, so I asked if this was ever thought about in their experiences handling bodies over the years. I thought the question might be perceived as a little weird, but as it turned out they both simply

said, "all the time," and that it also motivated them to do an excellent job in the preparation room.

Handling dead bodies created a variety of thoughts and emotional responses that included intrigue, interest, fascination, sadness, peculiarity, discomfort, anxiety, confusion or indescribable impact, and indifference, but a summative thought about my position, by the time I worked my last day, was best expressed with a metaphor to the shock and dismay yet appreciation and understanding by the staff, the doll metaphor.

It first came to mind when the funeral director was combing out the tangles in the hair of a dead woman during one of my last dressing and casketing jobs. Once we laid her in the casket and adjusted her hair, a static build up from the shirt she wore caused a number of strands to stick to my gloves and there was no way to remove the hair without simply taking the gloves off and throwing them away. The static was also pulling strands of hair outward in various directions, so to alleviate the problem the funeral director decided to try spraying on some Scotchguard, and it worked. He would also have to improvise for setting the arms because she had been embalmed in another city and the arms were down on her sides too much for a normal casket fitting. Styrofoam pieces placed underneath the mattress provided the fix and at this point while looking at her face, she really appeared to have the likeness of a doll.

I think the doll metaphor idea began during my drive to work earlier that morning in full awareness of this body that would be delivered for dressing and casketing. Caleb and I had met her family the previous day and knew the approximate time in the morning that the body would arrive. So, I was thinking about the way people prepare for work and how different that work can be when employed with a funeral home. For instance, it

seemed almost humorous to me to think that Caleb at some point was probably telling his wife about his schedule for the day and had to mention the first job of dressing and casketing an approximately two hundred fifty pound woman. Who looks forward to starting their workday with that? How strange was it that we all woke up early in the morning, ate breakfast, dressed in our suits, with preparation for that job on our minds?

We had just finished moving the body to the repose room and returned to the front office when I asked, "Do you ever feel as if you are just working with a bunch of dolls?" The immediate response was a stern "no" followed by laughter, a consideration for the strangeness of the question, and then admittance for understanding. As I explained, once the embalming fluid set, the limbs hardened with about as much mobility as a doll moving back and forth somewhat with the skin sometimes reflecting a plastic image. And just like some dolls look very real, there were also bodies that looked very natural and real lying on the table. As a matter of fact, the first time I saw a body like that it was an instant surge of adrenaline and disbelief because she literally looked as though sleeping to the point it was almost scary.

Then, of course, came the preparation work of combing and styling the hair, cosmetizing with foundation, lipstick, eyeliner etceteras, followed by packaging for display and shipment after the family makes the purchase to take them away. The next body dies, comes in for production, and moves out just like packages or parts on an assembly line. There was even a plastic marker board in the front office where we would write the name of the deceased as a reminder of the work for the week and once that body was put into the ground or taken away in an urn the name was erased and often replaced with the following case. And this whole process, the continuous work around dead

bodies that would come and go, and memories about all the feeling or emotion that may have been developed while working with the family over several days or a week, would all be erased with a simple swipe of a hand. In this manner, it created an effect that I called the *un-reality* of being around dead bodies.

It just seemed that by the end of my last case, I had become indifferent or maybe numb to it all. I found myself often reflecting with an "oh, here is another body" or "all in a days work" kind of attitude in recognition of the nature of the job that entailed always being around another dead body. Sometimes the bodies embalmed really well other times not so well, but in any regard they were always dead, and by being dead it made them seem almost *un-real*. It really became evident when viewing one of the last bodies delivered to us already embalmed. I could not help but think he could just as easily be made of rubber, questioning whether the end result would be any different. Obviously, one would have a longer earth life once buried in the ground, but the appearance was much the same. I guess the realization was that even for another somewhat anonymous death, it was still difficult for the human brain to grasp precisely what it meant. And maybe it was the notion that when staring into the eyes of a dead person, or even looking at the face after closing those eyes forever, individuals were reminded of nothingness and possibly even meaninglessness. These thoughts served as reminders of another man we had dressed earlier that day.

Here was this man who was very outgoing, a businessman, a man who went out of his way to meet as many people as possible and still found time to take vacations and have fun with his family. All this life he lived, all these moments and experiences terminated in a mere eighty-one years, and now he would lie in a casket for five more

days awaiting the arrival of one more son before his burial on a Saturday. His funeral service was the largest worked during my time working there, with community business leaders and citizens of all ages present. And what did we at the funeral home have to say...a very calm or even sometimes exuberant NEXT!

I guess it was fact that a body had so much meaning to a family that recognized it as such, and sometimes I would get caught up in this meaning with a family but I was also part of an industry that motivated a subtle attitude of indifference, and this could be a matter of personal conflict at times. I did not like feeling indifferent, and it was this realization that eventually developed a craving for the drama and stories learned during the arrangements as it made me feel more attached to a particular case.

Funeral Arrangements

There was a young man in his twenties that had just opened a business, that died leaving behind a fiancée and broken hearted family. There was a woman in her thirties who finally felt balanced after years of struggle that suddenly died while giving birth. She was survived by a fiancé; two other children, and stepchildren that viewed her like a mother. The first time the newborn would see her was in a casket. There was a seventeen year, old girl that watched her mother buried, who was in her forties, across the street from the city dump for her eighteenth birthday. There was a man in his forties, a widower recently remarried, that complained of arm and chest pains to a doctor who suggested it was indigestion, he died two days later of cardiac arrest, leaving behind five children. There was a man in his fifties, a fatality of a one vehicle car accident; the family later found a letter explaining clarity and happiness now felt in his life, yet it also seemed to cast doubt on the notion of an accident. There was a woman in her seventies

that died nearly fifteen years after fading away with dementia, leaving behind several children, a husband that was still in love and frustrated with the unknown aspects of her demise. There was a man in his eighties, who earned the Purple Heart, among other medals serving his country in the military. He would have no visitors and only two people present at the graveside for his burial, one being the funeral director and the other a friend that visited him in an assisted living home and cared for him until his death. His only living relative was a nephew that barely knew him and apparently had no money to pay for a funeral. Each of these examples could be interpreted as both tragic and sad, in fact, in the immediacy of the moment, they were. But, when a person died with what many would consider less drama, such as individuals dying from natural causes in their older adult years, was it any less tragic? To the living family members, relatives, and friends that cared, the answer would be no. In other words, the story behind the death could not change the fact that the person was still dead and that was always dramatic to the people that cared.

It became apparent that in nearly every case according to the people involved in the arrangement had stories of love, family, favorable memories, some unfavorable memories, humor, sadness and loss among other similar characteristics. Loved ones focused seldom on explicating disturbing personality traits of the deceased, their happiness about the death, and satisfaction with the circumstances surrounding it, or any sort of optimistic suggestion toward the fact someone they knew and potentially cared about was dead. And, though knowing that a loved one had survived more years than anticipated or beyond the national average could be comforting to some degree, it still did not remove the hurt or fill the void where attachment in some form use to be.

Before entering the funeral home, funeral arrangements were considered to be less interesting and not really anticipated with much excitement. Just like most people outside of the industry, my original concern and fascination was toward any possible impact on self-conception from working around dead bodies on a regular basis or what many would consider the most troubling aspect, embalming. However, with increased experience with funeral arrangements and stories surrounding the deceased, I would come to feel as if the arrangement legitimized my role as an apprentice by connecting me to the cases or dead bodies and solidifying, or making everything else, more real. It was the funeral arrangement that enabled me to emotionally feel something other than indifference or a couple of times, a little anxiety. And in feeling more, it would motivate a number of existential questions regarding reality and truth. These were not intentional thoughts on behalf of my theoretical choice for this research endeavor; rather, they were emergent, and often would come to mind during those silent moments of reflection. Was handling a dead body without any knowledge regarding the consequences or causes too concrete to generate an emotional reaction? Was nothingness revealed when looking in the face of an unfamiliar dead person? Was it more existential to feel emotion while handling a dead body? Or was it that existentially, there was nothing to feel? Was it the socially constructed dramas during the arrangements that created feelings of sadness? Was sadness truly missing without knowledge of these dramas? Or was I simply afraid to feel? Possibly distancing myself from the situation? The argument holds that an existential sociology would assume that emotions, feelings, passions, drives etceteras, while situated in some context were most significant. Concurrently, it might be possible that when handling a body without knowledge of the story behind it, nothing was felt;

rather, it was a job that needed to be completed that happened to involve some mass of flesh. Whereas, when knowledge was acquired about the dead person, every other expected task from the arrangement to the graveside, suddenly took on new meaning. If the meaning in the various situated contexts was generated from socially constructed dramas during the arrangement, then how truthful were my feelings toward handling a dead body? Moreover, how truthful were they in the moment of any social context of work in the funeral home?

Whether thoughts generated during an arrangement were truthful when experienced later around the dead body kept me mentally occupied as I continued in my work experience over the next several weeks. These kinds of thoughts received their most consideration as previously mentioned, during the silent moments of any job such as embalming, body removal or funeral service. A lot of the time they would surface when a particular emotion was initially felt in the arrangement during the parts that required the funeral director and bereaved to participate in the interaction leaving me as a quiet and reflective bystander.

The Rational Plan or Attempted Goals

Each funeral arrangement began with simple introductions followed by seating. Signatures would be required for quoted prices, embalming, whether someone would be following the body for cremation, and the final contract. Sometimes the funeral director knew the person who claimed responsibility for the body before the arrangement; other times, it would be determined during the arrangement. Typically though, the funeral director would attempt to position himself next to this person as a means to keep things convenient. I found myself sitting wherever there was an opening, and sometimes that

meant around the outside of the family in an extra seat depending upon how many people would take part in it.

Once introductions were completed and everyone agreed to my participation, the funeral director would generally begin by asking the family to tell us something about the deceased. This was not typical for all funeral homes, but something they tried to practice and was a subtle way for them to write down information for the obituary. Of course, when individuals had a difficult time and asked about what kind of information, then the funeral director would simply explain that it was a way for them to construct an obituary and suggested they begin with likes and dislikes of the deceased or something along those lines.

This was one part of the arrangement where I could involve myself and would generally speak in response to stories being shared or possibly say something to help facilitate conversation when someone appeared to be seeking a suggestion. It was important for me to say something at this stage in the arrangement in order to legitimize myself as an assistant rather than some futile, deadbeat just staring at the rest of the people interacting. I also felt it would make the individuals involved more comfortable with my status as a social researcher, since one could easily be perceived as an obscure person interested in watching people cry or grieve. In recognition of my position as an apprentice, I was always careful with what would be said because I neither wanted to offend the family with insensitivity nor the funeral director by ignoring his status or right to direct the arrangement his way, especially during my first few arrangements. Sometimes family members planned to write their own obituary, but even if that was the case, the funeral director would ask about what newspaper or where they preferred it to

be printed. The funeral home would not make money on this but directors could have it completed a lot quicker with a phone call from their list. The service plans offered by the funeral home would then follow.

There was an overhead fee and after that a charge for any service desired that fell under three categories: care and preparation of the deceased, use of facilities and staff, and use of automobiles and staff (Alderwoods Group Funeral Planning Guide 2005). This would begin with the decision made by the family about the body and whether they wanted to have a visitation and funeral. Of course any decision would have a fee attached to it. For example, there was a fee for a visitation period and funeral service in the funeral home or church if funeral home personnel were used. The funeral coach or hearse and flower/equipment vehicle were basically mandatory with Cadillac limousines for family members, clergy, or pallbearers being optional. For these kinds of services a person could expect a bill from the funeral home between \$1350-3800, but they would have also have to consider casket, urn, outer burial container, stationery, flowers, honorariums, and third party business expenses that included cemetery fees, governmental fees such as death certificates, and monument or marker fees that were separate expenses not controlled by the funeral home itself. The funeral director could add any of these costs to the overall bill or simply leave it up to family members to complete on their own. Generally, the only services people provided themselves were flowers and honorariums or payments to clergy and musicians since most preferred taking care of everything all at once. The funeral director did not take a percentage of any cost from an external business. For example if the cemetery expected \$600 for opening and closing a grave then that was the amount that would be added to the bill and

the funeral home would pay it to the cemetery personnel usually by check after all family members had left the graveside.

Going through the merchandise and price list immediately following a discussion about the deceased was considered the most uncomfortable and least favorite part of the entire arrangement despite its necessity. Even the funeral directors were disappointed with price changes that came from corporate office and were really not in a position to object. Obviously this was a business, but the discussion of very personal details about the deceased and from the lives of people grieving that was then instantly redirected toward expenses and business considerations made any rapport established initially feel insincere and I was not even receiving money from any of it. I was always pleased when the funeral directors spoke candidly with people about their expenses and the fact they agreed it was better to leave the family alone during casket selection rather than trying to sell them something more elaborate and expensive. Again something that was not always consistent with other funeral homes.

Once the casket was selected the funeral director would re-exit to write the contract and then would go through each part of it before requesting the signature of the person that claimed responsibility for the body. All the anxiety, anticipation, excitement, or scenario construction about what might happen during the arrangement would disappear with the signing of the contract. For me, this was a sigh of relief either due to impatience or anticipated time to reflect.

Sometimes it was a bit awkward trying to conclude a session or to move people along. They were looking for indicators to leave and we did not want to appear impatient by making the suggestion. Often, the funeral director would use the same verbal cues

one might use in a phone or casual conversation with friends, just to communicate the end of the arrangement. If everything went as orderly as the plan, then an arrangement could be conducted in an hour and pre-need arrangements in even less time, or as Logan once stated after an arrangement with a pre-need plan that took us less than thirty minutes, "pre-need arrangements, priceless." However, we were dealing with individuals that were unpredictable and adjustments were always made based on what was perceived to be the necessary, or unspoken need of the individual. Grieving individuals were not reliable for coherence in the rational plan of action, leaving arrangement goals to linger or change.

The Irrational or Improvised Plan

Aside from a little nervousness just before entering my first arrangement, it generally felt very comfortable and natural for me to participate. As a matter of fact, the primary discomfort or complication regarded being in a secondary position or concern over lacking a legitimate role. It was not that I would have conducted arrangements differently, but would have preferred being the man in charge rather than the man reduced mostly to observing and contributing when possible. One could call it role strain and later role conflict when a funeral director requested my professional opinion regarding his style and ability to conduct arrangements that revealed one perception of my status beyond apprentice. The realization that occurred from various conversations following arrangements was that the funeral directors experienced the same thing especially when family members or individuals involved in the session did not respond in accord to their more rational plan or intentions.

Anywhere from two to ten individuals could be involved in an arrangement that sometimes included clergy, young children, toddlers, and others that would come and go throughout the session. Often, in larger group settings the director would move in various directions meeting people, and this would alter my introduction style as well. It was much more sensible to follow the pattern and introduce myself by going around the table than to stand there in silence until he completed his rounds in order to make the introduction. In this manner, all the funeral director had left to do was to briefly mention my researcher status and request permission for my participation. Larger groups tended to have more initial questions from various individuals whereas dyads and smaller groups tended to wait for direction. Sometimes, groups, despite our repeated assurance to direct the arrangement, continued to explain they were unaware of what to do because they had never been immersed in this situation before. Realistically, most people entering into an arrangement were unprepared. I preferred smaller group sizes because if I was unable to reserve a seat at the table, my role was more often detached and reduced to mere observer. However, any individual regardless the group size; could change the order of the arrangement with a comment, question, primary interest, or emotional outburst.

For example, one of the easier and somewhat humorous arrangements conducted, though not in an orderly fashion, because it more or less was conducted by a woman that wanted to control everything. It began in the casket room by a request for our opinions about how well the outfit she just bought for the deceased matched the lining and color of the casket. She first introduced herself then her husband and requested our names before we went back into the arrangement room. She was not being disrespectful just more forward and assertive than the average individual in an arrangement. This became a

rather elaborate funeral service with many decisions being based on her preferences rather than what might have been considered the preferences of the deceased, even though she continuously requested the thoughts of her husband without giving him a chance to think or really respond, something he abruptly explained by the time the session reached an hour being already longer than the time he wanted to spend there. Since the funeral service was for the living anyway, I did not recognize it as a problem, but I also was not directing the arrangement, so the continuous interruption with overlapping comments before the funeral director could explain anything became somewhat frustrating for him even with her likableness. It was a credit to his character for his willingness to swallow pride, adjust to the perceived demands and demeanor of the individual, answer her questions in random order, and still manage to acquire all information needed. When he left to fill out the contract, I remained and began explaining my research in greater detail at her request. Later, immediately following a private committal service at a cemetery as I held the door open for the family to enter the limousine before heading to the funeral service at a church, she would play matchmaker and introduce me to her daughter much to my surprise. It was thought to be an odd time for this kind of arrangement.

Family and individual characteristics in combination with my interpretation of non-verbal cues or things that were "not" said during the arrangement determined whether or not I would remain with the family when the funeral director exited to write the contract. I enjoyed these brief moments as it permitted the opportunity to learn more about the family or deceased, to ask questions that were on my mind while the funeral director was speaking, and it legitimated my role as an apprentice, especially when

someone would question me regarding services offered by the funeral home. Other times it was thought the family wanted to discuss the prices quoted or just needed a brief moment together to absorb everything that had just transpired separate from the funeral staff. These assumptions were often verified with the line of questioning or comments that followed upon our return; I would give myself a little phantom pat on the back for insightfulness or the ability of interpretation. Other more visible signs also aided in the definition of the situation.

Essentially, there were two circumstances during the arrangement that created emotional displays of tears, silence, uncomfortable pauses, throat lumps and swallows, and the need for tissue paper. The first circumstance involved discussions about the deceased from the social to personal conceptions of them and the second occurred when attention turned toward the dead body either when selecting a casket or viewing the body before transporting it for cremation was mentioned. These emotional displays could certainly trigger the same emotions in self, and made one sympathize, empathize, and in a subtle way grieve or share in the experience of it, not in the personal experience of the bereaved, but in recognition of their grief both from personal experience and for those inevitable moments in ones' own life yet to come.

Most people did not struggle with explaining the social significance of an individual, for example, Mary was a Christian, a teacher, who loved fishing, teasing people, and played golf. Other kinds of factual information were marital dates, places lived or traveled, and occupations. Anything that seemed to validate the existence of an individual or a life lived was considered the social-self depiction. Tears, silence, pauses, and deferral to other people in the arrangement occurred whenever a loved one began

describing personal stories or experience with the deceased such as Mary was a loving wife, a caring mother, hilarious sibling, a best friend, and very compassionate about her family. Anything that represented a personality characteristic attached to the personal significance or meaning it held for the person speaking would create these emotional displays sometimes even to the surprise of the individual. General statements about the deceased were never as difficult as providing descriptive details about those statements from a more personal perspective that seemed based in an emotional attachment to the deceased.

Once the information about the deceased had been discussed and decisions about services and merchandise had been made, one of the last things to address was the selection of the casket. It was not uncommon to see facial expressions change, eyes begin to well up, tears stream down cheeks, deep breaths taken, or to recognize a new kind of profundity in the moment. There was even a case where two men thought the air was too tight or heavy and they went outside for a moment to calm down before returning to select a casket. Another case had two daughters on either side of their mother holding her hand through the entire selection process. The feelings and reactions always intensified at the actual moment the decision to get up from the table and make the selection was made. For these reasons, each funeral director at least exited the casket room while the family made their selection.

When a decision had already been made to cremate a body, the director would try to have it ready for viewing by the time of the arrangement. In this manner, once the contract was written and signed the funeral director could offer the opportunity to view the body. The effect would be just the same. Sometimes individuals had questions about

the condition of the body and regardless the attempts made to explain; especially, the deterioration process of the body if lying in state, there always was an emotional impact on the bereaved. For example, one teenage girl wanted to know what the effect on the body would be if they chose to bury her grandfather the following week. The funeral director briefly explained the possibility of discoloration in the facial area that could be cosmetized if necessary and the tears began to fall. What all of this suggested was that it appeared the disbelief of the death could hide emotions while living in the memories and reflection of the deceased, but once the reality of the situation was recognized through conversation about the dead body or finality reflected in the selection of the casket, these emotional displays were unleashed.

Possibly these reactions served as evidence for the questions about authenticity and in the moment experience. Possibly being situated in a context for discussion about the details of a dead loved one created the result and was based in the lived experiences of other social contexts with the deceased while still living. Possibly this was similar to my thoughts regarding new meaning of the corpse after learning more of the person during the arrangement; their dilemma being much the same where details about the deceased had less impact if discussed or thought about within a different social context. Whether crying was in response to reflected experiences of the deceased or due to the confrontation with the concrete reality of a dead body and what it becomes, the emotionally driven physiological reactions were derivative from attributed meaning by individuals that were situated in a very real or existential conversation about death. And it was always interesting to note that almost in the same instance people would rationalize the insignificance of the dead body, the shell, or empty vessel; that references to and

viewing of that same body, essentially became the greatest difficulty. Most did not want to see the body of the person they loved this way, but it was felt to be somewhat of a necessity.

The Coalescence: Us and Them

My attitude about funeral arrangements changed from disinterest, partially a response to scenario construction about unknown possibilities that might occur while interacting with the bereaved, to a favorable preference, though some days toward the end of my working experience, the arrangement was met with indifference due to saturation, physio-emotional stress, and a growing interest to participate only in the unique cases.

During the funeral arrangement, individuals often shared meaningful stories of happiness, sweetness, joy, intrigue and other sentiments. And though these stories were interesting, they were always spoken against a backbeat of sadness, and some days I was not in the mood to be melancholic. Just like any day at a job when a person might have wished she or he never got out of bed, so too had we at times. The challenging difference was that the subject matter or job could be much more profound with no sidestepping unless personally or mentally. These were the kind of days, where the idea of distancing seemed more relevant and my method was a cynical, indifferent attitude about more of the same, another person dead and another person sad because of it. The narrative hook from loved ones in an arrangement could regenerate an interest or bring you into the proper mindset, and I still proceeded with compassion for their loss, but the seven-day per week schedule created more excitement about the dramatic stories and conducting arrangements with the Native Americans because there still existed a misunderstood

tension there, possibly due simply to cultural differences. This tension apparently was directed more toward one tribe than the others.

The Native American arrangements never included less than three people, others might come and go, and by the end of it there were always plenty more individuals that had gathered in the front of the funeral home waiting to transport the body. Their closer proximity to the body, interest in paying respect to it, and interaction that would take place for the next few days around the deceased that included a twenty-four hour death watch until burial on the fourth day, seemed much more meaningful and dignified to me. What made the arrangements so interesting were the generalizations made about the Native Americans before the arrangement and the quietude in the room throughout. Silence during any arrangement that resulted from everyone waiting for the director to lead or say something was the kind that created discomfort for me. Sitting in silence while a person took a moment to get an emotion under control or to reflect was fine, but when conversation ended as a funeral director made calculations or left the room altogether, never felt natural, because the arrangement then became more of a process rather than an interest in understanding and helping people. These sorts of silences occurred more in arrangements with the Native Americans, almost from the beginning. This often encouraged me to speak, as I felt obligated or morally responsible to interact. Other times it was used as an opportunity to satisfy personal inquiries about the people or tribe involved. Yet just like most people, the relative silence could be broken with a simple statement, and I was always amazed at how people would get lost in sharing stories about their loved ones when they realized it was okay to do so, and that we were interested in hearing them.

For example, Logan and I conducted an arrangement with five people from a Native American family. These arrangements generally went by quickly because the discount had specific merchandise and prices leaving very little for them to plan in the arrangement. The deceased was another Vietnam veteran and Purple Heart recipient. In between my trips to fetch things the funeral director had forgotten, I heard the daughter mention her father was in Vietnam when briefly questioning Logan about veteran benefits. When finally able to sit permanently with everyone, I noticed the only conversation involved the written guideline used to acquire information needed. The funeral director posed a question, the family members responded, and then returned to silence as he quietly filled in the blanks. A basic question, then answer session. As he determined an estimate in silence with his calculator, I decided to pose a short question to the family, "So what did he do in the war?" That was all it took as comments began coming from all directions around the table and the conversation flourished for the remainder of time. I felt more relaxed from the interaction and it seemed to relieve Logan too, as he was then able to finish his calculations without the pressure of having all eyes watching each punch of a button. And this was something witnessed and recognized before about most people in an arrangement; they really wanted to talk about their loved one, and if given the proper cue or freedom to speak, would use the arrangement as one type of forum to do so. For the family members with the most responsibility in the arrangement and tasks that would soon follow, it may have been one of the few chances they had to discuss their thoughts and feelings since receiving the death notification. This was certainly the case in a nearly three-hour arrangement conducted with Caleb.

Though without formal interviews, I attributed the silence and unspoken tension to the thoughts and feelings of both the funeral directors and Native Americans. As mentioned, one tribe was over a year behind payments even with a significant discount, sometimes at only a cost to the family of less than four hundred dollars. This was the source for a lot of the frustration toward meeting with the Native Americans and led to a number of generalizations about other tribes. I felt they overlooked that four hundred dollars could be a lot of money for a poor family at a moments notice and the fact they knew the greater portion of the total cost came from the tribal council that consisted of political, tribal members who supposedly were ameliorating problems with the allocation of government funding. There was also racial insecurity about distrust of White Americans and the assumption that the funeral directors were not appreciated for the discount and services provided. I would not deny that distrust was a shared sentiment among some Native American viewpoints of directors but wanted to believe a lot of their silence stemmed from cultural and class related manners for a negotiation process. Just like most people, they were not prepared for an arrangement, were not the experts in the room and simply awaited instruction or direction. In other words, since they came to a funeral establishment it was more important for the funeral directors to instigate interaction, especially in a context where their mind was focused on the loss and four-day ritual planning.

Eventually the question became, "Would I care about these stories if it were not in this setting?" When immersed in a funeral arrangement an individual must listen to the shared stories on some level and they did often become meaningful. However, if these same stories were being shared in some other everyday situation where listening became

more of an option, would the interest and meaning from the stories be the same? In other words, a funeral arrangement has a definitive endpoint, whereas listening to these stories in an everyday life situation as a friend, acquaintance, or at times in my life as a stranger, one does not have the luxury of knowing when the conversation will cease and may feel less obligated to care or perplexed about the reason some bereaved individual chose to share information about something so personal. It was important to note that, by handling the dead body and engaging in interaction with the bereaved for that body in such close proximity, there was no escape from the emotional impact of the situation. Unlike the indirect experience through media and friends when we hear tragic stories about death, our presence in the immediacy or closest proximity to a body that became a corpse and then interaction with the family of this person in one of their most intimate moments for confrontation with that death following the notification, registered with a more intense kind of reality. All one could do was feel or deliberately guard against feeling.

In the beginning my concerns were with the senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, and the touch when handling a dead body and it was not until having participated in the arrangement that emotions were felt and understood. As early as the second arrangement I decided that learning about the deceased person changed any discomfort or what some would consider the grotesque parts of handling the body. As soon as a body had a name and a story, suddenly it felt more natural to be handling a corpse; or normalized the situation. This made me feel more connected to it and as if providing a service for a real person rather than just a mass of flesh. Additionally, by arrangement three, I began to also feel more integrated with the directors and funeral staff since we shared in the same

experiences. Even during my transcription I had begun to use the word "we" in any reference toward the funeral home.

By the seventh arrangement, I no longer felt any nervousness before or impatience during the arrangement due to exhaustion or saturation as it became a more meaningful part of the entire process or something preferred. The realization that occurred was that as people explained favorable memories about their loved ones they were describing the same kinds of memories that were favorable to me with my own family. As people grieved and mentioned details about this grief, they were the same kinds of grief I have experienced and thought about when considering the fate of my family members, if I should be fortunate enough to survive their deaths. So by the end of my time working with this establishment, it was understood that this was not just a funeral arrangement for a group of strangers because somebody was dead, this was also a clairvoyant moment of my own death or funeral arrangement that would one day be conducted for me.

The Funeral Service

Whenever heading to the funeral home to participate in a funeral service, I always had a sort of nonchalant, indifferent or relaxed attitude because my role was minimal; it never had the same mystery that the arrangement or embalming carried before beginning work there, and aside from occasional transport of the casket, my involvement was indirect. However, funeral services were an extension of the arrangement and it was primarily the only other time to be in the presence of the family. In a way, it was our time to prove the sincerity, professionalism, compassion, or anything said to the family in the arrangement and to cast the funeral home in a favorable image to the public. The

dramaturgy of Goffman was far greater during the service than any other part of the entire process. The process was much like organizing any ceremonial event with pre-planning, early arrival by the set up crew, and the lead director facilitating everything. But again, we were dealing with individuals, enclaves of individuals, and crowd behavior so everything did not always work according to plan. Therefore, improvisation and adjustments became a regular part of any service.

Setting the Stage and the Hierarchy of Workers

Most funeral services took place in a church, at the funeral home, in community or recreational centers, and sometimes only by the graveside. Generally they required moving the body twice, once from the repose area to the service, and then again from the service to the gravesite. From my very first funeral service the presentation of a professional and business oriented image was understood even from suggestions by other funeral assistants such as keeping my black suit jacket buttoned in ninety degree weather while standing in the sun or reminders to keep my hands out of the pockets, a personal dislike of the managing funeral director. Aside from their suggestions, I personally felt obligated to meet their standards as a new apprentice just as any person would be at a new job when establishing first impressions. Wearing the suit alone got me into character because before working in the funeral home it was not a part of my everyday life and suits have always had the effect of making one appear to be about business even if the more upright walk was from the sheer stiffness of the necktie and starched shirt. Just standing around in a suit attempting to appear knowledgeable and professional was not enough to personally, legitimize my role at the service, and I often found myself looking for more to do. However, the person that conducted the arrangement was the

lead funeral director at any service, and the rest of us had to work in accord to his demands or expectations. It was a mutual, unspoken agreement, and each of us could contribute ideas and opinions, but the lead director made the final decision.

It was fairly typical to begin setting the stage approximately two hours before the funeral service even though we were usually finished within thirty minutes to an hour. There were several regular responsibilities for each one. These jobs included everything from transfer and arrangement of the casketed body, flowers and equipment, to drivers for the family and pallbearers, to door greeters and ushers handing out program folders as they seated people before the service. And each person chosen for a specific task again was relative to the hierarchy of workers, whether or not a person was on the insurance to drive company vehicles, and at the discretion of the lead director. Just like work around the funeral home, the more prominent and important tasks were reserved for the most experienced individuals leaving the more general tasks for the part-time help and me.

For instance, the funeral director would be primarily responsible for moving the casket usually with the aid of another funeral director or Lefty, the full time assistant, if only one director was present. Once the casket was in place, Lefty would later be in charge of ushering and handing out the programs. Whenever he was not present then one of the other paid part-time funeral helpers would do this task because the funeral director would be in the entryways greeting people and directing them to the registries. I often was assigned a registry role even though a person standing by the registry table after the funeral director had already told them to sign it seemed futile. In fact, this would lead to some boundary crossing of designated roles and professional image as I sought other things to do such as handing programs to people standing in line, something not approved

at their funeral services. The parameters for these roles were rarely crossed for smaller funeral services, however, when the number of people attending increased and there were multiple entryways these roles could be challenging, thus requiring alteration and additional help. I called this adaptable means "filling the gaps."

One thing was certain among funeral workers at a service, each was consistently perusing the crowd to ensure everything was moving along smoothly and somewhat according to plan. Sometimes an individual would pull the director, or usher away from their position, but it would be recognized by one of the other helpers and substituted until they were able to resume it. In this manner, each person could take a turn at greeting, ushering, or directing the registries in any particular funeral service. There was not a set plan for who would take over; it really depended upon first notice and who was closest to the space that needed to be filled. It was almost humorous at times because we always stood in alignment, basically equidistant from each other at the same angle or with surrounding structure in the available space. It resonated Mitford's satirical reference to funeral directors being "The Suits" in their attempts for professionalism and to be taken seriously. If one took a photograph the men in black could easily be recognized with our alignment and body language such as straight, strong stance with hands to the side, buttoned suit jackets, and continuous repositioning in accord with the movement of the crowd, in order to be out of the way, but also visible in the event someone needed assistance. In a different setting, possibly we could have been perceived as Mafioso or secret service though without the ear-pieces. The symmetrical alignment may have been an extension of the attitude taken when setting the stage for the casketed body and floral arrangement.

Setting up for a graveside service did not require much effort because there was not a lot of space around the casket at a cemetery. However, setting a stage in a church could become quite elaborate in consideration of the number of flowers purchased for the family by friends and other care persons; sometimes there were pictures, or video screen.

Centering followed by symmetrical alignment was the general pattern used and it all started with the casketed body being placed in the middle. The middle could mean right in front of a pulpit that was centered at the front of the church or in between pew rows that vertically descended on the right and left side when the pulpit was not centered. The flower arrangements and sprays were then set on either side of the casket usually starting with the two largest and then working outward and back dependent on the number and size of plants available to use. If a Peace Lilly were set in the second position from the first flower spray on one side of the casket then another Peace Lilly would be set on the second position on the other side. And if there were not two of the same kind then a plant of similar size and color would be used as a means to keep things consistent and symmetrical. There were no formulas, guidelines, or special training for décor; rather, it was generally accomplished by preference, experience, trial and error, and agreement from other workers when asked for their opinion. Once the stage was set the funeral director would ensure that the registry stands and books were in the most practical place, and that cones were set outside for the funeral cars being used; then he would begin to strategize and assign positions to each of us.

Aside from crew work that included bringing in flowers, flower and registry stands, picture easels, and sometimes electronic equipment to show the video memorials my role was often limited to observer or upholding the appearance of a significant

worker. The paid staff, were expected to work funeral services, so I was considered an extra set of hands and used more during large funerals, on days when multiple services in different locations took place, and when a paid worker was on vacation. These kinds of days were relished because it was better than feeling some form of insecurity about being a nuisance rather than a contributor, a feeling brought about more often by the public attending the funeral. For instance, we were conducting a funeral service for an older adult woman whose son made several glances my way suggesting confusion or malcontent about my role. I was unable to participate in the arrangement for this family, so at the least he was curious about my presence. I was about to introduce myself when other friends of the family pulled him away, even though his expression was not one of invitation.

In another funeral service where I was told to stand at the door exiting the chapel in full view of everyone after they passed by the casket for final viewing. Several older, adults, peered at me from head to toe and once again delivered an expression of malcontent as if to say, "Who the hell are you?" and "What are you doing?" Of course these interpretations may have been based more on personal thoughts about my role, especially when just standing around contemplating and seeking anything to do as a means to legitimize my presence. As a matter of fact, after participation in several funeral services, my observational stance was noted by one of the directors who teased me once when assigning each of us a role. We had more than enough staff so my assigned role was to just stand there and look pretty. He was probably the most sarcastic person on the funeral staff so everyone else seemed pleased and laughed when I returned the sarcasm by letting down my hair, flinging it around as if promoting a hair product,

and then asking if that would suffice for what he was thinking; thus revealing a more jocular personality characteristic they might have been unsure about before. From that day forward, on days there was plenty of staff at a funeral service, my designated role from each funeral director would be to stand there and look pretty for the sake of humor if nothing else, and that was fine by me.

Once everyone was seated we would close the doors to the chapel and then await the completion of the service out of view. Generally, we would all convene and discuss the plan for getting everyone out of the building and to the cemetery, in addition to casual conversation and sarcastic banter back and forth. As we had discussed several times before, to work in this business, a person must have a sense of humor. This would also be the time to eat or drink something provided by the family of the deceased. Other times we sat with the people in the service, usually toward the back. Since we often were out of view and could not even hear the service, I never thought our discussions were disrespectful or inconsiderate; however, during some of my quiet reflections and observational stances, new thoughts about the meaning behind the funeral service would emerge.

Social or Personal Significance?

Once while sitting outside a chapel listening to the murmur of the activity inside, I began reflecting on the funeral service and made considerations toward the possibility of my own. I had met the minister and a singer earlier, and they both were disengaged from the family basically providing a service not much different than the role of the funeral home, an occupational responsibility. I then contemplated the point or significance to the funeral service and it appeared to be something unwanted.

The funeral service was socially significant for the businesses and personnel involved as well as the friends and extended family members that were paying their respects. But the regulated roles and ritualistic processes made it all seem too formal, somewhat impersonal and almost meaningless to me. People turned the body of a loved one over to strangers that were indifferent and detached from it especially members of the funeral staff that were not involved with the arrangement. It was not that funerary staff, ministers and musicians were dispassionate; rather, they just did not have any memories attached to the deceased in the form of care.

And were the participants or family supporters that consisted of the crowd doing anything more than an expectation? A job? Were these not all attempts to help the family relieve the realistic aspects of the death, the physical and emotional pain involved with mourning loss? Life? Human mortality? Moreover, if a person made an appearance at a funeral only for the symbolic gesture of support to the grieving family then where was the real feeling, emotion, or meaning in that? The obligated action of a funeral service that could last from a mere ten minutes to an hour just had the feel of insincerity and detachment. Say some prayers, drop a body in the ground, and let us get home just seemed to diminish the significance of the deceased or deposited meaning into the social process rather than where I thought it should rest, within a genuine thought or feeling of personal requisite.

Over the course of several more funeral services, it became difficult to discern whether these were thoughts of a bitter, burned out, and saturated man, or if it was a revelation that had been overlooked throughout the years due to active participation in the funeral service either as a respectful member of the public or as an altar boy in childhood.

Possibly this perceived reality had been concealed by the constructed activities of the service that seemed to manifest physical displays of emotion right on cue.

Sometimes the music playing alone was enough to make a person cry even without being in the context of a funeral. Combine that with some sniffing, crying, or even wailing of other crowd members, and suddenly, it was a situation that beckoned tears and expressions of sadness. At one of the young mother's funeral, as people began to pass by the for the final viewing, a pianist began playing a very beautiful yet somber song that had the emotional effect of a musical crescendo as the small, convention center emptied, starting with the most distant people to the family and ending with the young children, the fiancé and father who were the last to pass; an effect that would have challenged the emotional composure of the most hardened funeral director. Even while combating my own emotional composure at times such as these, I could not help but think if just the music were removed from the context, would the effect be the same? And if it were possible to remove the visible expressions of grief on most faces, would a person ever need to fight back the tears? In other words, the pressure to remain emotionally composed did not occur at every funeral service and when felt it was often in response to a minimum of three factors that included, music, background information of the deceased, and physical displays of emotion by the bereaved. Just like the arrangement, watching someone cry was always an additional challenge to any job, and it was the professional obligation that helped us maintain control and order in situations where the family members felt less of it.

If tears did not develop on the faces of loved ones in response to the socially constructed dramas from the minister's words, video memorial, or music being played,

then one could count on tearful reactions as attention turned back toward the concrete, physical body during the final viewing. This again called into question the effect of the concrete versus the socially constructed and the authenticity of the responses. After all, was not a body that had been molded and prepared with cosmetics just another construction? If a person had to view an untreated dead, body of a loved one would the reaction be the same? Or would the natural, biological decomposition create an entirely different emotional response? For me, standing still in ten-degree weather for a graveside service was enough to strip away any feelings, emotion, or meaning that might be felt on a warmer day.

Maybe even viewing the body followed by tears was only a social happening leaving little to no room for a genuine, subjective, and personal consideration because would not a person that did not view the body or cry over the death of a mother, father, sibling, or child be perceived as troubled? Distancing? Insincere? Inauthentic? The reality would be that a loved one was dead, deteriorating, or rotting. Therefore, a person that might dispose of the body as quickly as possible, and then move on as if discarding trash would be just as existential as another person that dramatically displays emotive characteristics. And that person could still honor, respect, and reflect on the deceased in the same way by holding some sort of vigil, funeral or public memorial service.

In any case, thoughts, feelings, and physical displays of emotion seemed to be motivated by subject matter that pertained to the person being physically dead or when it was time to discuss or view the corpse. It was understood that the funeral service was a situational context filled with music, expressions of care from both intimate and indifferent persons, and a dead body treated for a more peaceful look. Regardless the

debate of social construction versus concrete reality or authenticity, it took place within a particular moment in time and history, region, city and specific location in three-dimensional space. Thus, the individual immersed in this situation became a vortex for thoughts, feelings, and meaning demanded by the characteristics and social constructions of other people whirling about. However, as my experience in funeral services increased, sermons about relieving the physical pain of the deceased, visions of paradise, and their new reality within the rightful place and care of an extraordinary being, in addition to musical selections, and the patterned behavior of the ceremony had less impact and began to dissolve into nothing more than the background noise of the typical. Though compassion toward the bereaved still existed with each funeral service, maybe this shift in attitude was just an indicator that nothing new had been felt or recognized other than the personal conflict of differentiating the authentic from the inauthentic in retrospect. The people changed but the situation remained somewhat the same and this potential form of saturation once again developed a favor for a specific type of service.

Native American Funeral Service and Graveside Rituals

Maybe it was just my status as a sociologist with our consistent considerations and interest for culture, but the Native American funeral service seemed more meaningful, respectful, and appropriate, even if individually some tribal members might have been hiding their indifference behind obligated rituals or in full view of my naivety. At least their rituals involved an intimate setting with the dead body, reminiscent of early America rather than leaving it alone with strangers and then in many ways avoiding it until absolutely necessary, if ever at all, as was the case in a lot of Caucasian funerals. This Caucasian discomfort, elusiveness, and preference to bundle emotions during a

service was also noted by a Native American woman and her sisters during one of my arrangement discussions that took place when the funeral director exited to write the contract. She mentioned experience with death since her early childhood and that her tribe did not hide from it or even attempt to shield it from children. Death was viewed as a natural and real part of living, and they attempted to reduce the fear of it through education and experience. However, most of the Native American services attended were also Christian, so parts of it paralleled the patterns identified in Caucasian funerals and made me consider whether indifference over time would also be the result.

Each tribe had variations to their funeral services but most evolved around three days of prayer, food, and a twenty-four hour deathwatch with burial on the fourth day. One minister, during a graveside ritual, explained that the soul rose with the sun on the fourth day. For the three days prior, many would fix breakfast, lunch, and dinner that often were served in the same vicinity where the body laid in state, at community centers or churches. On the fourth day breakfast would be served and then what some would call the main dinner or lunch was served before the final service and burial. Immediately following the main dinner a master of ceremonies or family member would offer gifts to various relatives, cooks, and organizers. Then opportunities for individuals to speak on behalf of the deceased were offered. In one instance, the brother of the deceased, in his obvious grief, still managed to be very gratuitous by verbally demonstrating appreciation even for people just attending to pay respects, and he wanted anyone that felt they were left out from gift giving or dissatisfied with anything to inform the family because it was not a manner of disrespect. This sort of announcement really signified that a death in an Indian tribe was socially significant and each seemed to have a personal attachment to

that idea. What I found fascinating or respectful was that all this interaction, eating, sharing, gift giving, meeting with old friends and family, took place around the body. And just like my thoughts about the funeral arrangement, it was an implication that the death was a very real, natural process of life and the service verified that it was more a ritual about the universality in human mortality than just the personal and social significance of the dead individual.

The graveside ritual was also more concrete and personal. Sometimes graves were dug by hand out of respect to elders and traditions, other times due to the unavailability of a bulldozer or backhoe. As one of the final rituals for burial a family member or grave digger would hold a shovel of dirt while friends followed by family members would pass by, grab a handful of dirt from the shovel, and throw it on the outer burial container or vault that was usually constructed from wood and nailed shut by a cemetery hand. The closing of the grave involved approximately five men with shovels that would be replaced by other family members and friends as they grew tired. This rotation would continue until the grave was completely covered by hand. Something about hearing and watching the nails go into a wooden vault and the sounds of handfuls of dirt clanging off the outer burial container that was sitting at the bottom of a hole seem to create a more intimate feeling or reaction to the burial both for me, and the closest family members. It was a very solemn moment and one place a person would more regularly react with an emotional display of tears or sudden jump to the sound of the first hammer to nail. Overall, attending a Native American funeral in a tribal cemetery, out in the countryside, with hand dug graves, intermittent songs in native tongue, and even viewing people wrapped in blankets during colder weather rather than just coats had the

personal effect of nostalgia, honor, and respect. And though all these things were present with a greater emotional impact, the authenticity of meaning was again called into question with the first real physiological test, very cold weather.

It was a beautiful day for the drive to the funeral home with snow blowing over the road and drifts forming in the fields. A Native American funeral service was planned but we were not looking forward to standing in twelve-degree weather on a breezy day with a much colder wind chill. Though being outdoors for a graveside ritual in the falling snow was visually pleasing and created a tranquil mood, the majority of thoughts were based in physiological discomfort and wishful thinking that some of the regular rituals would be reconsidered, given the circumstances. Fortunately, the ground was too hard for men with shovels to cover the grave and a backhoe was eventually brought in to finish the job.

This experience offered some evidence for previous thoughts about the arrangements regarding whether thoughts and feelings would remain the same when embedded in different situational contexts, even though, existentially, one should not have expected that sort of consistency. Under normal circumstances, a Native American funeral service made me reflect on compassion, honor, respect, and nostalgia, but when standing with a full bladder while my face went numb and eyes were watering from a moderately fast northern wind, the primary thoughts or emotions felt were based on maintaining composure, attempts to convince myself it was not that cold, and relief when we broke down equipment just before leaving. There was another circumstance that created a sort of personal conflict over meaning.

During another Native American funeral service in a church, a minister began to discuss the amount of time the deceased spent doing church activities followed by the singing of her favorite songs. There were approximately five unfamiliar Christian songs performed including every verse to each one of them. Following the songs, the minister began "preaching" and the longer she went, the greater her volume and tone increased to the greatest passion when making biblical references. I was standing in the very back of a small church with standing room only while people continuously came in and out of the doors. An hour into this service it was getting hot, my feet were hurting, and there was a little tightness in the lower back area making the next thirty minutes to an hour more frustrating than normal. For me, the prominent feature of this service, and later, in other Caucasian services was an understanding to the vexation that had been mentioned by other funeral directors about these services, longwinded ministers. So maybe it was the physiological discomforts combined with the length of the service, but on this day, the primary source developed from the Christian emphasis and words spoken by the minister. In retrospect, these thoughts and feelings were a bit odd since there was no disfavor with Christians per se, especially since I had been raised that way myself; and these considerations were strongest when participating in the Native American Christian funeral service. At times these services were just too Christian or maybe too Protestant for me.

The minister began to passionately speak about the pain the bereaved were feeling at this moment over the loss of life. She continued by suggesting human beings may not understand the thoughts and feelings about death or the pain felt in this moment but could take comfort in the one thing that was certain, God. The pain of the of physical life was

gone from the deceased and now she had comfort in paradise, heaven, or any other metaphor used in explanation of the afterlife. Would this idea really help a grieving family? Were people really confident about this certainty in knowing God during the immediacy of this moment? Though perplexed to some degree, my thoughts and feelings toward the rambling of the minister would make more sense by the end of the service as the people walked by for their final viewing of the body.

Generally, the nuclear family members would sit or stand right next to the head of the casket while individuals passed by for viewing. People would view the body and then go down the line offering condolences before exiting and leaving for the cemetery. The last people to view the body would be the nuclear family and then the minister or master of ceremonies would signal us for the closing of the casket. In more than one instance, Native American women had a different more passionate way of crying that created a very profound and powerful effect. It seemed to start with a soft whine that would build until it broke into a higher pitched more powerful cry that diminished into quick gasps for air until building once again. There was no holding back and on this particular day the personal impact was even greater than the impact generated from a typical display of emotion. My thoughts then returned to the sermon of the minister.

The sermon just seemed to remove the emphasis from the death and suggested that though this could be your father, mother, brother, sister, or child it was a wonderful day for her because she was with God, the only certain and realistic aspect of human life. The minister's comments were similar to the general idea purported by ministers whether Native American or not. Considerations toward the death, the cold dead body, physical and emotional pain felt in response to the death, and mourning the loss or absence of a

person for whom someone might care was misunderstood; yet a grieving individual could find comfort in a certainty that, in my mind, was the least knowable of all. It was as if scapegoating the real, in-the-moment thoughts, feelings, and emotion for something futuristic or not-as-yet; a generic solution to the real pain of grief that might be better understood if accepted as something felt and indefinable rather than attempting to control the situation or remove the impact of feeling with constructed antics. Maybe this was just a case of ignoring the existential.

In the Christian, Native American funeral services, there were usually words shared by the minister with biblical overtones mixed with traditional songs generally sung by men. These songs had a greater personal impact and at times were almost mesmerizing, thus creating a sort of calm that was rarely felt during Caucasian funerals. When viewing the body language of the crowd, I noticed the traditional singing appeared to be met with more interest, sincerity, and compassion than the Christian based songs, sermons and eulogies. Maybe it was a demeanor recognized or felt only by me, but they appeared more reverent in those instances. However, being unable to speak to them in that moment left me only to speculate without the possibility of establishing greater validity and despite some irritable thoughts these types of services remained of preference.

Coming to The End

Of all the work situations involved, the funeral service was the one place that an urge to share in physical emotional displays was felt, as it sometimes provided those silent moments when participating in a service and enough time to shed tears or fight back growing lumps in the throat. In the funeral arrangements and embalming sessions

possibly upholding the professional image and a focus toward preparation trumped any emotions lying beneath. Maybe the urge was greater during the service because it served as a sort of an endpoint to a nearly weeklong process of social and emotional work for everyone involved. These feelings were always directly related to the background history of the deceased and other factors that might include watching a video memorial, viewing people cry, the way individuals cried, dramatic stories performed by ministers, eulogies from family members, musical timing, or similarities to personal life stories and experience all piled into one location. However, what became humorous at times or called into question the authenticity of all this emotion, was how quickly it could change, making it seem as if the emotion or tears were the goal of the actors because meaning such as this attached to the experience could only benefit all people involved, especially those with monetary interests. This could be a solid argument for symbolic interaction and social construction.

One example took place at a cemetery during a graveside service following the funeral in a church on a sunny yet mild day. Stephen and I had arrived at the cemetery first to place the fresh cut flowers around the grave. He then took a position near the roadway to stop the hearse and participate as a pallbearer while I remained near the graveside to appear as if that was my role when realistically it was just a place to stand out of the way since there were plenty of workers for this service. When the funeral procession arrived the other funeral helpers along with some family members lifted the casket onto some metal trucks and guided the casket down a long sidewalk that happened to end about fifteen to twenty feet from the graveside. Everyone was quiet and solemn and was led down this pathway by the minister. He then looked at me for assurance

about the direction he would take toward the graveside since the pallbearers would now have to lift the casket from the metal trucks and carry it to the lowering device. Though no one informed me of the direction, I nodded my head in full confidence as if this was my designated role and was relieved to learn later that it was correct. The funeral service was a temporal situation, and just as Altheide (2002) suggested, dramaturgical appearances for attunement with the situation, crystallized the existential sense of professional identity and aided in the maintenance of a more orderly process. Sometimes, the direction was significant because caskets only opened one way and bodies were generally buried facing the East. At times a family wanted a final viewing and rotating a casket in full view of them would not look very organized or professional.

There was a tent set up around the grave to cover people from the sun and wind; however, as usual, getting people to fill the provided seats was always the first task. Three other helpers were already doing this, so I continued to stand toward the back and out of the way, looking pretty. Once everyone was settled, the minister spoke a few words about having faith in an eventual reunion with the body, even though he did not fully understand how it would be so, and he followed this with a final prayer. Almost immediately, people began moving away from the casket into the area where I was standing and engaged in conversations about anything other than the death at hand. For a lot of people, it was sort of a family reunion and an opportunity to learn about the lives of nieces, nephews, brothers, sisters, and friends. When these conversations got rather lengthy the funeral directors would begin making visual cues for departure as a means to motivate movement since they were landlocked in their requirement to witness the body into the ground. One way to do this was by having the other funeral helpers leave the

cemetery thus setting an example for the rest to follow, the rule of the tourist as was said when living in Orlando, Florida.

What made the transition so interesting was the solemnity, solitude or serenity exuded as people in more sophisticated attire filed in quietly and orderly against the more chaotic and disrupted scene of other things around the cemetery such as a curious dog that appeared to draw a lot of attention. This was the last moment before moving forward with the rest of their lives, and during the brief service, people appeared focused on getting through it. On the other hand there were cemetery personnel dressed in old work boots or sneakers, dirty jeans, cut off shirts, caps, and sometimes smoking cigarettes just off stage but in full view. And the minute the minister completed his sermon, all of this reverence seemed to explode into conversation, laughter, and disregard for something that only a minute ago represented the world. Just as quickly, once people were motivated to move toward their vehicles, the tranquility and seriousness by the graveside turned into the loud labor of workers as we broke down chairs, the casket lift, and the artificial turf, literally tossing them into a clanging pile. This transformation from a more sophisticated demeanor to raucous motion, though humorous in many respects, also seemed to desensitize or strip meaning away from the moment.

Was this not a case for absurdity? Social construction? When everyone was quiet, stories of loss were shared, and questions of mortality posed, a stronger sense of mourning was present or pondered. But whenever a dog starts sniffing people, a cat runs by, or the silence turned toward conversation and equipment clatter, the thoughts or feelings about mourning, loss, and death suddenly lost the intensity. Maybe the funeral service did serve as an endpoint to the entire process, and these sorts of reactions were

just sighs of relief and signifiers for new beginnings. Maybe the funeral service was another method of cliché or emotional coping strategy with focus on the life the individual lived rather than the vessel, shell, or body that was about to be discarded. Then again maybe laughter, stories to lighten the mood, and other distractions were sincere and authentic feelings about the occasion and simply challenged my perceptions about grief that may have been based in personal constructions from things read and observed over the years. Possibly this was simply an example of arbitrary meaning (Lyman and Scott 1970) based in my subjectivity within another everyday meaningless social world. Again, how would one differentiate? In the moment of experience, anything thought, felt, or physically displayed would be authentic or justified even if the funeral service was socially and symbolically motivated by the intentions of people in attendance on behalf of the bereaved.

In the end, regardless any visible commotion, personally constructed dramas, individual social significance, or existential connotations, a sense of finality was never experienced more greatly than when closing a casket at a graveside and then lowering it into the grave. Maybe the funeral and graveside services were best understood by a Native American leader who said just before the casket was lowered into the ground, "well we have taken you as far as we can," thus representing the role of the living and separation from the dead. For me, at those moments, everything was silent.

CHAPTER VI

TRANSFORMATION OF SELF AND CONCLUSIONS

I went into this study without precise knowledge of being an embalmer's apprentice, direct experience regarding the expectations of the job, or experience in conducting an existential sociology. There were no hypotheses to test, surveys to construct, or reputable, quantitative data sets to abstract because the data would ultimately be delivered and analyzed by me. For many social scientists this may not be considered an adequate start toward a research endeavor, but to produce an existential sociology, or determine how it might be applied in research settings, this was how it had to be.

Since existential sociology begins with an individual immersed in some everyday form of social life, it was important to enter the experience of becoming an embalmer's apprentice without clouded judgment from more empirical forms of social science as a means to report on a more authentic experience while in the process of acquiring information about this social world. For me, this meant seeking the cooperation of a funeral director, determining legal requirements, and eventually the shaping of apprenticeship responsibilities in cooperation with the other funeral home personnel. What made this unique was that each of these steps was determined along the way in a response to specific demands encountered while immersed in various situational contexts. In this way, how I came to know things mimicked the way information was acquired by

most people in their everyday lives through active participation and the emotive characteristics that emerged during it. My active participation as an embalmer's apprentice, co-worker, and researcher then provided the data for real thoughts, feelings, passions, and emotions that resulted from personal experience in body removals, embalming, funeral arrangements, funeral services and all aspects of work while in the funeral home as would be the case for any embalmer's apprentice that began work in this industry. A list of words regarding thoughts, feelings, and emotions attached to everyday life experiences that I reported over the course of this study are in the paragraph below:

adrenaline, agitated, appreciative, amazed, antisocial, anticipation, anxiety, attachment, calm, comfort, concern, conflict, congested, contemplation, curious, day dreaming, desire, detachment, discomfort, disappointment, disinterested, drama, eager, embarrassment, empathy, emotional, ennui, estrangement, excitement, exploited, fascination, frustration, futile, funny, groggy, happiness, honor, hopeful, humor, hurried, impatience, impressed, improvisation, indefinable impact, indifference, inquisitive, insecure, interested, intrigue, intrusive, investigative, irritated, juvenile, lackadaisical, meaninglessness, melancholy, mesmerized, miscommunication, mundane, niceness, nonchalance, nothingness, obligated, odor, peculiarity, paranoia, physiological discomfort, pride, privileged, professional, rapport, reflection, relaxation, relief, respect, responsibility, restlessness, rewarding, routine, sadness, sarcasm, satiated, saturated, sleepiness, smell, social, strangeness, surprised, solidarity, stigma, stressful, suspicious, teasing, temperamental, tension, tired, uncertainty, uncomfortable, unimportant, validation, vexation, and vulnerable.

It would seem that these ideas were representative types of emotive characteristics felt by most people on any given day when learning and living out the everyday situations of their lives. Therefore, it would follow that my experiential knowledge was a more truthful indicator of an embalmer's apprentice experience with the everyday life work in a funeral home than information that has been acquired through the use of more objective means that might control for these types of occasions. Though the lived, subjective experience was the primary emphasis in this study, there were still initial considerations made about its possibilities in relation to the existential self.

It was thought a focus on the more irrational aspects of being human while working as an embalmer's apprentice might provide insights into issues of death and dying, stigma, self-concept, or grief and bereavement. Additionally, there were potential, practical benefits both theoretically and methodologically, even if just to determine the applicability of this approach. It is my contention that information regarding these considerations was achieved; however, the generalizability for issues in grief, bereavement, death and dying will have to be decided by anyone that reads it because it is also my belief that grief, especially in relation to death, is an ongoing, changing process that each individual must endure; it is a natural part of living incapable of being eradicated completely. Merely offering possible outcomes rather than results probably presents the greatest problem for critics of this approach. Maybe that develops from never attempting this methodology because my experience offered information for intellectual growth personally, socially, and as a researcher.

In the beginning, I thought my attitude about the work in this environment was more objective, professional, and different than most individuals in greater society. It was not until working at the funeral home a couple of months that I realized, through conversations with people outside of the industry who were interested in my project that my initial intrigue and thoughts about what many considered the more grotesque aspects of the job were just the same. Was it gross? Did it smell? Did anything weird happen? Were you freaked out? Was it hard to sleep at night? Most would fire new questions before even offering a chance to respond to one. Now these questions were sensible to some degree because it was already known that the study was about becoming an embalmer's apprentice, and this kind of information was a necessary part of the study.

However, with my new knowledge about the work of an embalmer's apprentice and after the mystery of embalming had been stripped away, it just felt as if people really were not interested or attuned to what I considered to be the more important aspects of the job. I believe it was more about a combination of disinterest and discomfort because most conversations about the work I was doing were short lived and generally ended when people got quiet and appeared to be reflective. This was one of the first indications for existential differences between funeral home employees and general society; similar conversations at the work place more often were met with mutual understanding.

One of the more interesting changes to self was that despite all of the thoughts and emotions mentioned above and over a rather short period of time, my general attitude about the work on a given day shifted from anticipation and excitement to indifference. I was always compassionate and empathetic toward grieving individuals that chose this funeral home for services, but whether we conducted an arrangement, funeral service, or embalming did not matter, and it was only sitting around with nothing to do that was dreaded. By the end of my time working in this funeral home, it was this sort of conclusive sentiment along with several situations during funeral arrangements, services, and embalming that generated questions about the authenticity of it all. Were the thoughts, feelings, and emotions shared based on real, existential moments in time? Or was socially constructed information responsible for the emotive occurrences based in existential moments in time? How would one know the difference?

The Total Experience: A Search for Authenticity

For the first case, I was glad to be dressing for work, feeling relatively calm yet some nervously excited. During the drive to the funeral home, I verbally prepared an

explanation for the research in the event the funeral director wanted further explication in a somewhat coherent form. Since it was going to be a funeral arrangement, verbal considerations toward potential negative scenarios such as rejection for my participation were also made. The first case went very smoothly, so upon a second drive to the funeral home, I already began to exude the mentality any person might have on a given workday; a little bit tired, not in the mood, and more thoughts about returning to bed. This might have been the response to the second job that was for a funeral service, something considered more normal and understood in relation to my personal experiences, and four funerals attended in the previous year. Some new insight was gained, however, from being on the employee side of the service that included do not drink a lot of water in the morning before a funeral service, carry a handkerchief on really hot days, an appreciation for the reverence of a military honor ritual (though this sentiment would change later), and possibly experience in one of the most existential moments from the indescribable impact or feeling toward the notion of finality in death felt when closing the casket and watching it lowered into the ground. Most of the thoughts during these initial cases centered on the maintenance of a professional image both in appearance and by doing the job well. This concern developed out of respect to my co-workers and the people using our services.

The professional sense of self would continue to be prominent with my first experiences handling dead bodies. Again the very first case of simply cleaning a body for viewing was an indescribable experience attributed to the speed and nonchalance exhibited by the funeral director. We were in and out before one had a chance to consider how it felt or what it meant. All I knew was that it felt different than when

working in other parts of the funeral home possibly suggesting another significant, existential moment.

The first embalming garnered a similar feeling along with excitement and intrigue in the way a student might respond when learning something interesting and new. The next couple of experiences with embalming were handled without any real stresses or revelation, and aside from teasing and question/answer sessions, I found myself with thoughts about whether the deceased individuals had any knowledge of embalming practices before their death, would they be troubled by this setting if it were understood or could be known in their condition, and of course, predictions about their life story were sometimes made.

For approximately the first half of my working experience at this funeral home there was not much stress involved and it seemed to be the result of limited cases sometimes with days off in between and the fact everything was still new. The only concern that emerged at this time was the uncertainty of my position and whether I would get involved in a substantial number of cases for a study. This was the stage where we learned about each other and attempted to find or develop a place for me within their regulated work schedules. The only thing established for my initial role was a time frame regarding the on-call status and that did provide some mental relief. I still was excited to receive phone calls to work, hopeful to increase my experience with embalming since that lagged behind, and not thinking much about the work beyond my transcription. One noticeable change regarding transcription was the use of WE in my recorded notes rather than THEM or THEY. Also the recorded tone of my voice had changed to an almost disinterested tone. If others would have listened to it they might have felt it was

dispassionate about the services provided for the day or at least that the experience was regarded as mundane; thus possibly more *authentic*. Some days this was in fact true and generally speaking the tone of voice often began to match the attitude or mood on a given day.

Another significant determination during this time was that learning more about the deceased person removed any peculiarity or discomfort that might be felt when embalming or handling dead bodies as it seemed to transform the flesh into a real person. It also was thought that whomever conducted the embalming should continue with the family of that body in the arrangement and funeral services requested. This sparked the beginning of the existential or authentic reality versus a socially constructed reality debate that would only become more difficult to discern during the second half of my working experience as the stress level increased and the first real emotional reactions occurred.

The first emotional experience happened during a funeral arrangement where vicarious feelings of sadness or grief were felt, though it appeared most of it had to do with the physically emotional displays by family members, the demographic factors such as age and marital status, and the story that was shared. Other times, emotional reactions occurred during funeral services but again it seemed as if the primary causal factors were video memorials set to music, music played during the final viewing, physical emotional displays of sadness, and knowledge of the demographic factors and story surrounding the deceased. For example, generally at a funeral service people filed in without much crying or physical displays of sadness and everything moved along relatively uneventful, as planned. As the video memorials began playing, sometimes just before people left

their seats for the final viewing, sniffles could be heard and tears began to fall. In one instance, a little girl about eight years old had not appeared bothered by anything taking place; she looked more curious and bored than sad. However, when her mother and other adults around her began crying as they passed by the casket, the little girl also began crying in an almost uncontrollable fashion. They exited the funeral home and probably no more than five minutes had passed when the little girl returned running around, laughing, and jumping as if nothing had happened.

Adults were not much different, and at times it appeared to be blatantly obvious that emotional reactions were basically created through props such as music, flowers, words used in eulogies or by ministers, and other people crying; all lumped together in the same context. It was as if literally pulling the emotion out of people. Sometimes emotional reactions were simply the result of empathic understanding from personal experiences that were similar to those exposed. In retrospect, my confusion or conflict with distinguishing authentic and constructed responses became increasingly difficult; possibly, it was the result of managing the new socio-emotional workload. After all, during my last four weeks I had worked about twenty-six of twenty-eight days. The vexation was greatest when listening to myself on the recorder during transcription from things such as using the same phrase again and again or repeating the same thought when all I really needed to do was stop talking.

Other places some feelings of frustration or disappointment developed were during funeral services, where I always seemed to be left doing the simplest chores as in the case where a death call was received at the end of a funeral, yet I was expected to load flowers into a vehicle rather than assist with a body removal, things of that nature.

The feeling developed from my thoughts and concerns about getting more experience in areas that were lacking or in what was considered more pertinent to the study. Again, in retrospect, it became clear that when conducting an existential methodology, there were no definitive roles, and if loading equipment into vehicles was the demand of the situation or based on an in-the-moment decision, then, it was precisely what needed to be done. In other words, I had to remind myself that the focus was on the feelings that preceded and were responsible for the rationality that followed.

Ultimately, by the end of my working experience, it was the focus on feelings first that provided knowledge toward my search for existential, *authentic* truth versus the socially constructed *inauthentic* truth. The realization was that my personal conflict emerged from feelings and reactions while immersed in various concrete situations of death. Just as we do in our everyday lives when encountering things, we are sometimes confronted with questions, doubts, uncertainty, surprises, reactions, confusion, or conflict over things felt or not precisely understood or known. Almost immediately, we begin a progressive conversation with Self or Others, as a means to interject rationality to the situation that will once again establish sensible order to our lives or in our ways of thinking and feeling. Therefore, this personal debate was the existential result of things being felt when involved in social situations of death, followed by a more rational interpretation.

Possibly these were feelings motivated by guilt due to the unequal emotional effects experienced case-by-case when intellectually they were considered to be equally tragic for the individuals involved. In any regard, it represented the struggle between something being felt or thought and the resulting conflict when attempting to make sense

of it. The debate was fueled by rational, recognizable patterns affiliated with nearly all cases where an indescribable impact, unexpected reaction, or greater emotional response or attachment was experienced. For example, consider the stories shared about elevated anxiety when caught in between two dead mothers alone, or discomfort when deciding whether I should sit inside the removal van with a dead body or stand outside it as a means to maintain professionalism, each case being indicative of an indescribable impact or unexpected reaction. There was also the embalming where I chose to observe without being suited for the occasion that generated thoughts about mortality, meaninglessness, and discomfort that had not been experienced before. Each of these unexpected reactions seemed attached to the fact I had just learned a lot about the life stories of the deceased and in some way felt emotionally attached. The anxiety felt in the garage while in between two dead mothers came right after leaving an emotional arrangement that made me feel sad or vicarious grief for the woman whose arm I was holding while waiting on the funeral director to return; the anxiety experienced outside the removal van on my first body removal also followed feelings of sadness that resulted from removing a body surrounded by personal artifacts and possessions in her last home while living, a place that seemed too small, and in some ways, depressing; the nihilism and grotesqueness that had never been problematic before in the embalming occurred immediately following another profound arrangement where emotional attachment from the story or sadness was felt. Additionally, it seemed when these unexpected reactions were absent I would not see as many props such as music, singing, and flowers or crying at a service, though it was still believed that any death was equally tragic.

Ultimately this highlighted the dilemma and provided an existential understanding of being in concrete situations of death, what it meant, and how it impacted me. What it meant was that something felt could be indefinable and possibly was more truthful that way. Clark (2002) shared this sentiment as she explained that in a given moment, a person might be unable to articulate or even understand something felt since conflicting emotions could arise concurrently. Further she stated a real person was not just definitive emotions, but should be considered agency in the way she or he carves out a pathway in a structured yet highly improvised social world. And this could serve as a lesson for the experiences some grieving individuals have when conflicted about a death or whether they are properly grieving. For instance, if someone with a relatively good relationship to her mother does not cry at her mother's funeral, she might feel guilt or pressure from other suspicious family members or participants at the service, as it would not be interpreted as the appropriate response. Many would probably suggest it was a case of repression and that it would not be healthy. From my experience with the funeral home, the reality was that, existentially, if one does not cry then in that moment this person had nothing to cry about. Later, her grief may induce tears and that would be fine. There should be no right or wrong designated time for crying or grieving if grief was taken or understood as an ongoing process that may be more intense on some days during your life, less intense on others, and possibly absent at times when it was presumed to be present. Manifestations of grief might even occur unexpectedly or vicariously through empathic understanding or unspoken connectedness to strangers, but does that really matter? If individuals would just permit their selves to feel rather than getting caught up

in what it means or the social construction of it all, I believe grief management would be handled more successfully.

I guess when working as an embalmer's apprentice and dealing with what might be considered anonymous deaths, it was still difficult for the human mind to grasp a precise meaning of it all. Maybe it was based in the simple fact that when looking into the eyes of a dead person or even looking into that face after their eyes had been closed forever, I was reminded of nothingness or meaninglessness. Maybe in being-next-to-death, the realization of my potential ending and final possibility was conceptualized. This might have revealed the authentic self, the one that had been with me since conception in my mother's womb, my *ownmost* possibility as suggested by Heidegger, or an understanding that possibly Self was the same thing as Death. However, in the absence of rationality and the usually structured, objective methodology, I was able to feel something as a means to achieve a more truthful understanding; that was somewhat liberating and possibly all there was to know.

Debunking Myths and Social Contributions

Contrary to popular belief, a possible motto for this funeral home would be, "Meeting the Family and Their Needs." Fortunately for me, the personnel at this funeral home were both professional and compassionate; otherwise, it might have been a more difficult experience to endure. However, this was still a place of business, and even though it operated under the guidelines of a corporation, individuals ran it, so criticisms of the funeral industry as a whole were certainly understood. As mentioned, probably the greatest critic was Jessica Mitford in her book *The American Way of Death*. And though she did write a sort of disclaimer that saluted funeral directors with integrity, and there

was truth in a number of her claims, many of her depictions about the industry basically would not be consistent in an existential analysis and in my experience as an embalmer's apprentice.

Mitford attacked funeral directors for being inconsiderate, disloyal, and as people without integrity. She challenged the necessity of embalming, the notion of making money or business out of dealing with the dead, the exploitation of living individuals in one of their most vulnerable moments, the therapeutic value of an embalmed body for grieving individuals and other more specific criticisms within each. For all of her criticisms there were not any alternative strategies, but a quick existential look at these basic criticisms might suggest other possibilities.

The primary issue in this book was that funeral directors were sometimes considered ethical businesspersons but not ethical community members regarding thoughtless price fluctuations or cost to individuals in the community. This included the cost for everything funeral directors did such as body removals, the casket arrangement and selection process, the words used when negotiating, the tools and kits for embalming and shaping the corpse, the cemetery plot selection, and the vehicles used to get a corpse from one place to another. Mitford and other critics have a real problem with people profiting from other people when a loved one dies. For me, even before beginning work in this establishment, the implication was that anyone with this viewpoint suffered from what most of us suffer, listening to the public rather than the existential. My working experience then validated this position in many respects. Why did it matter that a funeral director made money off people that chose not to handle their loved ones' dead bodies? Why was death being treated as something different than other aspects of our lives? Why

was it considered more disrespectful for a funeral director to mask reality as a means to make money than for any type of business industry? Was masking reality for profit the real reason for every funeral director to speak with euphemisms? Were their sales strategies even as deviant as those used on people in their everyday lives by other industries? What makes the funeral director/embalmer treatment of a corpse any different than its treatment while moving about in the corporeal both by Self and Others? Was there no therapeutic value in viewing a dead loved one? Maybe a better question would be: who in fact was doing the dehumanizing, the funeral directors? Or Mitfordians?

First, a funeral home is a business, and just like any business it must turn a profit in order to survive. Though subject to the same economic pressure of other businesses, the funeral home does not always have the luxury of advertisement placement anywhere on the planet, especially in smaller towns. In other words, where a funeral was situated regarding region of country, state, town, community, and ownership all affected the cost and management of prices for individuals running them. In this funeral home, members of a corporation operating outside the community dictated the increase in cost, and often their decisions were not consistent with the beliefs of the funeral directors. Even if the directors opposed these decisions, they still did not have a lot of leverage with which to negotiate or ignore. For private owners to survive, they either had to sell the home to a corporation or increase prices to stay in the game. One solution might be a transfer to state or federal ownership as a means to control prices on behalf of the American public. Would taxpayers go for that? Another possibility would be for people to handle the bodies of their dead loved ones. However, with the varied state regulations for proper

disposal of remains, the significant amount of paper work involved with various institutions, and lack of knowledge about the real process of a decomposing body, it would almost seem a greater disservice to grieving individuals than high prices.

Mitford also speaks candidly about the dead being nothing more than painted corpses that mask the reality of being dead. Possibly a painted corpse was more representative of the person that also painted the corpse while living? Would it be better to view the dead body naked as well? How about being handed the body from a coroner or physician as it was when determined dead? Just consider for a moment the dead body in all its grandeur and possibility, such as purplish color, smell, blood, purge, or drainage out of any orifice, with sagging jaw and cracked eyes. Are Americans really ready to view their loved ones that way? If they chose to take care of their own dead loved ones, would they pick it up, move it, and possibly view it covered in blood, fecal matter or anything that might be on display? Possibly they could wrap it in a sheet, place it in a large bag and just throw it back in a hole. Though not legal without proper paper work, would that be a legitimate alternative?

She goes on to criticize reconstruction practices of embalmers as a heinous activity regarding specific cases such as a missing arm, putting a head back on a body, some sort of mold for the back of a head blown out by a shot gun and etceteras. Three funeral directors at this establishment, working together spent eight additional hours of their time reconstructing the body of a woman that had died in an automobile accident because her husband was out of town and wanted a chance to view her before she was scheduled to be cremated. Do you think he thought their actions were heinous? Consider the possibility of any person that dies out of state or the country. Might their loved ones

find some therapeutic value from the chance to view the body before disposing of the remains? Would they consider cleaning the body from things such as blood heinous? Would they disapprove of any necessary reconstructing? And how would people feel if the negotiation for these sorts of processes were conducted in the following facetious manner:

Well your father's corpse is bruised all over, his eyeball is drooping down the side of his face, the brains are exposed and it appears that possibly his intestines are sort of seeping out of a laceration in his abdomen. What would you like us to do with it? Now if you want to keep it cheap we can just leave him as is and throw him in a cardboard box as long as we get him in the ground by morning. That is unless you want us to burn the corpse, or send it off to be cut into pieces for recycling with the useless parts being burned. You are welcome to view him since we have him back in a body bag right now. Or we can stuff, stitch, and paint him for a more presentable viewing.

Do people really want to discuss these concrete realities of being dead? How acceptable would it be for funeral directors to conduct business this way? The point is that funeral directors are not masking reality as means to turn profit as much as simply providing a professional and personal courtesy in their understanding for the concrete realities being faced out of view from the public and how troubling that might be for people grieving. Additionally, in this funeral home, the directors were mostly truthful, even about the variations in vaults and caskets, allowing the consumer to determine whether they wanted something more expensive. From literature and personal experience, however, there were enough reports to indicate their approach was not consistent everywhere and the funeral directors suggested their approach was partially due to the fact all expenses did not come out of their pockets as would be the case in privately owned funeral homes. Finally, from observing behavior at various funeral services where people would cry and sometimes touch the body, to the symbolic gesture of artifacts placed around it, to simply reading over some of the letters received from families in appreciation for all services provided, it was hard to believe that people did not find some sort of therapeutic value in

having the chance to view their loved ones at least one more time before final interment into the ground.

Another criticism that funeral director/embalmers undergo is they only provide part-time work at full time wages. There were some days when the work was limited because unlike other businesses, one could not promote, cut prices, or employ other marketing strategies to encourage people to die. However, by the end of a month or over the course of a year, full time wages were certainly pertinent because during times of high volume it was not uncommon for funeral directors to continue working after only a few hours sleep per day. Even on days when I spent twelve hours at the funeral home, the directors were there before me and they still had paper work and obituaries to follow up with after I left. Other times after a long day they might get two or three hours to relax at home before another death call required them to come right back for a body removal and embalming, giving them a couple hours to sleep before returning for the next official workday. Additionally, there were a lot of phone calls pending about tracking numbers, documents, or even for a family member in order to schedule a time for an arrangement. On more than one occasion we waited around for several hours on a Saturday or Sunday for family members to appear after missing their scheduled arrangement time. Basically, this was a moment-by-moment work environment and it was never known how busy or slow a particular day would be, so in a given month one might have a week where the physical work was accomplished in part-time hours, and in a different week one might have worked seventy to eighty hours; it was all relative. Therefore, part of the job was waiting and that, in and of itself, could be stressful, especially for individuals with families and children. And realistically, other than factory

workers subjected to assembly lines with specific times for breaks, how many people work every single minute and hour each day at their jobs?

A curiosity I shared with many people before beginning work as an embalmer's apprentice was whether sleep would be affected by things seen or done while working. The funeral directors generally did not have any problems with sleeping. When on-call, they understood before going to bed the possibility for being called in to work. If they were called they responded and if not then they continued sleeping, it was not problematic. For me, it was not much different. Any problems with my sleep resulted more from the demands of working hours in combination with methodological demands after hours or not getting enough sleep.

There were nights when I had peculiar dreams that appeared to be in response to things experienced or discussed on a given day. For example, during an embalming that we conducted around 9 p.m. one night, Logan was talking about the idea that, historically speaking, there had been cases where a body was mispronounced dead and the embalmer received quite a surprise. The same night after work, I watched a television program that focused on patients that were supposedly under anesthesia but felt pain during surgery and did not have the ability to speak. Later that night I had a dream about being present at a funeral service in a home for someone we had embalmed, who started struggling to open her eyes, eventually obtaining consciousness and mobility. The family then turned on me with anger and discontent. In another instance, earlier in the day during a funeral service, I had a discussion with two military men that were present for a veteran's funeral. We discussed grave robbers in New Orleans and the connection it had to voodoo religion. Later that night I had a peculiar dream that involved open, desecrated graves with some

sort of doll hanging on each and a person that drove by slowly in a car telling me to leave them alone. However, these experiences did not disrupt my sleep and were no different than dreams I might have on any night that could be partially derived from a conversation or stimuli experienced on a given day.

Probably the most significant point the critics underestimated for people that handle dead bodies was that when a person dies we have to do something with the remains. Most people do not know legal responsibilities involved for handling dead bodies nor do they even want to know the biological considerations for them, as they are more often interested in the social and economic consequences the death will have on the family or community. And though embalming and handling dead bodies might be perceived by many people as peculiar, strange, gross, disgusting, troubling or freaky, to people doing the work it was just a job. In my mind, if people outside the industry had a chance to experience what I have done, everything from strangeness, people fearing ghosts, touching dead bodies or anything perceived as gross or peculiar regarding dead bodies in this setting would disappear along with the mystery; it really was just like any job. As Jantzen and Nancy suggested handling the dead body was much easier because it was just putting on a shirt, putting on some pants, brushing hair, or administering fluid whereas the greatest challenge was handling the living family members that entered the home filled with expectations and notions of stigma about crooked funeral dealers.

Methodological and Academic Limitations in an Existential Approach

An existentially informed sociology can be a valuable asset to both quantitative and qualitative researchers in terms of personal experience and development of authentic research questions. However, when the researcher also serves as the subject the same

existential dilemmas occur with the greatest issues being relative to rigor and generalizability. How would one know when he or she was speaking the truth? How would one know when other individuals were speaking the truth? Why should other people care about a researcher's experience in some social context? What methods would be employed to obtain knowledge about a social world using self as subject? Even a placement of existential sociology in a participatory paradigm that functions as an extended epistemology does not dismiss the significance regarding these kinds of questions and in my application of this methodology there also arose other concerns.

The first problem a researcher might encounter with this methodology would be in the presentation of research goals when attempting to gain entry into a particular social world. Explanations about the search for truth, personal experience, epiphanies, or possibilities may not be met with the same comprehension as hypotheses testing and definitive goals. In some ways it might even create suspicion because the researchers might be perceived as deviant with something to hide. On more than one occasion different funeral directors stated they had no knowledge of existentialism and thought that portion of the study was over their heads. A more polite way to say, "I'm not interested." Also, if too many specific things of interest or goals were mentioned in the beginning it would possibly change the experience, thus making it less existential. In other words, the researcher must find a way to legitimize the study without explaining in great detail because real, intended goals would not exist. Of course a lot of the legitimization was a response to IRB protocol and this methodology possibly suggested a need for policy change for individuals conducting existential research. For example, the IRB could possibly permit researchers to conduct a study as a regular participant without

any consent forms under a clause that once the experience was completed the researcher must receive consent to publish from all those at risk, or they discontinue the project. Obviously, it would be a greater risk to the researcher because they may have to throw away months of work, but in the more acceptable situations, they would be granted the information and maintain the integrity of the phenomena in retrospective reports as dictated in an existential approach.

A study based in everyday life possibilities, with limited definitive research goals, legitimization efforts that identify one as a researcher and co-worker (in my case), also leads to difficulties in the search for a truthful experience and information for emergent questions in various situations of experience. For example, there was a lot of sarcastic banter among all of us as co-workers. This was a part of our everyday working experience. Sometimes the fact that I was new and learning would not be acknowledged and attempts to achieve a simple answer to a question were almost impossible. In this type of study, their answers might have provided a source for reliability checks on my own experience. If it was not the sarcasm as an information block then it was the demands of the situation such as a phone call, a random person coming in with questions, or a death call. In a more structured research endeavor, there would be an allotted time without interruption for legitimate question and answer sessions to take place.

There were also days where I just did not feel like talking much or inquiring about anything so emergent questions were just ignored. The same would hold true for others involved on a particular day since they might not have felt like talking either. There were also days of indirect involvement in conversations or things read that generated questions never to be investigated. This meant a lot of information that was emergent in the

context was left unsaid simply because we were not in the mood to socialize. Without any a priori questions established this could have been a detriment to a more truthful account of experience sociologically speaking.

Another limitation was my researcher status, in that it was more prominent in relation to the content of particular questions and this provided the possibility for discrepancies in responses. For example, I posed a question to one funeral director about how much time was allotted in the event a next of kin could not be contacted before embalming. And, if a family wanted to cremate someone that had been embalmed without permission would they still be held accountable for payment of that service. One director suggested that he would try for a couple of hours to find a next of kin to make that determination. After that he would go ahead and embalm because at 3 a.m. a person was tired and not willing to remain awake all night when having to come back in to work by 8 a.m. This way the body would embalm well and be presentable for the family and could still be cremated if that was their desire. The managing director said he would charge for the embalming in that situation but they would never embalm without permission. Funeral directors often differ in their viewpoints about appropriateness in a practice and possibly these responses were just preferences. It could also suggest the offering of filtered knowledge out of a fear for misinterpretation or disapproval by the public. In these situations, a researcher must make a decision to either push the issue further with confrontation as a means to determine some form of truth, though each might be true, or to simply keep the information to their self. "The personal embodied experience is visceral and real, breathing first-order constructs, talking vocabularies of motive and courses of action, and suffering the consequences of excuses and

justifications rendered by those in another part of the situation" (Altheide 2002: 52).

These kinds of situations can become a real test of character because if the information received might be detrimental to the working environment then the researcher's study would be at risk, as would his or her integrity and personal relationship among co-workers that were cared about. It begs the question to the existential researchers, "how truthful are you willing to be?"

The problems with acquiring information can be equally troublesome for recording it. My method was a voice recorder and transcription notes. An existential sociology suggests recording the experience as close to it as possible, which meant I would speak into a recorder on the drive home from the funeral home each day. My recorder was not state of the art, so the first recommendations would be to speak slowly or succinctly, always remember to bring the apparatus, and test it each time before using; each make transcription easier. There was one incident where my recording picked up interference and it was very difficult to distinguish what was being said; fortunately, I immediately began transcription and could hear enough to trigger the memories reported to get through it, but I possibly lost some of the accuracy. On another day, I forgot to bring the recorder and though equipped with a pocket notepad one cannot really provide the same kind of information as when talking on a recorder. After a long day of work and an hour drive home, I was really not in the mood to speak into a recorder for another hour, and I possibly lost information due to reflection and a lack of enthusiasm.

Another difficult challenge to recorded notes was daily transcription once my work schedule changed. Each day you simultaneously experience and think something, retain information, speak those thoughts into a recorder, and then listen to those thoughts

as you write them down. Redundancy only begins to describe the annoyance. Also, transcription was not a forte of mine, and whenever falling behind the pace with a relic recorder, I had to flip the pause button and then rewind a little when ready to begin again. In other words, an hour and a half of recorded notes could take four hours or more to transcribe, and this kept me awake well into the night on more than one occasion. On a couple of busier days when the recorded notes ran long, it was impossible to finish the transcription, and then I spent a couple days struggling to catch up. Meeting these methodological demands became very frustrating and certainly could impact the authenticity of the experience.

A more definitive problem involves the parameters surrounding experience. Does an individual record everything in every moment of each day or only discuss situations specific to the status or social world, and when would the researcher know to stop. This study was about becoming an embalmer's apprentice, and throughout my recorded notes, they often ended when I began repeating the same things over and over again much to my displeasure. There were a couple of evenings when I recorded thoughts that were relative to things happening in the funeral home or to me during this experience of becoming. The transcription was exhausting, but once completed, there was no more desire or thought really toward the events of a particular day. Basically, my days were much like anyone coming home from work. If you have a significant other or friend you might mention your activities for the day and that was it. Since I worked in a funeral home, most people did not care to have long lasting conversations about it. Again, it was important to note that an existential study, though based on an existential self, was more about experience than strictly self, so it was not necessary to report every detail of my life

while working in a funeral home. Things reported were always connected to living out the experience of an apprentice. In other words, once my work and transcription was completed for a given day, my attention turned toward other things going on in my life just as they do for other people when away from their jobs.

Possibly the greatest challenge to this methodological form was writing existentially. There was always the issue of vulnerability and the dilemma of creating a story or rationale rather than exposing a truth. For example, during my first Native American funeral service I was disappointed with the other funeral personnel because they were perceived to be disrespectful when in full view of the people holding the service. The director was up/down, inside/outside, talking with a co-worker or doing things that were not considered professional or appropriate while in full view of a service that took place. I was unsure if it had to do with a disdain for Native American services or just impatience with the style of the minister (a more legitimate assumption learned later and one of concurrence). Nonetheless this continued until I was left alone in the building when the minister turned my direction to state they were ready and all eyes were on me. I did not know what was expected and had to go outside to get the funeral director feeling quite embarrassed. Later in my transcription of this day I questioned who was being more existential, the other funeral personnel or myself. Possibly I was feeling nostalgic, respect for culture as sociologists generally claim, and attempted to uphold an obligated inauthentic impression that was being challenged by their behavior. Possibly, their behavior was an authentic response to their much greater experience with Native American funerals. What I failed to realize was that both were existential experiences because regardless the reason, in the moment everything happened, for me, some level of

disappointment and embarrassment emerged. The other funeral personnel were motivated by their own emergent feelings in the situation as well.

Another example involved getting a chance to work. With my non-paid status as an embalmer's apprentice, even after working a more regular schedule, there were times when the funeral directors suggested coming in later, leaving earlier, or not participating at all. Generally, these suggestions were made when there was nothing happening and since there was no monetary earning potential, they saw no point in my participation for the day. Also, some services were so small that one person could take care of it. My greatest concern was that in a moment-by-moment business I might miss opportunities for experience. But was this a greater concern for experience regarding an embalmer's apprenticeship? Or a greater concern for increasing cases as a means to legitimize the research endeavor? Existentially, if my apprenticeship involved leaving early because there was nothing to do, then maybe that was how it should have been defined.

Finally, in regular social science prose, a researcher can use objectivity as a sort of security blanket whereas existentially you can be fully exposed. It is the experiential presentation of self to the world, but also to individuals that work in the same environment, an environment a researcher may not want to damage with some new or private knowledge. One advantage was that a researcher could take the writing back to those involved for comparison to determine if there was any truth to it. A disadvantage, however, was that there could be things a researcher chooses not to report out of fear for embarrassment or being hurtful to someone else. As my mother always said, "if you don't want something known or repeated, then keep it to your damn self! Don't say it,

and don't write it down." But when this was the case, it caused problems with authenticity and the reported reality.

One of the strengths to this approach was that when recording notes as close to the experience as possible; especially, on more stressful and emotional days, it was difficult to coherently express or verbalize thoughts. Sometimes there were just no words for things being felt or experienced. However, since existential sociology contended writing in retrospect, then any explanations or descriptions of those indefinable thoughts still became more scientific and rational than existential. Possibly this thought holds more in the philosophical than sociological sense, or as Fontana (2002) suggested while working as a crew member for Speed Week in the Bonneville Salt Flats, it was the existential experience of the everyday life social world bridged with the more postmodern report of that existential experience of the everyday life social world that enabled a fuller more realistic depiction of it.

This was why it might be better to suggest an existentially informed sociology, and for those more troubled by this way of knowing, possibly consider its utility as a pre-research exercise as a means to establish more truthful questions or understanding of the social world or problem being investigated. A person could learn about a social problem or world through participation, note the questions that arise in-the-moment-of-experience, and then prepare reliability checks and methods for rigor as a researcher, in an effort to ameliorate problematic conditions or simply understand. This subjective/objective approach would then allow one to share in the stories responsible for any given responses that might be provided in a more empirical setting; thus contributing to a more representative study.

Retrospective Account: Personal Significance

Everybody or at least many adults, especially academic professionals have some level of consciousness about the fact that anybody, anywhere on the earth currently living, can die at any second, of any given day. However, most people do not think of that on any kind of regular basis or nonchalantly support an understanding through cliché such as "live each day as if it was your last," "life is too short so drive fast," or "try everything once while you still can." These sorts of statements along with the subtle dismissal of concern over death suggest a less truthful understanding of it. As an individual that has been intrigued by the concept for many years, studied and read books about it, experienced the death of friends and family, it was by coming to the end of an apprenticeship term in a funeral home that I generated feelings toward a greater comprehension of death or at least established a stronger meaning for it. And though I may not have words to describe this comprehension completely, it seems to be based in feeling and certainly has made any clichés or reports about death on television have greater impact. For example, there were days during an embalming when I thought this could just as easily be me tomorrow or by the end of the day. How many people actually wake up to consider the notion they could be fully embalmed within their next eight hours of existence? This thought combined with sensory perception was a sort of grim reality check for me. The simple point regarding cliché was that it should not just be said, but the suggested finality should also be meant.

These kinds of thoughts began to occur more at home as well. For example, once while taking a shower I was thinking about the space heater running in the other room and how a simple spark could start a fire during my sleeping hours, bringing death by

dawn. When seeing horror movies, criminal cases, and other television shows with dead bodies, a new appreciation for the people doing the work and how it was accomplished now existed. Any death by murder, suicide, or natural disaster heard about in the news also had a greater impact. These people were not just numbers, because they lived, had meaning, and probably were missed by someone. And these thoughts were not so much about a greater fear of death, or emotional responses with tears, they were more about a sort of vicarious grief or sincere empathy for the people involved. In a way, at least for now, my experience appears to have re-sensitized the announcement of any death in an understanding for the realistic aspects surrounding families and employees that make this a regular part of their day. Lately when hearing about some random death, two questions come to my mind: Were they ready? Were they okay with it today?

Additionally, through rapport development I had found a new group of co-workers or friends, had established a place within this subculture of funeral personnel, and acquired an extended stigma. Conversations with individuals outside the industry before, during, and after my experience revealed my stigmatized position. Most people were fascinated by the more grotesque aspects of the job, but preferred hearing my reaction to it rather than concrete details. And some of those things were preferred kept to self or to conversations that took place with other funeral personnel. The greatest curiosity often involved the reason for my interest to participate in such a research endeavor, especially without a familial connection to the industry or previous experiences in any death care organization. Since most were not interested in hearing my more profound and academic explanation, the conversations usually fizzled with their suspicious demeanor and assumption that I did not provide a satisfactory rationalistic

explanation for their curiosities. For example, there was the wife of a friend, who had been raised in a household operating a funeral home. One night before beginning my apprenticeship we briefly discussed the study. Her husband began talking about some of things she had shared with him at which point she said, "Remember we don't talk about that?" Later she questioned about whether I dyed my hair black suggesting a potential analysis for gothic culture or a non-academic interest in death. During another visit with the couple after my time in the funeral home, my friend mentioned the study again and she responded as if surprised, having forgotten about the initial conversation. She first inquired whether I actually did any work there. When I mentioned all that was done she followed with a comment such as "Did you actually get involved with the work?" Once this was understood a rather nice conversation about our experiences began flowing. It was comforting to know I could share information with someone that more clearly understood the circumstances and experience. It was as if by working in a funeral home rather than simply reading or writing about the subject had a legitimizing effect, whereas, before, I was perceived as just someone with a morbid curiosity. However, I am still uncertain if she accepted my very brief explanation for interest in this work as she understood the emotional and physical difficulties involved and was curious why someone would pursue work in this environment if given a choice. Basically, this story among others suggested there were limitations to what I could say and to whom. Or in the least, there were consequences. Concurrently, I was reminded of how strange this occupation was still perceived to be by the general public, but took comfort in knowing there were places where conversations about these peculiarities of the embalmer could be discussed with more regularity among normal people with a similar understanding.

As I drove home following my last day of work with the funeral home, reflections about all the experiences took place. Though no tears ran down my face there was a strong emotional feeling of release. It was as if all the things felt or possibly suppressed mentally, especially regarding the previous three weeks, were overflowing and let go. It was a sort of sadness as if saying goodbye to all those people involved in the various cases. I was thinking of all the faces, all the human beings, that passed through this same establishment, lied in state in the same rooms, the same chapel, were moved forward and buried by the same hands. All these emotions that each family endured during funeral services, graveside committals, and how our memories as participants in one of their most significant and memorable moments of grief and pain, were so easily filed away, to a drawer, a cabinet, words on a page in a binder, or somewhere along a neurotic pathway in our brain. Were they filed away for safe, keeping? Or filed away to be forgotten? Though the answers to these questions were uncertain, I felt the process of exiting this world really seemed to remove any individuality from the person that existed or lived and in lot ways it became a dignified unification of the human experience that solidified or made everyone equal. We had seen all kinds of death ranging from individuals in their early 20s to early 100s and every generation in between, all kinds of situations and families, so maybe in my least existential moment, I realized that it was better to be alive than it was being dead.

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APPENDIX A



*In accordance with the Funeral Services Licensing Act adopted by the Legislature approved
by the Governor of the State of Oklahoma we hereby issue to*

MEGHAN PROBSTFIELD

A Certificate of Registration as a
Apprentice Funeral Director/Embalmer

*To practice this profession in accordance with the requirements of law
From April 14, 2005 To April 13, 2006*

**IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the
official seal of said board to be impressed thereon**



Terry M. Emory
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Registration No. 5567AP

APPENDIX B



Department of Sociology
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OBJECTIVE:

Currently I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and working on a potential dissertation topic that might involve a funeral home pending your cooperation. It would require my volunteer work with you in the funeral home for a minimal period of 6 months. This is not a research endeavor with the intention of exploiting your establishment or to be used as an analytical exercise of your employees. Rather, the theoretical focus is more individualistic and will be based on my personal experience while working in this environment. I am fully aware of the stigma that funeral directors are often forced to manage and understand the concerns you may have by permitting a researcher into your place of employment, but hope you will agree to speak with me about this project before making your decision. Further, I have written and presented a number of papers at professional conferences in sociology and at least one for the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) regarding issues that surround death and dying. I consider myself to be an advocate for educating the general public about death related concerns as a means to begin the break down of these old taboos and stereotypes of morbidity that often surround everyday discussions of death.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY:

As a member of the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma State University all research is subject to approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Basically, with my status as a graduate student, the university owns this project and will not stamp their name on it unless it is to be accomplished with integrity. It is up to this review board to accept my proposal and permit me to do work in your funeral home. As the primary researcher I do not have to include the name of your establishment on any forms that would connect you to some publication that may come to exist somewhere down the road. On the other hand, if you want your funeral home to be mentioned as part of the project then I would be more than happy to do so. This is at your discretion, you can have as much anonymity and confidentiality as you want and once it is proposed and approved by the IRB there is nothing I can do to alter or sabotage the original content.

Secondly, if you want to review all the reports that are made about my personal experience before the completed project is reviewed to ensure that you are comfortable with the material that has been presented, then again I would be more than happy to comply. In other words, there is no need for secrecy and I will keep you updated regularly so no surprises show up later in the printed work. (Attached is a copy of the IRB form that addresses these issues)

COMMITTEE AND CONTACTS:

My tentative proposal date is June 2005 with a potential graduation date in December 2005, so any aid or information you can provide would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in verification of my current status you are welcome to contact any one of the following members of my dissertation committee:

Dr. David Knottnerus (Chair): 405-744-6106 or jkd2307@okstate.edu

Dr. Chuck Edgley: Currently out of town but can be reached at edgley@cox-net.com

Dr. Beth Caniglia: 405-744-6125 or canigli@okstate.edu

Dr. Steve Perkins: 405-744-6123 or perkism@okstate.edu

I appreciate any time or consideration you give toward this project and hope we can meet to speak about this project in greater detail real soon.

Sincerely,

Meghan Probstfield
Graduate Teaching Assistant (Instructor)
Oklahoma State University

APPENDIX C

Oklahoma Funeral Board

4545 North Lincoln Boulevard - Suite
175
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

4/18/2005

MEGHAN PROBSTFIELD
625 WEST BENNETT APT.D
STILLWATER OK 74075

Apprentice Monthly Report

Your apprenticeship begins: 4/14/2005

Your apprenticeship expires: 4/14/2006

Name and Address of Funeral Home:

JONES MEMORIAL CHAPEL
P O Box 444
Border Plains, OK 74078

The rules pertaining to Apprentices are found in the Oklahoma Administrative Code 235:10-3-5. You may access them at www.okfuneral.com.

If you change your place of employment during your apprenticeship, please submit a new Apprentice Employment Affidavit.

To re-new your Apprenticeship, please submit a letter detailing the need to extend apprenticeship and a hundred fifty dollar (\$150.00) fee to the Board requesting an extension and attach an official transcript from the mortuary college you have graduated from or are currently attending.

The Board will consider your request at the next regular meeting. The meeting schedule can be found on the Board's Web Page: www.okfuneral.com.

Your first monthly report is due by the 10th of the month following the Board approval of your apprenticeship.

Instructions:

Reports. An apprentice must properly file twelve monthly reports documenting their employment and completion of embalming and funeral directing experiences.

Due date. Each report is due the 1st and must be filed no later than the 10th day of the month it is due. Only Reports with original signatures can be accepted, no facsimile's accepted.

Postmark. The postmark shall determine the date of filing for the monthly reports and case reports.

Late reports. Reports received late shall not count toward the total number required for licensing.

Cancellation. An apprenticeship shall automatically be cancelled by the failure to file two monthly reports consecutively, unless an exception has been granted in writing by the Board office.

Please, check the month for which you are reporting. Indicate in the spaces provided the number of funerals and the number of embalming you assisted in for the reporting month.

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Month	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
# EMB												
# FNRL												

I certify that the above named apprentice has been in our employment for the period indicated and has obtained experience in the embalming and funeral services as indicated above.

_____	Date: _____	Must have ALL signatures for a complete report
_____	Date: _____	
MEGHAN PROBSTFIELD 5567AP	Date: _____	

FOR BOARD USE

Reviewed by: _____ Total number of reports filed: 0 Months 0 Embalming 0 Funerals 0

APPENDIX D



Department of Sociology
 006 Classroom Building
 Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078-4062
 405-744-6105 or 405-744-6104
 Fax: 405-744-5780

Meghan Probstfield
 Department of Sociology
 Oklahoma State University
 006 Classroom Building
 Stillwater, OK 74078
 Email: Meghan.Probstfield@okstate.edu
 Work Phone: 405-744-6105 or 405-744-6128
 Home Phone: 405-707-9174

OBJECTIVE:

Currently I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and working on a potential dissertation topic that might involve a funeral home pending your cooperation. It would require my volunteer work with you in the funeral home for a minimal period of 6 months. This is not a research endeavor with the intention of exploiting your establishment or to be used as an analytical exercise of your employees. Rather, the theoretical focus is more individualistic and will be based on my personal experience while working in this environment. I am fully aware of the stigma that funeral directors are often forced to manage and understand the concerns you may have by permitting a researcher into your place of employment, but hope you will agree to speak with me about this project before making your decision. Further, I have written and presented a number of papers at professional conferences in sociology and at least one for the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) regarding issues that surround death and dying. I consider myself to be an advocate for educating the general public about death related concerns as a means to begin the break down of these old taboos and stereotypes of morbidity that often surround everyday discussions of death.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY:

As a member of the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma State University all research is subject to approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Basically, with my status as a graduate student, the university owns this project and will not stamp their name on it unless it is to be accomplished with integrity. It is up to this review board to accept my proposal and permit me to do work in your funeral home. As the primary researcher I do not have to include the name of your establishment on any forms that would connect you to some publication that may come to exist somewhere down the road. On the other hand, if you want your funeral home to be mentioned as part of the project then I would be more than happy to do so. This is at your discretion, you can have as much anonymity and confidentiality as you want and once it is proposed and approved by the IRB there is nothing I can do to alter or sabotage the original content. Secondly, if you want to review all the reports that are made about my personal experience before the completed project is reviewed to ensure that you are comfortable

with the material that has been presented, then again I would be more than happy to comply. In other words, there is no need for secrecy and I will keep you updated regularly so no surprises show up later in the printed work. Finally, as the primary investigator, all data will be stored in my home on a laptop computer. I am the only one with access to this unit and will remove any information that may link your establishment to things that have been written. In other words, I do have internet access, so information of this sort will be immediately copied to a compact disc or diskette and removed from the computer to ensure it is not pirated electronically. Further, the IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedure.

PROCEDURES AND RISK:

There are no known risks associated with this project that are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. This research endeavor takes a different approach from the atypical literature on the subject, as it will come from my experience while working in this environment rather than as an objective, dispassionate investigator that critically assesses the process strictly as an observer. In other words, I am not taking this position as a means to analyze my co-workers intentions, attitudes, or behaviors by making moral judgments about how or why they do the things they do. However, as co-workers we will have conversations and there is a possibility that something we discuss will be pertinent to my experience. For example, if a co-worker and I have a conversation about his grandmother that died and the story is relevant to my experience of that particular day, I may decide to write something about it. In the event this occurs, I will inform the co-worker that it was written and offer the opportunity to review it. If my co-worker decides it is inappropriate then I will remove it. Keep in mind though it will be written anonymously without names to ensure your privacy and protection. Basically, your participation in this study is only to continue the work you already do. Nothing additional will be expected of you on my behalf other than training me as would be expected for any embalmers apprentice that chose to work at this establishment. Ultimately, my experience will be based upon whatever happens naturally among us as I work with you over the next few months.

COMMITTEE AND CONTACTS:

My tentative proposal date is July 2005 with a potential graduation date expected in May 2006, so any aid or information you can provide would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in verification of my current status you are welcome to contact any one of the following members of my dissertation committee:

Dr. David Knottnerus (Chair): 405-744-6106 or jkd2307@okstate.edu

Dr. Chuck Edgley: Currently out of town but can be reached at edgley@cox-net.com

Dr. Beth Caniglia: 405-744-6125 or canigli@okstate.edu

Dr. Steve Perkins: 405-744-6123 or perkism@okstate.edu

Dr. Michael Taylor: 405-744-9239 or mike.taylor@okstate.edu

For information of subjects' rights, contact Dr. Sue Jacobs, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall, 405-744-1676.

PARTICIPATION RIGHTS:

This is a statement to inform you that your participation is strictly voluntary. You do not have to agree to work with me in this environment and have the right to decline at any point of my duration at this establishment. You have the right to refuse conversation with me beyond work related necessities. You also have the right to deny my access to any or all parts of your establishment at any time you feel uncomfortable or recognize an unforeseen risk to you or the establishment.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been give to me.

Signature

Date

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

_____	_____
-------	-------

APPENDIX E

JONES MEMORIAL CHAPEL

To our valued customers:

Privacy Notice

The Funeral Home, its family of affiliated companies and their employees ("we" in this notice) value your trust and confidence and want you to understand how we collect, use and safeguard information we receive about you. We collect nonpublic personal information about you from the following sources:

- Information we receive from you on applications, contracts or other forms;
- Information about your transactions with us, our affiliates, or others; and
- Information we receive from a consumer-reporting agency.

We do not disclose any nonpublic personal information about our customers or former customers to anyone, except as permitted by law. We may disclose all of the information we collect, as described above, to companies that perform marketing services on our behalf or to other financial institutions with whom we have joint marketing agreements.

We restrict access to nonpublic personal information about you to those employees who need to know that information to provide products or services to you. We maintain physical, electronic, and procedural safeguards that comply with federal regulations to guard your nonpublic personal information.

Acknowledgement of receipt by purchaser: _____
(Purchaser's signature)

Date: _____

Member of
ALDERWOODS
GROUP

APPENDIX F

Oklahoma State University

Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, June 10, 2005
IRB Application No: AS0586
Proposal Title: Becoming an Embalmer's Apprentice: An Assessment and Application of Existential Sociology

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 6/9/2006

Principal Investigator(s):

Meghan Probstfield	David Knottnerus
006 Classroom	006 CLB
Stillwater, OK 74078	Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.


The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,


Sue C. Jacobs, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Meghan Daniel Probstfield

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: BECOMING AN EMBALMER'S APPRENTICE: AN ASSESSMENT AND APPLICATION OF EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Monett, MO, On October 27, 1973, the son of David and Sondra Probstfield

Education: Graduated from Monett High School, Monett, MO in May 1994; received bachelor of Arts/Science and Master of Arts/Science in Sociology from Central Florida University, Orlando, FL in December 1998 and August 2001, respectively. Completed the requirements for Doctor of Philosophy degree with Major in Sociology at Oklahoma State University in May, 2006.

Experience: Raised in the small town of Monett, MO and employed with various factory jobs during summer months; employed in retail during Undergraduate years at University of Missouri, Columbia MO, Jacksonville Community College-South, Jacksonville FL, North Florida University, Jacksonville FL, and Central Florida University, Orlando FL; employed as a graduate research and teaching assistant at University of Central Florida, Orlando FL, and as a teaching assistant at Oklahoma State University; 2001-2005.

Professional Memberships: Southern Sociological Society, Mid-South Sociological Association, Southwestern Sociological Association.

Name: Meghan Probstfield

Date of Degree: May, 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: BECOMING AN EMBALMER'S APPRENTICE: AN ASSESSMENT
AND APPLICATION OF EXISTENTIAL SOCIOLOGY

Pages in Study: 222

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Sociology

Scope and Method of Study:

This study examined the applicability of existential sociology in a research setting. The theory contends that a researcher must report on his or her thoughts, feelings, emotions, drives, passions and etceteras while immersed in some everyday life situation. A retrospective account of these experiences is then used for generalizing and theory construction in terms of possibilities. I chose to become a state registered apprentice funeral director/embalmer and reported on the everyday life experiences that included, body removal and transfer, embalming, funeral arrangements and funeral services using a personal experience narrative.

Findings and Conclusions:

Results were based on my personal experience while participating in the various activities that took place within a funeral home. The personal narrative highlighted a whole range of thoughts and feelings that revealed role strain, role conflict, stigma, and an ongoing debate of existential truth versus social construction. It was determined that existential sociology would be better understood as an existentially informed sociology since there was no perceived difference in its general underpinnings from existential philosophy and the fact that meeting IRB demands would disrupt the integrity of an existential philosophy from the beginning. The application of this approach potentially provided insight into issues of death and dying, personal grief management, and social psychological aspects of self. Additionally, this study served as a concrete example for the challenges a researcher faces when attempting to gain knowledge about a particular social world. The advantages, disadvantages, and possibilities to this methodology were then discussed.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: DR. J. DAVID KNOTTNERUS
