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# Crossroads: An interdisciplinary study of funeral directors in Indiana

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Is approved by the final examining committee:

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CROSSROADS:  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF FUNERAL DIRECTORS IN INDIANA

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty  
of  
Purdue University  
by  
Aubrey Thamann

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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West Lafayette, Indiana

For OM Watson.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: FUNERAL DIRECTING, A BRIEF HISTORY .....	15
CHAPTER 2: THEORY .....	31
CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE THEORY DATA .....	57
CHAPTER 4: LIMINALITY DATA .....	83
CHAPTER 5: SOCIAL SOLIDARITY DATA.....	101
CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS.....	118
6.1:Introduction .....	118
6.2: Analysis of Performance Data .....	119
6.3: Analysis of Liminality Data .....	127
6.4: Analysis of Social Solidarity Data.....	131
6.5: Conclusions .....	134
EPILOGUE .....	143
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	146
VITA .....	159

## ABSTRACT

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This work is an ethnographic study of funeral directors in Indiana, focusing on the social role they play. Funeral directors, through performances as director and actor, with their living tableaux and focus on the life of the deceased individual, rather than his or her death, offer us the illusion of a modern American ideal—a society with no death. In the face of a great loss, we are reminded how much we depend upon others, which runs contrary to the traditional American concept of the individual. Individualism is so important to us that our funerary ritual, in place for the living, has become a showcase of the deceased's personality, rather than centering on the needs of the bereaved. An effect of this is that we then struggle to achieve a much needed, visceral connection with our fellow mourners. The funeral director offers us the much needed, shared experience of collective grief in the funeral. And through his production of the funeral, he maintains social solidarity with us by making death the outsider, the ultimate Other. In this way, we are more easily able to process the loss of a loved one without losing our sense of individuality.

## INTRODUCTION

This work is an ethnographic study of funeral directors in Indiana. It is ultimately a discussion of the social role that funeral directors play. My research took place at several funeral homes throughout the state. Although I sent out surveys seeking participants to businesses of varying ethnicities and religious affiliations, the only homes willing to work with me on this particular project were those owned by white Christian families. This is significant because funeral practices vary in the US, based on ethnic or religious affiliation, so the data I collected reflects a specific demographic. I spent several weeks at each home over the course of two years. My fieldwork took the form of surveys, interviews, and note taking, as I observed funerals, consultations, an embalming, and day-to-day office work. In this Introduction, I want to take some time to explain why I chose this topic, discuss my thesis, define my terminology as it will be used throughout my dissertation, and briefly summarize the contents of each chapter.

My interest in this particular topic stems from my long-held fascination with the unique relationship we have with death in mainstream US culture. When I first began thinking about what to research for my dissertation, I was primarily focused on how film functions as a vehicle for folklore—specifically how horror

films often take motifs from urban legends as their thematic makeup. I began looking at horror films from within the framework of terror management theory (TMT). TMT essentially argues that we are continually struggling between a desire to live a long, valued life and our awareness of our own mortality. In an effort to mitigate this struggle, we have developed culturally-based worldviews that give our lives meaning.<sup>1</sup> Horror films resonate for us, then, because we are able to face our own mortality and defend our value vicariously. We don't have to continually validate our existence personally or physically. When the monster (representing death) ultimately loses in the end (whether by dying or merely failing to kill the protagonist), then our confidence in our world view that our lives are meaningful is reinforced.<sup>2</sup>

It was difficult at that time, though, to pin down a specific group of people or culture about whom to conduct an ethnographic study.<sup>3</sup> So I asked myself about the root of my interest in this particular topic. Primarily, I was interested in what I saw as America's death phobia. My next question was: who deals with death on a regular basis? The first answer that came to me was funeral directors. So I set out to discover how funeral directors, as a group, handle working with death day in and day out, as members of a death-phobic society. I had some selfish motives as well—I have been to more funerals in my life than the average person my age. Just during the span of my time in school, I attended 6 funerals for various family members and friends, one less than a week ago as I'm writing this sentence. I think I was looking for some cathartic experience that would help me to better process loss. I have thus included my

own personal experiences in the data chapters because they informed and colored my perception of the fieldwork I was doing.

Most cultures fear death; indeed, TMT would argue that the very reason humans universally believe in some form of afterlife is to offset our fear of just ending. But it was in the West, specifically in the US, that we began to work to stave off death indefinitely. Medical and technological advancements prolong the life of our physical bodies, even well after our minds are gone.<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Gorer talks about death as the new taboo, akin to pornography. We don't want to talk about it, because to talk about it makes it real. Death as a natural process has become disgusting to us, because it is less common at younger stages of life.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in the 1930s, we moved death from the family home to the hospital or nursing home, so the responsibility to care for the dying is now in the hands of doctors and nurses.<sup>6</sup> Because we have lost touch with death as an everyday occurrence, we begin to deny its existence. In their history of funeral practices in the US, Habenstein and Lamers write: "The modifications and developments in the organization of American funeral practices has led to a vastly different response to the problems of death and the disposal of the dead."<sup>7</sup> Caring for the dying and disposal of the dead is no longer in the hands of the families of the deceased.

Philippe Ariès argues that in the non-US West, death is completely denied—there is no viewing of the body, and wakes are on the decline. But in the US, we insist on viewings (embalmings) as part of the process. Why? According to Ariès, this is what makes the US's relationship to death unique. We

acknowledge death, but we insist on transforming it, rather than trying to make it disappear altogether. In my experiences, both personally and professionally, the funeral director is able to stage a life-focused scene through the process of embalming. Increasingly, this living tableau is meant to represent the individual personality of the deceased. People are buried in their favorite team sweatshirt; coffins can be individualized to represent hobbies of the deceased; props are sometimes brought in. In some funeral homes, the living tableau is taken one step further to make it seem as though the deceased is attending his or her own funeral.<sup>8</sup> Again, why? Why do we go to all this trouble to create these types of scenes? Ariès argues that it is emotion we are afraid of, rather than death per se. He writes of the “interdiction of death in order to preserve happiness,”<sup>9</sup> and how this ultimate denial changes our relationship to death: “The definitive nature of the rupture has been blurred. Sadness and mourning have been banished from this calming reunion.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, death is sad, and emotion must be avoided at all cost, so death is transformed to more closely resemble life. This practice makes it easier to maintain composure at a funeral.

And yet, this only pushes the question further—if we accept Ariès’s argument that it is really emotion we are afraid of, rather than death, then why are we so afraid of emotion? I believe it is due to the focus on the individual in our society. Individualism and self-reliance are core values in mainstream American culture. As Emerson wrote, “it is only as a man puts off from himself all external support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail.”<sup>11</sup> Connecting Emerson’s self-reliant individual to Ariès’s assertion above, if we are

overly emotional at a death, then that demonstrates we were at the very least emotionally connected to that person. Depending on our relationships to others is in opposition to the traditional American concept of the individual. As discussed above, individualism is so important to us that our funerary ritual, in place for the living, has become a showcase of the deceased's personality, rather than centering on the needs of the bereaved. An effect of this is that we then struggle to achieve a much needed, visceral connection with our fellow mourners. Roy and Jane Nichols, funeral directors who wrote an essay for Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's book *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, argue that, "people need to come to grips with the reality of death. This acceptance must not only be intellectual, it must also be emotional. What appears to be acceptance can be deceptive and can be very, very destructive when the acceptance is only intellectual."<sup>12</sup> Acceptance of death must include an emotional reaction to the death, so if we attempt to banish emotion from the process, then the death is not real. If we don't process the death as real, then we run the risk of an uncompleted social drama (which is any social process that generates a social conflict), which in turn severely hinders our ability to heal, maintain, or forge deep connections with others experiencing the same loss. If we are unable to make those connections, also known as *communitas*, then we run the risk of losing social cohesion altogether. It is my argument, then, that funeral directors, by performing certain roles from within their liminal status, help us to achieve *communitas* following a death.

At this point I should define my terms, specifically what I mean by “performance,” “liminality,” and “communitas.” Let me begin with performance. I discuss the rituals and roles performed by funeral directors through the concept of “performance theory.” Performance theory is the idea that social drama and aesthetic drama are inherently linked, and terminology used in critiquing the latter can be equally applied to daily performances, and in particular, rituals. I define the concept of “performance” broadly, as Goffman does: “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, everything we do while interacting with others. Goffman includes in this definition how we present ourselves—our appearance.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly relevant in my discussion of funeral performance because we dress a certain way at funerals to convey that we are indeed in mourning. The deceased, if in an open casket, are made up to resemble their living selves—their last performance as themselves—an attempt by us to convince ourselves that the deceased are merely at rest.

I extend the term to include the performance of any ritual involved in the funeral process. This includes sacred and secular rituals, those performed by the mourners or the funeral directors, and those either performed in front of an actual audience or those performed in private. These last I include as performance because even private rituals, such as the embalming process, are done as part of a larger performance as professional death workers, and with the intention to specifically provide a service for the bereaved. The “influence on the

observers,” in this case, would be helping the bereaved into experiencing *communitas*, the natural process of which, as I will discuss later on, is interrupted by our severe aversion to the reality of death.

Next I want to address the concept of liminality. I use the term in its fullest sense in this work. Van Gennep described liminality as the in-between stage during transition rites or rites of passage. Initiates are neither in their “before” nor “after” state, and are often kept physically separate from the rest of the community while undergoing their transition.<sup>15</sup> Victor Turner also addressed the liminal status of initiates, arguing that:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, people who are going through transition rites are also liminal, because they are often kept separate from the rest of the community until they emerge on the other side.

Further, Turner’s definition applies to those perpetually on the margins of society, because they are never fully integrated into their community. In this work I conflate “liminality” and “marginality,” after Victor Turner: “If our basic model of society is that of a ‘structure of positions,’ we must regard the period of margin or ‘liminality’ as an interstructural situation.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, those who exist in the periphery socially—those who are in one way or another excluded from a society’s social structure, including those in a profession centered on

taboo work, such as handling the dead—are thus also liminal. Funeral directing as an industry is such a liminal entity, then, because our collective fear and denial of death in the US includes a denial of the industry and its workers—we don't think about them until we need them. Even then, unless we are involved in the planning of a funeral, we still don't think about the workers behind the scenes. They exist outside of our conception of our culture's social structure. Liminality is a state of being that can include the periphery, marginality, border dwelling, non-member status, in-between status—anything that marks us as distinctly separate from our surrounding culture. And what often comes with liminality is that visceral connection people who experience liminality together feel with each other—*communitas*.

Now I will discuss my use of the term “communitas.” I have mentioned several times that visceral connection we need to have with others following a death. It is this connection that we are talking about when we talk about communitas. Turner described it as an intense, usually spontaneous and unconscious, feeling of connection to others, often achieved while enduring a period of liminality. Communitas is, as Turner states, “an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, connecting to each other in this way is a fundamental building block for human society. As I will discuss in more detail later, the bereaved experience a liminal period following the death of a loved one. However, due to the way death is processed in mainstream US culture, communitas is often interrupted.

In mainstream US culture, we have compartmentalized death, banishing it to hospitals, trying to stave it off for as long as possible, and we attempt to deny an emotional reaction to the death of a loved one. Malinowski writes, “by setting in motion one part of the deep forces of the instinct of self-preservation, [death] threatens the very cohesion and solidarity of the group, and upon this depends the organization of that society, its tradition, and finally the whole culture.”<sup>19</sup> Death, then, threatens our social cohesion, and by trying to deny an emotional reaction to death, we exacerbate that threat.

Finally I want to briefly discuss the progression of the rest of this work. In Chapter 1, I briefly discuss the history of funeral directing as an industry, and I will also look at how each of my consultants entered into the business. I decided to include this information to give readers some context for understanding how and why the modern US funeral industry has developed. Even though funeral directing has historically been a family job, passed down from generation to generation, that dynamic is changing as people are leaving their family businesses behind, and as more people enter into funeral directing as a mid-career change. Indeed, most of the consultants who worked with me did not have a family history of funeral directing, although most developed an interest in their teen years and worked for homes in their communities. I find this significant because the funeral industry relies very heavily on the idea that their businesses are family-owned and operated.

In Chapter 2 I discuss the theoretical framework I am using to analyze my data. This includes a discussion of performance theory and its principal

exponents, as well as ideas on liminality and *communitas*. I included this chapter before I delve into the data I collected in order to give the reader a clearer understanding about why I think the data fit into those theoretical frameworks. It establishes the foundation for how I will be analyzing my data in the final chapter.

In Chapter 3 I address the data I collected that I read as performance, and interpreted through the application of performance theory. This includes ritual behavior, both secular and as it pertains to funerary practice. It also involves discussions of staging, props, make-up and costuming, and the various roles played by the various actors in funeral performance.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the data I collected that established the liminal status of funeral directors. I will also address other instances of liminality involved in funeral work, such as that of the mourners, space and place, and even my own experiences as an outsider to an outsider profession.

In Chapter 5 I discuss the data I collected that demonstrated the creation of social solidarity between funeral directors and their communities, as well as the families they serve. I use Durkheim's concept of social solidarity to inform this discussion. In this sense, social solidarity is an attachment to each other which is created by interdependence on each other. Because funeral directors perform work that is considered unclean or taboo, they have to work to make themselves seem an essential part of their communities. Without creating social solidarity within their communities, funeral directors would not have the trust necessary for them to facilitate *communitas*. These concepts are integral to a discussion of mainstream American funeral practices because, as discussed

briefly above, the typical way we process death hinders *communitas*, which we need for the maintenance of society as a whole.

In chapter 6 I describe my data analysis and draw conclusions in terms of the theoretical framework already established. Although the funeral industry may have begun as a business enterprise, we seem to have created a failsafe for making sure we still properly process death. We may need the funeral director to facilitate *communitas*, because we developed into a culture in which we struggle to achieve that connection, but we then created a figure who would help us do so. In addition, funeral directors are necessarily liminal, because they have to work in that space that we don't want to enter, whether because death is ultimately profane, or because it brings out emotions we don't want to feel. The funeral director enters that liminal space for us, and brings us out on the other side.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jamie Arndt, Jeff Greenberg, and Alison Cook, "Mortality Salience and the Spreading Activation of Worldview-Relevant Constructs: Exploring the Cognitive Architecture of Terror Management," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 131:3 (2002): 307-324.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Sullivan, Jeff Greenberg, and Mark J. Landau, "Toward a New Understanding of Two Films from the Dark Side: Utilizing Terror Management Theory to Analyze *Rosemary's Baby* and *Straw Dogs*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37:4 (Winter 2009): 189-198.

<sup>3</sup> These days there are a lot of online communities who share a love of horror films, and there are several horror conventions throughout the US held annually. In a future work I would be interested to see if questions about the way we think about death in the US would be answered by these groups similarly to how they are answered by funeral workers.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Lock, "Death in Technological Time: Locating the End of Meaningful Life," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 10:4 (Dec., 1996): 575-600.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," *Encounter* 5:4 (Oct., 1955), 49-52.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 87.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee: Bulfin Printers, 1955), 196.

<sup>8</sup> “Dead People Get Life-Like Poses at Their Funerals,” ABC News, accessed March 23, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/dead-people-life-poses-funerals/story?id=23456853>.

<sup>9</sup> Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, 94.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1841), 72-73.

<sup>12</sup> Roy and Jane Nichols, “Funerals: A Time for Grief and Growth,” in *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1975), 91.

<sup>13</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93.

<sup>18</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion: and Other Essays*, with an introduction by Robert Redfield, second edition (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Incorporated, 1992), 53.

## CHAPTER 1: FUNERAL DIRECTING, A BRIEF HISTORY

“Preservation of the dead has two fundamental purposes: the first resides in the belief held by some groups that the physical remains have some ultimate function in a postmortem state; the second, and less exotic, purpose is to allow time for ceremonial preparations to be made and for the resulting funeral ritual to be carried out. The Puritans entertained no illusions as to the postmortem efficacy of one’s mortal remains, but they did require time for ceremony.”  
(Stannard, Puritan Way, p 111)

Before I begin discussing the theoretical frameworks I used to analyze the data I collected, I want to briefly delve into some history. In this chapter I discuss the history of the funeral industry, outline the histories of the homes I worked with specifically, and touch on the personal working history of the funeral directors I worked with, including the various reasons they chose this line of work. I connect personal histories of funeral workers, institutional histories of the homes, and the history of the industry because I see them as thematically linked. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of my consultants.

Before funeral directing became a profession, caring for the dead rested largely in the hands of family members of the deceased. For the bulk of its existence, the industry itself has been entirely populated by family-owned and run homes, most of which were in families for generations. Death was not yet a

thing we worked to destroy or deny. As medical and technological advancements changed our relationship to death, the funeral industry has also changed to reflect that. As we can travel more easily, as we become more distant from each other, death becomes all the more marginalized. More and more funeral homes are becoming corporately-owned, more people with family histories of death work are leaving the business, and more people without that connection are entering into it. Although all of the funeral homes I worked with claim to be family-owned and operated, some of them are no longer owned by the founding family, and at least one has changed its business practices to resemble those of corporately-owned homes. Several of the people I interviewed did not have a family history of mortuary work, and one entered into the business in a mid-career shift, which is also becoming increasingly common. So not only is death work no longer a family matter, it is no longer a family business.

First, a brief history of the funeral industry. Although these days funeral directing is a heavily male-populated job, caring for the dead began with women, usually family or close friends of the deceased. Habenstein and Lamers write:

Well before funeral undertaking in America had evinced any positive signs of developing into a distinct occupation, the care of the dead in early America had been in the hands of those who rendered such attention as a personal service. Friends and neighbors were the first to come to the aid of the bereaved, and, as has usually been the case in small community life, certain members, quite often adult females, would develop a rough skill in laying out the dead, or, over a period of years, would have given assistance often enough to feel an informal responsibility to offer their services in cases of community or neighborhood deaths.<sup>1</sup>

Most texts which address the history of the funeral industry trace its origins to cabinet makers, liverymen, and sextons: “Over the next [17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>]

century, the sexton assumes a larger role in the funeral by providing equipment and directing the arrangements, such as providing a wagon or coach for transportation to the graveyard.”<sup>2</sup> “Usually the sexton would have dug the grave and tolled the bell to announce the funeral.” “In the colonial period, cabinet-making was often found with upholstery, and to this combination undertaking was occasionally added...Yet it was more frequently the case that cabinet-makers, chairmakers and the like first supplied coffins only; and then over a period of time extended the range of their functions from producer of a necessary material article, i.e. the coffin, to that of provider of non-material personal services.” “As cities grew and the material resources of the townsfolk increased, livery stable keepers were faced with an expanding demand for carriages for funerals.”<sup>3</sup> “[A] neighbor went to notify the cabinetmaker or furniture dealer, who provided a coffin from his small stock or made one to order.”<sup>4</sup> “At the graveyard, either the sexton or some friends had dug a grave, and after the body had been committed to the earth, these same people scooped the dirt back into the hole.”<sup>5</sup> Funeral directors I have spoken with who have mentioned the history of their field say the same—cabinet makers made coffins, liverymen transported bodies to cemeteries, and sextons buried the dead. As society became more atomized, people were no longer dying in the home. A need presented itself, and so the funeral industry was born—enterprising individuals who decided to take on all of the tasks of caring for and burying the dead.

Georgeanne Rundblad traces the roots of the industry further back, to shrouding women. She argues that evidence shows that:

Before this duty was transformed into a market activity, in part because the care of the body at death, like other domestic responsibilities, “fit” social roles for women...After commercialization, women were no longer able to prepare the body for burial in part because their “nature” no longer allowed them to “gaze” at the body appropriately; that is, the transformation from the shrouding woman to the funeral industry “professional” was also the process through which women were denied “knowledge” of a discourse that would have allowed them an acceptable way of “looking at” the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Rundblad also discusses the creation of the official history of the funeral industry, including the promotion of newer methods (such as embalming), establishing founding fathers, and legitimating “the idea that that undertaking should be a man’s occupation.”<sup>7</sup> She argues that as death care became more scientific with the application of embalming, a rhetoric surrounding women’s nature began to push them out of the burgeoning field. They were deemed too skittish, sensitive, emotional, and to lack the appropriate scientific knowledge that would allow them to handle the dead.

Leroy Bowman discusses death work as a previously familial duty.

Families and friends initially took on the burden of caring for the dead:

In the earliest colonial days, and until considerably later in isolated rural or cultural communities, members of the family and neighbors performed all the tasks consequent to death. The washing of the body and its “laying out” were the first tasks usually done by a member of the intimate family group but not infrequently by a friendly neighbor. The male members of the family dig the grave, if it was to be located in a family plot on the farm, or the sexton did, if the body was to be interred in the churchyard. The coffin containing the body was carried by family members, neighbors and friends to the church; and those closest to the deceased, or the sexton, filled the grave after the coffin had been lowered. The funeral was a family and neighborhood affair, taking place in the home.<sup>8</sup>

Then homes got smaller, families scattered, so the funeral home became more relevant. As people spread out across the country, embalming became

more popular. The typical way of preserving a body before burial was ice, which was not practical if a body was travelling across the country, or if family members had several days journey to make it home for the funeral. Many patents were filed in the late 1800s for various embalming techniques, and funeral directors began to embrace the practice. Although initially done only by medical professionals, who knew and understood human anatomy, funeral directors eventually took over this practice as well, just as they had casket making, transportation, and burial.<sup>9</sup>

For the rest of this chapter, I discuss each funeral home in terms of their histories as they are laid out for the public on their websites (note the focus on family ownership), as well as the personal histories of the funeral directors I worked with. Most of the funeral homes at which I did my fieldwork had histories much like that which I have previously outlined. The early days of Barlow Funeral Home, for example, were much like any other funeral home. It opened its doors in 1880 when cabinet maker William Mitchell began his business as an undertaker. His daughter Mary married William Barlow, who eventually took over Mary's family's business after her father and brother died. After William died, Mary obtained her funeral directing and embalming licenses, and according to Barlow's website, she was one of the first women in Indiana to do so. The business then went to her son, who sold it to his nephew Bill shortly before retiring. The Barlows eventually sold the home, although Bill and his brother Mike still work there, along with a licensed funeral director, Tom.<sup>10</sup>

With a couple of exceptions, most of my consultants did not grow up in the field, although several have been working in various jobs within the funeral industry since high school. Tom, one of the few funeral directors who did have a family history of the work, told me:

My dad was a mortician, so I grew up around it. He worked for a gentleman, it was privately owned, and he worked for the gentleman, but yeah. Grew up around it. I can remember as a little kid going on death calls with my dad to the hospital, things like that. And then obviously as you got older, you started mowing the lawn, washing the cars; you know as you got older, your responsibilities progressed. So, yeah, you just kind of grow up with it.<sup>11</sup>

Tom later said that, although it has been standard for funeral directors to have family ties to the business, that aspect is changing:

Up until a few years ago, yeah, it was kind of strange if you didn't have some family connection to it, but, in the last, probably, I'm going to say five years, give or take, you're seeing more and more people get into it that have never had any indication or influence or any ties to the funeral business. A lot of people that get into their forties that decide they want a second career and this is something that has interested them. So they're...you're getting a lot of those people that are getting into it, and you know, and that goes, for any, I suppose, for any industry that people are making second career choices. It's no big deal to go back to school, get your degree, and go on, and if you decide you don't like it, you go back to school again and do something else. It's just, it's gotten kind of strange, because it used to be you grew up around this, you went into it, those coming behind you, family members, it just, it was generation after generation after generation, and now, it's probably the opposite. Some of the younger generation that grew up around it are getting out of it because of the time constraints that are involved in it.

You know, when you're a smaller funeral home like this, small town, it's pretty much twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five. If I go somewhere, I have to make arrangements to have somebody cover for me. It's not like you can just pick up the yellow pages, look under embalmer/funeral director, and have a list of guys to call. If you're at a bigger place in a bigger city,

it's a little more departmentalized, in that you'll probably have some guys that do nothing but meet with families and make arrangements, some guys that do nothing—I don't mean just guys, guys and gals—that may do nothing but embalming. Obviously with more staff, they're set up usually for vacation and kind of more of a regimented schedule where you know at least I'm going to have certain days off during the month, where here it's just you kind of take what you can get. If we have a few slow days, and it's the middle of the week, and maybe that's your time to go do your personal business. Weekends don't mean much. You know, it's just another day. So, I think that's why a lot of the people that grew up in it nowadays are not staying with it. They're getting into other fields. And quite honestly, the pay scale in comparison to a lot of other professions is on the lower end. I mean, you have to like what you do. If you're looking to get rich when you do this, you probably need to look into another field. So I think that all kind of factors in.<sup>12</sup>

Cook-Fields Funeral Home has a relatively brief history, dating back to 1931. In 1965, Gary Cook took over. Cook Funeral Home was then purchased by Geoff Fields in 2005, and it became Cook-Fields Funeral Home at that time.<sup>13</sup> Geoff did not have family ties to the business, although he worked at a funeral home in high school. I took the following notes during our first interview: “High school student, part time job, had no desire to stay in the funeral business. Did all kinds of jobs—death runs, ambulance runs, yard work, funerals, etc. Was originally going to do petroleum engineering, but that didn't pan out, so he decided on mortuary science. Had the goal to own his own place, and now he does.”<sup>14</sup>

Following modern trends within the funeral industry, Menlowe Funeral Home has changed hands a couple of times, yet they still claim “family-owned and operated, since the current owners became involved in the late 1930s. It was opened by Charles Menlowe and Robert Smith, who had both worked for

other firms. Several others became involved with the home over the years, including Menlo Spiegel, who had no family history of funeral work, although his family still owns and operates the funeral home.<sup>15</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, Renee Spiegel was the primary owner.

Mark, who worked at Menlowe at the time of my fieldwork, discussed his decision to enter into mortuary school:

I was about to graduate high school, and I was looking at a couple colleges. I'm from New Orleans, and there were a couple colleges, well, only one offered mortuary science. I just happened to be looking through one of the college catalogs and I thought, funeral services. I had thought about it before, but I never really gave it much thought, until I saw that one of the colleges actually offered that. And I said you know what? I think I could try that. So I talked to the people at the school. My mom encouraged me to do it. Because it's not in my family at all. I'm the only one in my family, so it's not a family thing. And I talked to the people at the school, applied, got accepted, and that's kind of, that's how it started off, and it helped me get jobs, and one thing after another, it kind of just all fell into place.

I hadn't been to a lot of funerals before I entered mortuary school. My grandmother's funeral really influenced me. I just remember, I was 15, or no, I was 16, and I went to her funeral. I wasn't scared like I was a few years before when I had gone to my grandfather's funeral. You know, at that age, I was like 9 or 10, and it's just a scary thing to go to. But anyway, I was 16 when I went to my grandmother's funeral, and there was more curiosity of the business itself. And I had never really thought about that before her funeral. And I remember talking to my mom, it was also something my mom had wanted to do when she was my age, so, but there were no mortuary schools around at the time. It was always something she had talked about, just the combination of my funeral experiences, and my mother's influence, and me finding the schools, you know going through that college book, and the course catalog, and finding funeral service. Not only that, there was just always a general interest in it. I went into the funeral service primarily as an embalmer. The embalming side of it, at that age it really captivated me. You always go into school with this thought in your head about funeral service, and being an embalmer, and you come out completely different, so it's a really interesting experience to go through. And some people don't like it. They quit and others continue, so...I think when I started we had maybe 35 kids

in my class, and my graduating class was 11 [laughing], so most people end up dropping out[...] but it all worked out for me, because I went into it with one thought about the business and came out completely different. I never thought I would be where I am today.<sup>16</sup>

Carol was my first contact at Menlowe. When I began my fieldwork, she was the aftercare specialist there. I interviewed her early on, and asked about how she got into the funeral business. She entered as a mid-career change. She told me:

It was truly a job that just found me. I was on the Tippecanoe County air clean committee. And the gal who had my position before me was off having her third baby and wasn't coming back. And they actually had hired someone in between and it hadn't worked out. And I had my insurance license, which, when you prearrange a funeral, then there's two avenues, if someone wants to prepay, you can either put it into insurance or into a bank trust. So that's how I got into the funeral service. And I don't do that part of it anymore, I do now, my job is public relations, community education, I do all the grief work, aftercare, follow-ups, and I work with families before. I have five different grief groups that I facilitate, so that's really my area. That's the part that I work with. So that's it, but it really, truly was a job that found me. I was a single mom with three kids, and I loved, at first I said, oh, I'm much too happy to be in funeral service, but I loved it. It was more pay, and I could come and go, and set appointments, and then, that first year was really rough, because I'd never been around death. But the staff is amazing here. And then I just fell in love with it. Ten years later, I laugh, I say death is my life. I can't imagine doing anything else.<sup>17</sup>

One of the first contacts I made was with Paul at Colley & Froebisch & Frank Funeral Home. CFF had their beginnings as furniture makers. From their website:

Our funeral home is proud to be family owned and operated. Ed Colley and son, Harold, came to S\_\_\_\_, Indiana in 1919 from Cloverdale, Indiana and established a furniture store and funeral business on the south side of the S\_\_\_\_ square.

In 1929, they moved to the present location at 105 North Montgomery Street. Ed Colley passed away in 1949 and Harold in 1962. Arthur Froebisch joined the firm in 1938, and Bob Froebisch in 1964. Bob Frank joined the staff in 1977, just before Arthur Froebisch passed away that same year. Paul Day joined the staff in 2007.

Our funeral home would not be where it is today if not for the women who supported, and worked alongside those men mentioned above: Darlene Colley (wife of Harold Colley), Clara Froebisch (wife of Arthur Froebisch), Alice Froebisch (wife of Bob Froebisch), and Susan Frank (wife of Bob Frank).

Since our humble beginnings over 90 years ago, the funeral home has striven to offer a professional and classy approach in a dignified and personal manner. Our service is conducted in a manner befitting the tribute that you and your family wish to bestow. We have evolved from a furniture store/funeral home to a place of compassion and refuge, where you can take the first steps of grief, and healing.<sup>18</sup>

As with everyone, I asked Paul how he got into the funeral industry. Paul, like most of my contacts, does not have a family history of the work. When we first met, he was still working at a funeral home in Lafayette. From my notes following an interview:

He got into funeral service by having a friend in it in high school, it stuck. He went to mortuary school, and got into it that way. He says that the corporate homes are usually in big cities, and people don't follow in parents' footsteps anymore, because they don't want the lifestyle, so they get out. So for him it's not odd to get into it not having the family history. This was the first time I hear "cookie-cutter funeral." He talks about his first job not having these. They'll do whatever people want, typically. That's important to Paul.<sup>19</sup>

During a subsequent interview, after Paul had joined Colley & Froebisch & Frank, I took the following notes: "At his first job, Paul was strictly a mortician. He wanted to move into all of funeral directing, and now does that at his place CFF. He bought into that, and when Frank retires, he'll add his name."<sup>20</sup>

Finally, I spent some time with a few people at Richardson and Jefferson Funeral Centers. Richardson and Jefferson is in a somewhat controversial position as a funeral company, at least within funeral circles. Everyone I worked with outside of Richardson and Jefferson dismissed them as a chain funeral home, in contrast to being “family-owned.” They do utilize chain practices, such as having multiple locations and outsourcing embalming. Several funeral directors I worked with particularly disagree with the latter practice. They see embalming as part of the whole process of what they do, in providing care services for mourners. It is a point of pride to be able to make a deceased person look presentable, and most of the funeral directors I worked with felt that “assembly-line” embalming is never very high quality.

However, the people I spoke with at Richardson and Jefferson all emphasize that they are still owned by the same family who started the company. Richardson and Jefferson see themselves as a family-owned business who use cost-effective chain practices to provide affordable services to the families they serve. According to their website, their family has owned and operated the business for over 130 years. As their community changed, so did the company, expanding to provide service to various neighborhoods around Indianapolis. They continue to grow their business and adapt to community needs, as demonstrated by their mini-chain of discount funeral homes, the inclusion of a green burial site, and their use of facilities to provide non-funeral related event space.<sup>21</sup>

From the website:

In May of 1881, Frank W. Richardson became Indiana's first licensed embalmer and opened a mortuary in downtown Indianapolis. In 1887 Charles J. Jefferson joined his brother-in-law in the business, and the Richardson and Jefferson partnership was formed. The company was initially funded with money received from a Civil War pension.

The company continued to grow under the leadership of Paul H. Jefferson, a son of Charles J. Jefferson, and Frank B. Richardson, Frank W. Richardson's nephew. In 1925, the pair constructed a beautiful new state-of-the-art facility on Fall Creek Parkway at Meridian Street. It became "the" mortuary for northside families. Many funeral homes once lined North Meridian Street, but this location became the leader and served close to 1,000 families annually at its peak.

Paul H. Jefferson, Jr., represents the third generation of R and J. Paul's sister Charlene (Jefferson) Keller and her husband Donald Keller were also active in the business during the 1960s and 1970s.

In 2001 the Community Life Center opened on the campus of Washington Park East Cemetery. This "jewel" of the eastside is now a popular destination for weddings, funerals and community events. As our community grows and traditions change, Richardson and Jefferson will continue to be there, putting families and community first.<sup>22</sup>

I worked with two gentlemen at Richardson and Jefferson, one who worked at the North Branch, and another, who worked downtown. Neither of these men had family connections to the business, although both became involved with it at a young age. Ryan, from the North branch, told me his story of joining the funeral industry:

When I was just 15 years of age, I grew up in, when I was 15 I used to cut across the lawn of a mortuary to go down to a friend's house, and one day the owner of that mortuary stopped me and he asked me, if I could cross the lawn so often, if I would want a job mowing the grass. So I started mowing the grass of the mortuary, and from there, I worked all through high school, and college, and a gentleman there at the college helped me get a position here. So I started out mowing the grass and I've been in the business ever since, and that's been almost 40 years.<sup>23</sup>

Ronald is the Senior Vice President of Richardson and Jefferson. He told me that he had been interested in the funeral industry since he was just 9 years old, after having attended his grandfather's funeral:

When I was a little boy about 9 years old, the person that was my best friend and who had the time to spend all of his free time with me died. That was my grandfather on my mother's side. So when we went to the funeral home, nobody there was able to help me because my grandmother was distraught, my mother was distraught, my father was taking care of her, and the one person that stepped up and was able to help me was the funeral director. He was a good friend of the family. He explained to me why my grandfather felt cold, why there was this peculiar odor, which was not the embalming chemicals, it was a mixture of flowers, all the different things we were going to be doing, where I was going to be at, when we were going to the cemetery, what was going to happen there. He was the one explaining what was happening. Well, I loved my grandfather dearly, but I didn't want to follow in his footsteps when I became an adult because he was a coal miner. But I kind of liked that job, being a funeral director. I thought it was pretty neat at 9 years old. So it stuck with me. When I was about 15 I went out to this place and asked him if I could have a job helping out. I said I'll do anything just to be a part of this. So he said, ok, come back tomorrow and I'll put you to work. So I showed up and I had a new pair of shoes on, hand-me-down suit, because we handed down suits in our family. There were four of us boys, and they weren't going to buy new suits every year so they just handed them down between us. So he said come and go with me to the garage, and I thought oh, wow, we're going out and we're going to drive one of those shiny cars. I spent the rest of the day behind a lawn mower, mowing the grass. So that's how I got in the business. And I just stayed with it. It was my dream from the fourth grade, to be a funeral director. And one of my good friends, a former classmate who teaches in the school system in the northern part of the state and talks to her students about saying your goals early in life and sticking with them, she has used me as an example for years because I was the one who did. But anyway, that's how I got into it.<sup>24</sup>

I asked Ronald how he ended up working with Richardson and Jefferson, as he has been with the company for over 40 years:

Actually, it was by accident. I had went to mortuary school here in Indianapolis. I was from the Terre Haute area, and after graduation I went back to Terre Haute and took a job, and I was really not happy because of long hours we were putting in, and low pay, and so I had a friend from Terre Haute who was manager of another funeral home, a large firm here in Indianapolis, and I asked him if I could come over and ask him about a job. So I did, and he didn't have any openings at that time, but he said I know someone I'll send you to, so he sent me to Richardson Jefferson. So I came up here, interviewed with then the general manager Mr. Tremps and this was in December, and I went home after the interview and I called him back just a couple of days before Christmas to see if he'd made up his mind yet, and he said yes, you can have the job, and I think like Monday was Christmas. He said can you start Monday? And I must have had a moment of temporary insanity because I said no, I'll start Tuesday. And I always wondered how he felt about that later on, but anyway, that's how I got here, by accident, by somebody else who referred me up here. And that was 40 years ago this last December. Actually, I only came here to work here for a couple of years to get some experience. Basically an embalming room, hopefully someday I could be a funeral director if I stayed long enough, and I found that I got my embalming experience very quickly, and I was practicing as a funeral director within two years, and everything just seemed to keep falling in place, so I stayed here, and I'm still here 40 years later.<sup>25</sup>

When I began interviewing my contacts, I assumed that they all came from families of funeral directors, who had been in the business for generations. What I learned was that most of them seem to have had a calling to the business, having had almost a serendipitous experience with a funeral or funeral director that stuck with them, and that funeral directors whose families have been in the business for generations are leaving funeral directing because they are burnt out. The next three chapters will focus on the fieldwork I did, which included interviews, job shadowing, and observation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (Milwaukee, WI: Bulfin Printers, 1955), 235-236.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America* (Altadena, LA: Twelvetree Press, 1990), 129.

<sup>3</sup> Habenstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, 209, 227, 232.

<sup>4</sup> James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

<sup>6</sup> Georgeanne Rundblad, "Exhuming Women's Pre-market Duties in the Care of the Dead," *Gender & Society* 9, no. 2 (1995), 175.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Leroy Bowman, *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1959), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Habenstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*.

<sup>10</sup> Barlow Funeral Home, accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.Barlowfh.com>.

<sup>11</sup> Tom, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cook-Fields Funeral Home, accessed March, 19, 2015, <http://www.CookFieldsfuneralhome.com>.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey, Cook-Fields Funeral Home, interview, October 9, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Menlowe Funeral Home, accessed March 19, 2015,

<http://www.Menlowefuneralservice.com>.

<sup>16</sup> Mark, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Colley & Froebisch & Frank Funeral Home, accessed March 19, 2015,

<http://www.ColleyFroebischFrank.com>.

<sup>19</sup> Paul, Colley & Froebisch & Frank Funeral Home, interview, September 3, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Paul, Colley & Froebisch & Frank Funeral Home, interview, September 6, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Richardson and Jefferson Funeral Centers, accessed March 19, 2015,

<http://RichardsonJefferson.com/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ryan, Richardson and Jefferson Funeral Centers, interview, March 10, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald, Richardson and Jefferson Funeral Centers, interview, March 9, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORY

This chapter will lay the groundwork for the analysis of the data I collected in my fieldwork with funeral directors. The data collected will be discussed in the following three chapters, and analyzed with the theoretical framework I discuss in this chapter. Funeral directors, in their role as both actor and director in funerary custom, and through their liminality and social solidarity created with their communities, facilitate *communitas* for mourners. In this chapter I discuss theories of performance, liminality, *communitas*, and social solidarity, as well as how they inform my own work.

In order to address the performative nature of funerary ritual and the roles of the funeral director, we need to first discuss performance theory. Richard Schechner, one of the first scholars to argue that there is a connection between ritual and performance, argues that “performance is not merely a selection from data arranged and interpreted; it is behavior itself and carries in itself kernels of originality, making it the subject for further interpretation, the source of further study.”<sup>1</sup> Schechner argues basically that ritual is performed, and that performance transmits cultural knowledge just like ritual. This is the basis for performance theory.

Schechner then tells us that there are two main realms of performance theory: “(1) looking at human behavior—individual and social—as a genre of performance; (2) looking at performances—of theater, dance, and other ‘art forms’;—as a kind of personal or social interaction. These two realms, or spheres, can be metaphorically figured as interfacing at a double two-way mirror.”<sup>2</sup> Schechner sees an overlap, an interplay between what we usually confine to separate realms—ritual and dramatic performance. He points out that “anthropologists are trained observers [who also participate]. Theater people can help anthropologists identify what to look for in a training or performance situation; and anthropologists can help theater people see performances within the context of specific social systems.”<sup>3</sup> Performance theory, then, offers an interdisciplinary approach to the study of ritual.

Schechner argues that “there are points of contact between anthropology and theater.”<sup>4</sup> One of these is the transformation of being and/or consciousness. He writes: “Either permanently as in initiation rites or temporarily as in aesthetic theater and trance dancing, performers—and sometimes spectators too—are changed by the activity of performing.”<sup>5</sup> He tells us later that “transformation performances are clearly evidenced in initiation rites, whose very purpose is to transform people from one status or social identity to another. An initiation not only marks a change but is itself the means by which persons achieve their new selves; no performance, no change.”<sup>6</sup> How then are all the players involved in funerary ritual changed, if they are at all? In what ways does the performance of a funeral affect the funeral director, the mourners, and even the deceased?

Schechner also talks about focusing on all aspects of the performance, not just the performance itself, as most scholars tend to do. If we are to look at a ritual as performance, he believes it is essential to analyze all parts, particularly when dealing with behind-the-scenes people such as funeral directors. He refers to the “seven-part sequence of training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath.”<sup>7</sup> This raises the question of what it would look like to map the preparation for funeral work onto this sequence. It might look something like this: schooling; internships; preparing the family for what is going to happen during the funeral, as well as final plans for the body; prepping the body for the funeral; the funeral itself; disposal of the body, whether in burial or cremation. The aftermath might then include, for example, follow-up with family regarding the grieving process, dealing with death certificates and doctors, and insurance. The latter two may even be part of the cool-down process.

Although I understand Schechner's point here, and can connect his seven-part sequence of performance to funeral directing, I don't necessarily agree with his argument that all performance must be analyzed in this way. Indeed, I don't believe that all ritual performance requires training, workshops, or rehearsals. For example, mourners go through the ritual process, but no one requires training or rehearsals. One could make the argument that enculturation--the process by which we learn how to be functioning members of our society--is the training we receive to learn, among other things, how to properly mourn someone. However, this is an unconscious process, and I don't believe

Schechner is discussing training in this context as anything but a conscious process of learning how to perform.

Further, there are no workshops or rehearsals for us to practice how to mourn the loss of our loved ones. Even when death is expected, time is not set aside to even discuss the right ways to grieve, let alone practiced or rehearsed. So then I would argue that while many rituals may follow Schechner's seven-part sequence, especially those that are more formal in which certain performances are required for the ritual to be successful, some begin at warm-ups or even right at performance.

Schechner does point out that performances do not always put the same emphasis on each phase; for example, certain performances have little rehearsal because it is unnecessary. What about the funeral? He writes: "Traditional performances—the Mass, Purim spiels, Noh, and so on—usually demand training but very little rehearsal. It's obvious: If you play the same role over and over again...the idea of figuring out what to do beforehand is unnecessary."<sup>8</sup> So funeral directors, like priests, do not need to rehearse, but need to train, which they do through interning.

Schechner indicates that the aftermath process is perhaps the most difficult to analyze. He discusses what the audience doesn't see after the performance, and how the performers still have rituals to follow, although they are not public. I would argue that in the case of funeral ritual, the performance itself and its aftermath are the most important parts to focus on. It is through the performance of the funerary ritual and the facilitation of *communitas* that people

are able to return to their regular lives after a death. So it is the performance and aftermath I choose to focus on in this work. Another point of contact between theater and anthropology Schechner discusses is how performances are generated and evaluated. He asks, “How can a ‘good’ performance be distinguished from a ‘bad’ one?...Who has the ‘right’ to make evaluations: only people in a culture, only professionals who practice the art in question, only professional critics? Is there a difference between criticism and interpretation?”<sup>9</sup> Marvin Carlson looks at this point of contact from another angle: “All performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action.”<sup>10</sup> Ritual performances, like theatrical performances, are always evaluated and interpreted through the ideal. Funerary ritual seems to support this. It is common to ask someone after they’ve been to a funeral how it was. After a former co-worker’s funeral, people were angry. The funeral director clearly did not know her—his eulogy was generic and did not mention the woman very much at all. The mortician made her look like a frog. In another case, people were happy after my grandmother-in-law’s funeral because the priest who gave the eulogy clearly knew her. He told stories about her that made people laugh. It made a difference.

Victor Turner also sees the connection between ritual and performance.

He writes:

I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance*, *enactment*, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules ‘frame’ the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame...To perform is thus to bring something

about, to consummate something, or to 'carry out' a play, order, or project. But in the 'carrying out,' I hold, something new may be generated. The performance transforms itself.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, ritual is potentially fluid—there are rules that create a framework within which to implement ritual behavior, but because it is essentially a performance, ritual behavior has the potential to be a different experience every time. How does this apply to the ritual as performed by a funeral director? How detailed or rigid are their rules and frameworks of a funeral performance, or in terms of processing the deceased and working with the living in funeral planning? With the push toward green and do-it-yourself funerals, how do funeral directors adjust to new rubrics of mourning?

One area in which the connection between ritual and performance can be seen most clearly is in social dramas. Turner defines social drama as “an objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type.”<sup>12</sup> He uses this term to reflect the performative aspects of ritual behavior. When a situation or event is dealt with ritually, it follows the same steps enacted in a dramatic performance. According to Turner, social drama has four stages: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or separation. The first stage is wherein the offending party breaks a social rule or changes a relationship in some way. The crisis is the stage in which people take sides in the breach. Redress can include anything from personal advice and types of informal arbitration to more formal types, such as legal action. Finally, the person or group in breach of social norms is either reintegrated back into the

group at large, or a permanent separation is acknowledged.<sup>13</sup> Can this apply to death and the funeral process?

Turner describes death rites as a “life-crisis ceremony,” one that “indicate[s] a major, if not altogether unexpected breach in the orderly, customary running of group life, after which many relationships among its members must change drastically, involving much potential and even actual conflict and competition.”<sup>14</sup> He writes elsewhere that “every social drama alters, in however miniscule a fashion, the structure...of the relevant social field. For example, oppositions may have become alliances...Closeness may have become distance...Formerly integral parts may have segmented, formerly independent parts may have fused.”<sup>15</sup> It would then follow that death does indeed constitute a social drama. Death itself is a breach of social norms, in the sense that the death of a loved one alters social relationships permanently. In some cases, even social terminology changes. For example, a woman who loses a husband is no longer a wife, but a widow. A child losing both parents becomes an orphan, and so on. Relationships stop; they freeze in time; they no longer grow and evolve as at least one person in the relationship will no longer grow or evolve.

Death also includes the crisis stage in a social drama. It affects people very differently. When my grandfather died, most of us were happy for him because he was no longer suffering—he was proud man who hated the fact that his weakened body made it impossible for him to continue to help around the house, or work, or even travel. My uncle, however, did not share our relief. I remember telling him that Grandpa didn’t want any of us to mourn, but rather to

celebrate his life and his release. He responded that wasn't the case with him. He believed that, due to the nature of their relationship while my grandfather was still alive, that he would want my uncle in particular to be sad, and mourn. I also remember being angry at the doctor who was responsible for the failure of my grandfather's kidneys, and I wanted my grandmother to sue. Not everyone agreed with me.

Survivors can also be involved in crises. In other words, the death of a third party can affect the relationships between two people. In the case of my cousin's suicide, I know many people were sad for their own loss, but that many others of us were angry at Greg for the aftermath of his death. I think we all had a little bit of both feelings, but one outweighed the other, one way or the other. Since his death, Greg's wife has pulled away from most of his family, and she and my aunt don't speak at all. The suicide affected each of them so differently that their relationship with each other was destroyed. Neither could understand in any way the other's response.

The third stage is a little trickier regarding death and funerary ritual. In his chapter in *By Means of Performance*, Turner tells us that social dramas contain "some means of *public reflexivity* in their redressive processes...groups take stock of their own current situation: the nature and strength of their social ties, the power of their symbols, the effectiveness of their legal and moral controls, the sacredness and soundness of their religious traditions, and so forth."<sup>16</sup> How do we go about arbitrating death? The deceased has no way of making up for the social breach. Perhaps the funeral itself—the most obviously ritualized act

regarding death—is the redressive process. It is through the funeral that we take stock of our current situation—we reflect on our relationship with the deceased; we think about our remaining relationships with fellow survivors. We evaluate the very process of the funeral, and whether or not this process, the symbols utilized, or our funeral traditions are still useful or helpful.

Turner argues that “a liminal space, religious or legal, is often created, in which is presented a distanced replication and then critique of the events leading up to and composing phase (2), the ‘crisis.’”<sup>17</sup> This is particularly applicable to the US funeral, in which we embalm the deceased person and make them up to replicate themselves as they looked in life. The funeral, being the final rite of passage for the deceased, allows mourners to create the liminal space in which to replicate the deceased as alive, analyze the person’s death and life leading up to the death, and ponder how relationships and indeed life itself will change following the funeral.

Finally we reach the fourth stage, in which we acknowledge a permanent separation, as the deceased cannot be reintegrated back into society. Relationships of the survivors also follow the path of the social drama, reflected for example in the relationship between my aunt and her daughter-in-law. The death of my cousin created a breach that no amount of arbitration could repair, although this example is meant to be illustrative, rather than representative. A death and subsequent funeral can just as often have the opposite effect, an arbitration in and of itself, bringing formerly estranged friends or relatives back

together. It is this process of social drama that connects theories of performance to those of liminality, which I will now discuss.

The funeral director, as an actor and director in the performance of a funeral, is also perpetually liminal. He works within the liminal phase of our last rite of passage. He is neither mourner nor deceased. As one who works with and around death, he is an outsider in a culture where death is so feared that its existence is often denied.

Death is what Turner refers to as a “life-crisis.” And like all life-crises, we have rituals surrounding the death of a loved one that help us to symbolically make sense of what we’re going through. Turner writes: “Many of those rites that we call ‘life-crisis ceremonies,’ particularly those of puberty, marriage, and death, themselves indicate a major, if not altogether unexpected breach in the orderly, customary running of group life.”<sup>18</sup> Death, in mainstream, modern US American culture, is the ultimate unexpected breach in the orderly. It is something that we have compartmentalized, marginalized, and tried to stave off as long as possible, and when we fail, this thing that we try to deny becomes our focus. Further, feelings evoked in grief remind us of how dependent we are upon those in our lives, which is counter to the independent ideal. We have varying rituals for this final rite of passage, but even then we don’t want to deal with death completely, so we have the funeral director do the dirty stuff, the polluting stuff, break the ultimate taboo of handling the dead.

Like life-crises, rites of passage, according to Turner, are marked by phases. In this instance, “separation, margin..., and reaggregation.”<sup>19</sup> The first

phase “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both.”<sup>20</sup> So in this first phase, we are ritually separated from who we were. When someone dies, both the deceased and the mourners become detached from society at large. Relationships and roles are irrevocably changed from what they were before. Turner writes: “When a person dies, all these ties are snapped, as it were, and the more important the person the greater the number and range of ties there are to be broken. Now a new pattern of social relationships must be established.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere he tells us that: “Funerary ritual constitutes a passage from one set of ordered relations to another. During the interim period the old order has not yet been obliterated and the new order has not yet come into being...Many events of a typical funerary ritual are concerned with the careful disengagement of past from present, and with systematic reordering of social relations.”<sup>22</sup> The deceased is no longer actively a parent, or a sibling, or an employee, or any number of other roles one may have during life. Survivors are separated from previous roles, relationships and other social ties they had with the deceased. Their relationships with others are also potentially changed. Some people get closer, while others more distant; someone may become family head, or take over a company. Connections with others not mourning the deceased may also change. Survivors are also temporarily removed from their other roles—people take time off work or school; they separate themselves from regular, day-to-day

life to plan the funeral or memorial service, or just to go to the funeral, or to take some time to grieve.

Life-crisis rituals like those that surround death end with a return to the social structure, or to roles that, although different than what they were before the death, still make up part of the cultural fabric. Turner writes: “In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated.”<sup>23</sup> The ritual is complete, each participant coming through the ritual to fulfill their new role in society. The deceased is buried, or cremated, or put into a memorial reef, or any number of other possible means of respectful disposal. He or she is officially gone. The mourners return to their jobs, school, and the rest of their lives, altered, but they are expected to no longer be in social limbo.

There are different ways to mark this return. Van Gennep discusses “the meals shared after funerals and at commemoration celebrations. Their purpose is to reunite all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined.”<sup>24</sup> I have never attended a funeral in which the director joins the family after the funeral, and in my fieldwork we never did this either. Mourners and the deceased get to move out of their liminal phase, but we leave the funeral director behind. This is key to their ability to facilitate *communitas* amongst mourners—without maintaining their liminality in all aspects of their work, they would lose the ability to lead us across the border we have set up between the realm of the living and that of the dead.

It is this time between separation and reaggregation, the liminal period, which we are concerned with here. Turner discusses the liminal phase as a space in which to have experiences outside of and separate from ordinary life. It can be thought of as a space in which social ambiguity, role reversals, and sacred and symbolic concepts come to the fore. It is a space in between socially structured roles and action. Liminality is a state of flux, a time of transition, a place in the margins.<sup>25</sup>

Turner tells us that this liminal period is a time whereby “the state of the ritual subject...becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state.”<sup>26</sup> After a person dies, for example, he or she is in an in-between state, no longer alive, but not buried and gone—the funeral is our last rite of passage together.

As mourners we are also liminal. Van Gennep writes: “[Mourning] is a transitional period for the survivors...In some cases, the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased, and the termination of the first sometimes coincides with the termination of the second—that is, with the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead.”<sup>27</sup> We go through this final rite of passage as proxies for the deceased. As mourners, we are all plunged into the margins with the dead. We are separated from society at large because of our grief. We are the ones who experience *communitas* through the shared experience of loss. We are the ones who are

reaggregated back into society after the funeral, and go on with our lives, changed forever because of that loss.

Van Gennep writes: “So great is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds that a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage.”<sup>28</sup> Nowhere in US culture is this more true than with death, although the lines between what is profane and what is sacred are less defined. Hating and fearing death as we do, life is revered, and we often see the loss of life as a bad thing for the deceased, when, regardless of whether or not we believe in life after death, we can agree the dead no longer care one way or the other. Although a dead body is often considered profane, we still find the need to be respectful—it is considered bad taste to say negative things about the dead, or we feel the need to bury the person in consecrated ground, even when we’re not particularly religious. Malinowski discusses the paradoxical nature of our emotions and behavior when dealing with death when he writes: “The dominant elements, love of the dead and loathing of the corpse, passionate attachment to the personality still lingering about the body and a shattering fear of the gruesome thing that has been left over, these two elements seem to mingle and play into each other...the nearest relatives...always show some horror and fear mingled with pious love.”<sup>29</sup> The funeral director, then, as a perpetually liminal figure, helps navigate us through this paradoxical liminal period we enter into when we are faced with death, taking control of the profane, helping us to keep sacred what we need to be sacred, allowing us to show our love for the deceased without having to handle the dead body.

Liminality is not simply just a state of flux, though. Those who are liminal are also considered marginal, outsiders. Turner discusses this: “As well as the betwixt-and-between state of liminality there is the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart.”<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere he says that people considered liminal “all have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs.”<sup>31</sup> We all experience a bit of this outsiderhood while grieving—often people don’t know how to relate to those who are experiencing grief, even if they themselves have also felt it. The deceased is also now an outsider—in most cultures a dead body is seen as unclean or defiling, even among those who care for their own dead, unlike mainstream culture in the US.

But what of the funeral director? What of the person who makes his living working liminally? Is it the funeral director who is the true outsider? He physically handles dead bodies, which are seen as polluting. He is not a mourner, although very involved in the funeral process. And since this is a career, there is no process of reaggregation back into society—funeral directors are part of our society as liminal figures.

In the final section of this chapter, I’d like to address ideas about *communitas* and social solidarity, and how this can be seen in funeral work. Turner describes *communitas* as “most evident in ‘liminality,’ a

concept...refer[ring] to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life.”<sup>32</sup> He describes it as emerging from the liminal aspect of ritual process, as unmediated relationships between individuals, outside of social structure. He identifies three types: spontaneous, ideological, and normative. Spontaneous *communitas* is a “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities, a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction.”<sup>33</sup> He adds that “individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event.”<sup>34</sup> Turner’s idea of spontaneous *communitas* seems to reflect the connection that happens between mourners at a funeral. Even when the levels of grief or feelings of loss are not the same, most who have had a close relative or friend die are able to experience this kind of link with other mourners. However, this is not always the case.

Often, a death can create rifts between survivors, particularly if they disagree on how to give a funeral, or how to properly mourn. As I am writing this, my grandmother is in Florida with my uncle, and she is dying. She has been suffering dementia for the last several years. I’m not sure if my mother’s relationship with her brother will survive this impending death. They fought over where my grandmother should live once she began showing signs of dementia. They fought over her care while she was living at my uncle’s house. And now they are fighting because they can’t agree on how they should be grieving. My uncle wants my mother to be more upset. He calls her, crying. He keeps taking photos of this shell that used to be my grandmother and sending them to my

mother. She doesn't want them. She says she lost her mother years ago. She wants this all to be over. And neither she nor my uncle can comprehend how the other is grieving.

Turner writes that *communitas* is easily achieved only if it has happened on other occasions, but if achieved, it can follow those connected in such a way out of the time and space of the ritual performance into regular life. In this way it works to ease people back into the social structure, particularly if social conflict or an upheaval in relationships has occurred, as is often the case with the loss of a loved one.<sup>35</sup> Turner also tells us that “one might also postulate that the coherence of a completed social drama is itself a function of *communitas*. An incomplete or irresolvable drama would then manifest the absence of *communitas*.”<sup>36</sup> Death can be seen as the breach in a social drama. If this breach is resolved smoothly, or to everyone’s approval, *communitas* is potentially achieved. If not, relationships already strained can end entirely. Will my mother and her brother ever connect on the death of their mother in this visceral, imperative way? I guess it remains to be seen.

In mainstream, modern US culture, most life-crisis rituals happen by choice—we decide whether or not to have children, get married, graduate college—but death is something we try to avoid at all costs. We created an entire career dedicated to handling the dead so we don’t have to. In the Midwest, specifically among white Christian groups, it also seems that if mourning is to be done publicly, then it must be done quietly and tastefully. So then in this type of social breach, which is so hated and feared, how does

communitas emerge from a mainstream American funeral? Do we suffer in silence, alone? Or are we bonded together by the knowledge that we are all suffering silently and alone? Does the utilization of the funeral director and funeral home preclude the social ties that Turner mentions during his discussions of communitas?

I would argue that instead, part of the work that a funeral director does includes facilitating communitas among mourners. Funeral directors all insist that they work with the living, not the dead—all of their labor, including handling the dead, is done to allow survivors to mourn, connect and reconnect with each other without having to worry about the work involved. And because the funeral director is liminal, on the margins and able to fade into the background, he is able to facilitate communitas among mourners. They also often feel a sense of social solidarity with him, although not communitas. This is an important distinction. As Turner points out, “communitas is in this respect strikingly different from Durkheimian ‘solidarity,’ the force of which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast.”<sup>37</sup> Being liminal as we go through this rite of passage, we often feel an in-group relationship with the already liminal funeral director. Further, community involvement is seen as an essential part of their work (as I will discuss in Chapter 5), so the creation or bolstering of those in-group feelings is already going on before we ever call on them for funeral work.

Emile Durkheim defines mourning rituals, examples of what he calls “piacular rites,” or those rites which require or are equivalent to atonement, as consisting of both negative and positive rites—taboos and performative acts.<sup>38</sup>

Positive rites exist, for Durkheim, to create and maintain social solidarity, which is primarily the result of a force arising from participation in a shared system of beliefs and values, which molds and controls individual behavior. In this functionalist approach, mourning does not represent feelings, but is instead the rituals performed to sustain social connections and one's role in society. Specific mourners perform specific acts, based on relation to the deceased. These roles are usually divided by gender and lineal relation, such as maternal male kin, wives, sons, or daughters. Mourning ritual acts are performed not out of any real feeling of loss, but because these acts serve to reify social connections and roles.

Durkheim argues further that once mourning is performed to completion, it is over. He writes that mourning is not a spontaneous emotionally-based reaction to a death, but rather that it is a demonstration that the loss has actually had an effect. Any way we might physically demonstrate grief--whether through crying, wailing, self-harm, or other ways--merely fulfills a social obligation.<sup>39</sup> Durkheim does not see mourning and the rituals performed surrounding the death of a family or community member in relation to emotions expressed, but as means to cement social ties.

Durkheim also argues that mourning rituals are obligatory, both from societal and the individual's point of view. He writes, "For a family to tolerate that one of its members should die without being mourned would give witness thereby that it lacks moral unity and cohesiveness."<sup>40</sup> A society, according to Durkheim, functions the same way—a society needs to demonstrate that the individual

plays an important role in social cohesion, in order for the individual to work toward that same social cohesion.

He argues further that “When society is going through events that sadden, distress, or anger it, it...demands crying, lamenting, and wounding oneself and others as a matter of duty...because those collective demonstrations...restore to the group the energy that the events threatened to take away.”<sup>41</sup> Although Durkheim was here referring to larger-scale events, such as destructive weather or lost battles, the mourning rituals acted out are similar to those performed for the death of an individual, and the desired end of social cohesion is the same. Durkheim addresses this in terms of the individual as well: “For his part, when the individual feels firmly attached to the society to which he belongs, he feels morally bound to share in its grief and its joy. To abandon it would be to break the ties that bind him to the collectivity.”<sup>42</sup> Both society and the individual are responsible for requiring and performing ritual acts that maintain social solidarity.

Durkheim concludes his discussion of mourning ritual and social unity by addressing the ideal that a society works toward by requiring specific ritual behavior. He writes: “A society can neither create nor recreate itself without creating some kind of ideal by the same stroke.”<sup>43</sup> If a society is self-aware, in order to maintain that self-awareness it creates an ideal society to aspire to. Durkheim also argues that “a society is not constituted simply by the mass of individuals who comprise it, the ground they occupy, the things they use, or the movements they make, but above all by the idea it has of itself.”<sup>44</sup> Mourning

rituals then, it can be argued, are meant to be followed because they maintain social solidarity which is an ideal.

I mentioned in my Introduction that I would not be taking a functionalist approach to the study of funeral directors and their roles in funerary ritual, and that still holds. I don't agree with everything Durkheim argues. First, I don't believe that mourning rituals are performed solely to maintain social ties; rather that is one result of performing them, rather than the reason. It makes sense to provide a funeral for a deceased person. After all, we want to know that we matter. Funerals show that the deceased mattered, and we want funerals for ourselves for the same reason. So I can see that social cohesion can be maintained by demonstrating that individuals are important, and that their absence has a collective effect. However, I have lost enough people to know that those feelings are very real--anger, sorrow, guilt, and even happiness.

Further, I know that the mourning process is hardly ever over once the rituals are completed. Most recently, at my aunt's funeral, my cousin finally took her wedding ring back from her friend, who had been holding it for her. Apparently she had been worried she would throw it away or destroy it in a fit of rage following her husband's suicide. His funeral was 13 years ago, yet it was only a month ago that she was able to move forward from her grief. It was not over once the funeral concluded. The biggest issue here is that Durkheim is separating the feelings that I'm sure he experienced in his own life at some point from the rituals. He sees the actions performed as being the only (or at least most important) aspect of the funeral process, and as having one sole function--

that is, the maintenance of social structure. Yet I would argue that the rituals can be a vehicle through which we can express those feelings. This is particularly necessary in the US, where those feelings remind us that we are dependent on others, which is counter to our cultural ideal of individuality.

Further, a functionalist approach also separates the practitioners from the practice, which is a major flaw in functionalist thought. Although an outsider, objective perspective on ritual can access history, fluctuations in belief, and other contextual information about the ritual that practitioners are unaware of, the history, rules, etc. as told by practitioners are more valuable to them themselves and their own understanding of why they do what they do. And it is this understanding of their own rituals that allow us get a deeper, fuller sense of who they are.

In any case, Durkheim's theory of social solidarity is still very relevant to this discussion, as it raises some specific questions in regards to mourning and funerary ritual in the US. How do the modern American funeral and the variety of rituals and roles performed by all actors involved—deceased, mourners, and funeral directors—create and recreate social solidarity? Reality is that people do not always mourn according to custom, or even at all. Western societies and particularly the US focus much more on the individual than the larger society—do our mourning rituals reflect this focus, or do they still serve to maintain social solidarity, in spite of or because of this focus? More importantly, how does the funeral director work to create social solidarity, especially since when we are not in grief, he is marginalized, an outsider? Even when we are grieving, he is not,

so if *communitas* is achieved, he is still not a part of that, but we still allow him into our group while we are liminal as well. The funeral director's job is to facilitate this *communitas*, but from an extraliminal place.

In this chapter, I have discussed theories of performance, liminality, social solidarity, and *communitas*. I have addressed how funeral ritual can be examined through its performative aspects. I looked at the various ways in which the deceased, mourners, and funeral directors are liminal, in relation to their roles in these rituals. I also talked about *communitas* and social solidarity, and how these connections are made during the funeral and grieving process. In the next three chapters, I discuss the data I collected during my fieldwork.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 51.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 296.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>4</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 127.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Carlson, "What is performance?", 71.
- <sup>11</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 79.
- <sup>12</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 33.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34-35.
- <sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?" In *By Means of Performance: Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual*, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 92.

- <sup>16</sup> Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?", 9.
- <sup>17</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 34.
- <sup>18</sup> Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, ed. Edith L. B. Turner, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 294.
- <sup>19</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 231-232.
- <sup>20</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94.
- <sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 41.
- <sup>23</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.
- <sup>24</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, intr. Solon T. Kimball (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 164-165.
- <sup>25</sup> Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*, 294-295.
- <sup>26</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 232.
- <sup>27</sup> Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 147.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1.
- <sup>29</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion: and Other Essays*, intr. Robert Redfield, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Incorporated, 1992), 48.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 232-233.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 131-132.

<sup>38</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 392-393.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-416.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

### CHAPTER 3: PERFORMANCE THEORY DATA

In doing my background reading for this ethnographic project, I came across a lot of references to performance theory. As discussed in the Introduction, performance theory uses language centered around ideas of performance to discuss ritual and social drama. Mortuary ritual, then, is broken down as a social drama, which Victor Turner defines as “units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations.”<sup>1</sup> As social drama, death, mourning, and funerary ritual can be critiqued in terms of the performed actions associated with them. Turner writes, “I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance*, as *enactment*, and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules frame the ritual process, and the ritual process transcends its frame.”<sup>2</sup> Turner is arguing that ritual is essentially performance because it is never fully circumscribed by its rules. People follow the idea, but always make the ritual their own through their performance of it. It is this assertion that informs my own

analysis of the ritual data that I collected—data that I analyze through its performances.

Turner addresses the four main phases of a social drama: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. In these terms, the death is the breach of social relations. The crisis involves the time between learning of the death and the performance of the funeral ritual, and can be different for each person affected—are they next of kin? Will they be planning the funeral, or are they merely expected to attend? The crisis can be even deeper—if there is bad blood between the deceased and someone, in what capacity does that person show up, if at all? The redressive action would be the funeral itself, held for a symbolic act of processing the loss. Reintegration can also be complex—Turner discusses it in terms of whether or not the offending party would be reintegrated back into the community or if a small group would secede from the primary one. In dying, the offending party can never be reintegrated back, but the funeral can offer a chance to formally accept the death as a permanent loss.

The mourners themselves also perpetrate a breach of social contract—we are touched by the death of our loved ones, and in our culture, that touch is feared contagious. We don't know how to act around them, what to say, how to help, or if we even should. The funeral functions for those outside the affected ring as a redressive action that allows us to return to regular society as back to normal. We are compartmentalizing our grief within the confines of the funeral process, and once it is over, we are expected to reintegrate back into our daily lives having moved on from our loss.

Initially, I was skeptical about applying performance theory to funerary ritual, seeing it as a fad theory, something that likely did not apply to funerals and those in the funeral industry. My opinion changed on my first day of fieldwork. I was able to witness a funeral that day. Everything was set up already when I got there; typically this is done the night before at this particular funeral home. When the funeral was over, I was asked to stay behind, because they were not sure if the family would be comfortable with me attending. The following passage is from my notes that day:

Afterwards, Susan just cleaned up. I asked if I could help. I didn't do much. I get the sense she always stays here for this part, to clean up. I never liked the performance theory thing, but I should look into that. She was breaking down a set. She was folding up the chairs, putting the CDs away, organizing items left behind by the family for when they return. It reminded me of watching my theater crew friends after a play they worked.<sup>3</sup>

From that point on, I saw the performance in every aspect of the funerary ritual, in both mourners and funeral directors alike.

This chapter describes the performative data I collected. Recall that I am using the term "performance" in a broad sense here, referring to our actions while interacting with others, including the way we present ourselves physically. I also use it to refer to any ritual involved in the funeral process, including secular, job-performance based ritual behavior.

One final note—I do not assess performances within a functionalist framework. Although I do discuss all funeral-related behavior (whether within the occupation of funeral directing or as a bereaved person) as "performance" within the context of this work, I don't see these performances functioning solely to

maintain social cohesion. Rather, I see them as universal experiences filtered through a particular cultural context. Grief expressed within a largely white, Midwestern world view; job execution within a Western, specifically American conception of processing death. And then there is me, as audience to it all, analyzing what I see from my own perspective, colored by my own experiences.

I have performed several roles at quite a few funerals in my own life, and witnessed others' performances. Following a funeral I attended through Jefferson & Richardson, I made the following notes in my car, after I left for the day: "Well, I made it to my car before I cried. I keep thinking about Greg's funeral. Sandy with those photos, me singing "Amazing Grace," the flag ceremony. It's amazing to me that 6 years later I still cry."<sup>4</sup> In the spring of 2003, my cousin Greg committed suicide. Most funerals since then remind me of his, even though I had been to quite a few before his. I included this excerpt because it is the performances I remember the most. The performance of my cousin-in-law as the grieving widow, walking around with a couple of photos of Greg in happier times, almost hysterically laughing, trying to get everyone to look and remember him as he was. My own performance as role of grieving cousin, and having to set that role aside in order to sing "Amazing Grace" at my aunt's request. And the most powerful part of the entire ceremony—the flag folding the military does at funerals. I remember that soldier getting down on one knee and asking Greg's oldest son to take the flag in honor of his father's service. Thirteen years later, and that is still difficult to write about.

My first funeral, that of my paternal grandfather, included a sort of “changing of the guards” from his Knights of Columbus pals. Two at a time stood flanking his casket, each with his Knights of Columbus sword, although I can’t remember if they were in hand, or in a scabbard hanging from each man’s belt. I remember thinking my Grandpa must have been an important man, to warrant such protection. As I got older and family members realized I could sing, I began my own performances, singing at five different funerals, beginning with my Uncle Tom’s, and including my maternal grandfather, two cousins, and singing the entire Mass for my husband’s maternal grandmother.

But there were other aspects to these performances, often done unconsciously, things we all do in preparation for and while at funerals without thinking too deeply about them—Goffman’s “personal front” aspect of our daily performances as social creatures.<sup>5</sup> The American funeral is a staged reality—it involves embalming and putting makeup on the deceased to create a living tableau; costuming of the deceased, the mourners, and the funeral directors; even mourning itself and the roles we are cast in when someone we know dies are all aspects of this performance. The makeup on my cousin’s face and head to hide the bullet wound of a self-inflicted gunshot. My uncle and later my cousin each in their favorite sports teams’ sweatshirts, so we could remember them as they really were. Wearing black, and listening to people commenting on the occasional jeans and cowboy boots that crop up at my working class family’s funerals. My cousins walking my aunt around at her husband’s funeral, flanking her like the Knights of Columbus did the casket at her father’s, holding her up,

protecting her from that death the only way they could. And later, at one of those cousin's own funerals, I remember weeping, wracked with guilt, sorrow, and anger at his suicide, and my mother asking me if I was ok, in hindsight presumably because I was transgressing my expected performance of quiet crying, which is the way most Caucasian Christian American funerals transpire. I can recall good homilies and eulogies, and bad ones. And in my fieldwork, I was able not only to witness performances like these, but also those of funeral industry workers, both behind the scenes and up front at funerals.

I began my data collecting with interviews, and was able to talk with several funeral directors from different homes throughout Indiana. Performative aspects of funerals and funeral directing cropped up in some of these interviews, such as the overall feel of the funeral: "I believe in giving the person a funeral they would want. I feel as though it's about them. I like to suggest anything that will help celebrate the person, make it a big party, rather than making it a sad affair, or cookie cutter."<sup>6</sup> "I see myself as keeper of the brand,' the overseer of the same feel everywhere. I try to make sure everyone has the same attitude—'Does that feel how they want it to feel?'"<sup>7</sup>

Staging is also a part of the preparation for a funeral. Where the body will be laid out, where the chairs are set up, where the flowers go, and so on. Staging occurs for wakes and viewings, as well as at the funeral itself, whether this is at the funeral home or a church. I attended a funeral at Cook Fields in October of 2009, and jotted down the following: "Staging, quietly and discreetly.

[Guest] Book, [prayer] cards to families, flowers. They have tables instead of flower stands. And after, again, it's like they're striking a set."<sup>8</sup>

The funerals themselves are, of course, the public performance. I have been to quite a few as part of the audience, in the role of mourner, occasionally performing as a singer, but until my fieldwork, I had never even considered the roles of the funeral directors during the funeral. I certainly had fleeting thoughts about the prep work, and I knew my parents and other relatives had been present at consultations. But, and I think this is likely due to the fact that I have mostly attended Catholic funerals which are run by the priest, it never occurred to me that funeral directors have roles to fulfill during the funeral itself. I attended 11 funerals during the course of my fieldwork, six through my contacts, and five personal losses, and at all of these, the funeral directors took on the function of stage managing, making sure everything in the background was taken care of, leaving the final acts of the deceased and mourners to those performers.

The first funeral I attended at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, I had gotten there about an hour before the mourners were supposed to show up. Bob and Paul, the two funeral directors there, told me a little bit about the family, showed me the area where the viewing and the funeral would take place. The casket was set up in the front of the room, with a podium stage right, and a poster board filled with photographs of the deceased stage left. Several rows of chairs were set up facing the casket and the podium, with enough room in between, I later realized, to allow for people to file past the casket in saying their final good-byes. From my notes later that afternoon:

The family started showing up, so I stood with Bob and Paul, and just watched everything while they greeted people. The family seemed very much like some of mine—wearing jeans, or just any dark clothing, rather than suits or dresses. I could tell who her kids were—they were the crying ones, or at least on the verge. The funeral directors move all the cars to form a line. I always assumed the mourners did that. People began loading in. They had three photo boards, plus a bajillion others in frames—they even had a digital one. One daughter had a bar of soap that she had placed on the mantle above the casket, along with some more pictures. Was there a certain smell involved here? Is that why she did that? Maybe reminds her of her mother? It's very ancient Egyptian. I wonder if her casket has one of those memory safe drawers for the family to put stuff in—seems like they'd use it. Paul told me two things that really frustrate him are people not dressing up, and people bringing too many pictures. I felt very in the way, obvious, intrusive, obtrusive. Then Paul told me, now we step out, let them do their thing, we man the doors. As we were standing there, Paul and Susan (Bob's wife) bantered about Paul as an employee...We chatted while the funeral was going on...After the service, people filed by the casket (which is still very different for me) and out the door. Afterwards, Paul and Bob took the body out back, to load the car I assume. I'm waiting now for Paul to get back. I was not allowed to go to the gravesite...Paul said they normally set up flowers at the gravesite, and direct people where to go. I've never paid attention—do grave diggers linger? To fill it up after the ceremony?<sup>9</sup>

This was the first funeral I attended during fieldwork, and I saw the performative aspects right away. Dark clothing to present as mourning, active weeping of the children of the deceased, again to present as mourning; the staging of the funeral space to focus on life rather than death (photos, embalmed and made-up body), the symmetrical placement of flowers, and even the secular job rituals that Paul, Bob, and Susan were going through for the umpteenth time.

These job rituals were present in another funeral I attended with CFF several months later. From my notes at the grave site:

The minister, Bob, and Paul all joked around before things got going, and after, like giving each other a hard time regarding Purdue versus IU, for example. Do they do this to keep sane? This reminds me of the previous time with them, when I realized that once the body is loaded into the car, it

becomes about the mourners. The funeral directors hand their role as caretaker of the dead over to the minister, and they become more fully involved in their role as facilitator of the living through their grief.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout my fieldwork experiences, the behavior of the funeral directors on the day of a funeral was largely the same—staging the area for the visitation, light and often joking conversation in the background, directing people where to go. They were doing the same things, in the same manner, each time, to realize the same desired effect—to allow people to focus on mourning and celebrating their deceased loved one. It is indeed this effect that creates the necessary environment for the mourners to achieve *communitas*.

I witnessed the same or similar performances, personal fronts, and rituals throughout my fieldwork experience. From a funeral with Jefferson and

Richardson:

I'm at a funeral today. They all shoot the bull beforehand. They asked me about school, etc., in front of the family—that made me a little nervous because I was afraid the family would get upset that I was there, like I'm some morbid, death-obsessed person, or something. A phrase that keeps popping up from all of the funeral directors I've been working with is "hurry up and wait." Ronald mentioned this, and Part-timer Bobby Lee (this is how they referred to him; I think he works at the North branch as well) did as well, and the same from Paul at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch. This really is like a stage production. They set everything up where it needs to go (props and set), make sure that everyone is where they're supposed to be and when (stage managing), and when a funeral is at the home, they take care of music as well. They dress and makeup the bodies (costuming), and when the mourners start showing up, they tell them where to go (usher). After everything is over, and people are out at the grave site, they strike the set, taking everything down, putting things away.<sup>11</sup>

A third funeral, at Cook Fields, again with similar notes:

Geoffrey, Gary, Wesley, funeral directors. A lot of the same here—they BS the whole time, during the funeral. This is the "hurry up and wait"

part—they have to hurry all the behind the scenes stuff, to make sure the deceased is ready on time for the funeral, but once the funeral begins, they don't have much to do until after. When you're so focused on your own grief, you either figure everyone else is, or you don't think about it at all. Afterwards, took the body out back, to load the car I assume. Then it becomes about the family.<sup>12</sup>

In each of these cases, the funeral directors all do basically the same thing once the funeral is in gear. They fade into the background, do things like lining up the cars, set up flowers at the gravesites, and move the body from funeral home to cemetery—all essential acts to US funerary ritual—and like stage managers, fulfill their roles predominantly behind the scenes, and before and after the main act.

One of the roles the funeral director has to fulfill involves the consultation, which happens occasionally in a pre-need situation, in which a person designs and pays for his or her own funeral ahead of time; more often than not, the consultation happens following the death of a relative or friend. I wondered about the performance of the funeral director in the consultation—how differently do they behave when they are “on,” versus when they have no families in the home at the moment. I was able to sit in on several, one of which was the follow-up to a pre-need situation, although most were with grieving family members.

The most memorable of all the consultations at which I was present was one following the death of a newborn. The parents were a very young couple, maybe 18 or 19 years old. Apparently the baby had died within seven hours of being born. I observed Donald, the funeral director working with this particular family, noting how he spoke, how he utilized body language, and what words or

phrases he chose to use. He was very soft spoken the entire time, which was very different from his usual gregarious nature while in the office. He made sure to look each of them in the eyes, even though I could tell that was difficult for the parents. The girl's mother was there as well, and Donald included her in the conversation by also making sure to look into her eyes when he was speaking with her. He also consistently reminded them that everything was their choice, making sure to give them what they really wanted. They seemed so lost, so he did offer suggestions, but anytime he did that, he reiterated that the choice was theirs to make. While telling them about how the ceremony would go, Donald mentioned to them that the officiant had been through quite a lot herself, and that she would do an excellent job for them because of her own experiences.

At one point, they were discussing whether or not to have an open casket. Donald needed to check on the condition of the body to proceed on that particular conversation, so he brought me down to the embalming room with him. This was a particularly difficult moment for me, but Donald continued to maintain the manner in which he was presenting himself to the family. As gentle as he was with the couple, he was even gentler with the baby, as though he were handling a living infant. He carefully put moisturizing lotion on the baby's face, but in the end assessed that an open casket would not be an option, as the baby had not been embalmed. Later, someone told me that when Donald, who is a large man, was so gently cradling this tiny baby in his arms while bringing him down to the embalming room, everyone who witnessed this cried.<sup>13</sup>

For Donald, his role as funeral director involves performing as reserved and empathetic. This is not done solely for the bereaved as audience, as he behaves the same way in any specific job related to a particular death. In the role of coworker, on the other hand, Donald is outgoing and jovial. He joked with people, had normal, every-day work conversations with people, and even teased me about my tattoos. It is in these differences that I see the significance for Donald of his role as funeral director. He recognizes what people need from him in that role, and he works to provide it.

At another consultation, this time for a 96 year old man who had died, I noticed some differences in the way my two contacts at Menlowe acted when they discussed the funeral arrangements. The following is from some notes I wrote at lunch one day after sitting in on this particular consultation:

Mark's manner with families is different than Donald's. When I was in with Donald for the meeting with the baby's parents, Donald was very soft-spoken, and seemed to be trying to comfort the couple, or show empathy. Mark's manner is not so different from his regular persona. Donald is usually pretty gregarious. Mark's voice doesn't change, like Donald's, although this was a different situation—it was a 96 year old, not a baby. Mark is very professional, speaking in present tense. It's not that Donald isn't professional. It's almost as if they behave the way they think the family needs them to behave. In the case of the death of a baby, Donald acted in such a way as to show that he was feeling the shock and sorrow as well; whereas in the case of the death of an older person, where the family isn't in shock, and are less sad because it was expected, Mark acted polite, courteous, and attentive, but he did not seem to be trying to demonstrate emotional involvement, like Donald did with the teenagers.<sup>14</sup>

Much like Donald, Mark seems to adjust his performance in his role as funeral director to fit the apparent needs of the family with whom he is working.

I am not alone in seeing the performative aspects of funeral work. At one point, two of my contacts even referred to their work and consumer beliefs in terms of performance. I was having an informant chat with Mark and Donald about the industry itself. Mark mentioned to me that he sometimes feels uncomfortable in a room with other funeral directors, and that he doesn't like flowery language in obituaries. He also mentioned the emotional stress of performing his role as a funeral director when dealing with families. He told me that he always means what he says to families in consultations, but that it is difficult for him to be "on" all the time.

He and Donald then began talking about how people get bad ideas about funeral directors because of sensationalist stories on the news. Then both likened their work to a play. Mark said that people get mad because they feel they're being gouged, but they don't see the production—lights, costumes, etc. All those people have to be paid. Funeral directors have to pay staff, embalmers, etc., and they also have to pay for utilities and other overhead costs.<sup>15</sup>

Prepping the bodies of the deceased is an integral part of that production, particularly for funerals with open caskets. One of my contacts, Gary, says he won't work for anyone who doesn't make care and presentation of the body the top priority. He mentioned Jefferson & Richardson and Menlowe, both of whom use outside services to embalm and prep the bodies of the deceased.<sup>16</sup> Even one of my contacts at Menlowe, who no longer works for the company, mentioned his dislike for this practice: "They send out for embalmings now, and

the quality has gone downhill. We should still think about presentation and providing good bodies. We never had complaints until we started using this service, which is an in and out kind of thing. They come in, do cosmetics, and leave. I'm afraid things will only get worse."<sup>17</sup> Either way this is done, it is part of the preparation for the performance of the funeral—this is the costuming and makeup part for the role the deceased person will play in the funerary ritual.

I was able to witness only one embalming in the course of my fieldwork. Most of my contacts would not allow me to see this, which I will discuss in my chapter on liminality, but the funeral directors at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch finally agreed to let me see this preparatory performance. I wrote the following field notes, the afternoon following my first embalming:

Well, I saw the embalming. It was different than I expected. If I could see his face, it was ok, no matter what Paul was doing. It made him more of a person and less of a dead body. I had to look away a few times. It wasn't nearly as messy as I thought it would be. I was expecting...I don't know... a lot of mess, I guess. Blood and stuff. Bob was very cavalier—joking, telling stories, etc. People are ok with how much doctors make—they can be jerks but it's ok. This is an essential service with care and bedside manner. People see them as money grubbing, or taking advantage of grief. I stood in a corner. I had to suit up, wearing scrubs and gloves. It was an old man. Once Paul cleaned him, there was no smell. I stood in the corner because I wasn't sure how I was going to react. This was a human life. I'm so terrified of losing my family and friends and I think that's what gets me. He is dead. Paul put him on the table, undressed him, and cleaned him off as he went. I expected a chemical smell, and there was none. Only soap/cleaning agents. But that got washed away. Paul kept telling me, come over here, this is what I'm going to do, why I do it, etc. Different tricks are to keep the face nice—eye caps, cotton in mouth, etc. He kept calling him by name, Mr. X, this is what we're doing now, this is what's next, etc., and including him in everything that was going on. I find that interesting—in his interview, Paul said it's just a shell—whether the funeral director is religious or not, so it's interesting that he treats the body like a person. He did compartmentalize the body—he cleaned the head first, then the torso, and so on, rather than

cleaning everything all at once. But he kept calling him by name, talking to him, keeping him in the process. And something of note—when Paul first gave me a tour, there had been a woman in the embalming room, and her face wasn't covered by the sheet, although this man's face was. I asked Paul about it. He said that they leave the face covered before a body is prepped, especially if they haven't been cleaned and disinfected yet. After prep, sheet stays off the face.<sup>18</sup>

The embalming process seems to be not only part of the prep work for the funeral performance, but also a performance in itself, with its own rituals and prep work. There is costuming, staging, prepping tools, and, at least for Paul, a ritualized way of cleaning and prepping the body. As I mentioned in my notes he compartmentalized the body. What this entailed for Paul was cleaning and prepping each part, beginning with the head, working his way down, setting the pose the man would be in, as embalming stiffens the body, cutting nails, cleaning fingers, and so on. Further, because he was trying to explain to me what he was doing, Paul was performing for an audience this time. The entire process was followed by the striking of the set—putting the tools away, cleaning up after the embalming, and pulling the sheet back over the man, as his family had not yet arrived with the clothes he was to be buried in.

Fundamental, then, to the performance of each funeral director I worked with, in each role they fulfill from the initial consultation to the final performance of the funeral itself, is the preparation of the body. Each person I spoke with insisted that they work with and for the living, and it is for them that they try to take such care in presenting the body for those in mourning. So it is this practice that helps them create the “overall feel” referred to above; it is in this practice that funeral directors are able to tailor the services they provide for the bereaved.

The services include both the work that we as bereaved are aware of as audience to the rituals—a space in which to properly mourn our dead—as well as the deeper service of facilitating *communitas*.

Further, the deceased is, in this practice, still a person with whom they are interacting. Paul spoke to the person he was embalming, and everyone I worked with referred to the deceased by their names, rather than “the deceased,” the body,” etc. The dead person being embalmed is a passive participant, but we are often passive as audience—we often just sit and observe. The deceased can’t take it in and react, but the performer still sees the deceased as another person with whom to interact in the course of his job duties. The deceased becomes a proxy with whom the director can enact the final performance of the funeral.

I began my discussion of the performative aspects of funeral directing with my own experiences as “audience,” through the funerals I’ve attended in my personal life. I want to bookend the discussion with another experience as audience—this time as an observer of the ritualistic process of embalming. After the first embalming and body preparation I witnessed, I dictated the following notes as I was driving home that afternoon:

Ok, this is, I’m just going to dictate some field notes as I drive home. So I actually got to see an embalming. It was very weird, not in a bad way, just kind of, it was different than I expected. It was interesting because, for me, if I could see the guy’s face, it was ok. Like, if I was watching his face, or if I could see his face while Paul was doing whatever, you know, putting an incision in the neck or doing the aspiration thing in the chest cavity. I mean all that stuff, it was kind of, I had to look away, but if I saw his face it was ok. I think it made him more of a person to me, and less of a dead body, if that makes sense, so the dead body part kind of creeped

me out, but him as a person made it better. It was not nearly as messy as I thought it would be. It was interesting. Bob came in, and he is so cavalier, I mean he was just laughing and telling stories and joking about one of their coworkers, and very, telling stories about when he started out in the funeral business, how he didn't wear gloves when he first started. They weren't trained to wear gloves when he first started. He talked about gas, how gas is so expensive. We talked about, they brought up Jessica Mitford, and how she made it really hard for funeral directors to have any kind of welcome place in our culture because our culture is all about money, and that's what she talked about, and that's, she hit people where it mattered. You know it's interesting, and I said this, and this might be the thing I've been meaning to mention and I just keep forgetting, is that people are totally fine with how much money doctor's make, and a lot of doctors don't have any kind of bedside manner. They'll just come in, read your chart, and won't even talk to you or look at you, and people are fine because they're considered experts, and you know, this is your health you're dealing with, so you want them to be experts, but meanwhile these guys come in and do a service that's just as essential, but they do bring you the bedside manner, and they do bring you the care and consideration. People hate them. They look at them as money grubbing, greedy, feeding on your grief, taking advantage of your grief. I don't know, it's upsetting. I mean, I think, you know, maybe I shouldn't be upset for these people. Maybe that's not very anthropological of me, but I'm frustrated for them that that's what they have to deal with. And not even, I mean just in a broader moral sense, how can that be what you care about? I mean it's one thing, like, I don't have money, so I can't have a big flashy funeral, and that's fine, but I don't know that that should be your main concern. You know, not doing what you can afford because you don't want to spend the money. And you know, on the other hand of that, that's not to say that spending money equals care, respect or love, but what you should care about, I think, is sending the person off the way that they'd want to be sent off, and also in a way that you can live with yourself. You know, like I was really able to say goodbye to some people. I don't know that's just my thoughts. But back to the embalming. I kind of stood in a corner for the most part. I did have to suit up. I had to put on some scrubs that were stained—gross—he said they're cleaned, but some stains you just can't get out. Well let me start from the beginning. It was really interesting, because, so it was an old man, and he did not smell very good. Sort of a mix of b.o. and you know, he was wearing a diaper, and then plus also I don't know if he died at a nursing home, or if he died at home, but he definitely had that nursing home smell, that kind of, sweet decay? Mixed in with urine, and but then once Paul did everything he did and cleaned him up, it was fine. It didn't even smell chemically in the room. It didn't smell like anything. I kind of stood in a corner because I wasn't sure how I was going to be about the whole thing. This is a human

life, and I think that's probably the thing that's been tripping me up, and in the times that I was afraid I was going to cry, or whatever, at a funeral, or at a consultation, is because it's real hard for me not to think about the human aspect of this and the fact that these are real people, this is their lives, and these are their loved ones. But I suppose that's why I'm doing this project in the first place, is because I'm so terrified of losing my own family and friends and I just I think that's what gets me every time is this old guy on this table and I just and he's not exactly flopping around, but I mean it's evident that he's not sleeping, and it's evident that, I don't know, I guess there is something to expression dead weight. And I just thought about what it would be like, I can't even say it out loud because I'm so paranoid and jinxed, but at any rate. It was, I don't know. Anyway, I got totally tangential there and I have no idea what I'm talking about anymore. So he put him on the table, and he lifted him from the hospital gurney. He lifted him onto the embalming table, and made a comment about how he was sorry the table wasn't as clean as it was apparently the last body wasn't as cleaned as he would have liked her to be. So that was interesting, and then he undressed the man and cleaned him off as he went. Definitely the diaper was stinky. But once he got that off and thrown away and kind of cleaned the guy down, he really didn't smell anymore at all. Which is interesting. I guess I kind of expected it to go from body odor smells to chemical smells, and while he was using the chemicals they smelled, but the embalming liquid didn't smell at all that I noticed. The only one I could smell was one particular cleaning agent that looked like Windex that was particularly, you know, you could smell that but maybe I was just in a specific spot in the room that I didn't smell it as badly because at one point, Bob came in and we were chatting and he had to open up the vent because he said it was burning his eyes, so but anyway. Paul kept saying why don't you come over here and look at this, see what I'm going to do, it was really interesting, it was like I was an intern, and he was teaching me like, this what we do, why we do it. Talking about pulling out the artery and the carotid and the big vein is in your neck, and pulling them out, and draining the blood out of one, and pumping the embalming fluid into the other. He was a very good instructor. For example he was talking about, sometimes their eyes pop open so we put this sticky stuff on the caps and stick them under the eyelids and it keeps the eyes shut. He showed these tricks they have, shoving cotton in the mouth, for example, so it's puffed up. The guy didn't have any teeth, so they put cotton in the mouth to make it not so sunken in. He kept calling him by name. He kept saying, so Mr. So and So, we're going to do this now, and we're going to do this to you, and stuff like that. I think that's interesting because when I interviewed Paul, he was talking about how one of the ways to distance yourself from that process is if you're not religious the body's just a shell. It's just a thing and it doesn't matter anymore. If you are religious, the person's not there anymore

anyway, their soul's moved on so again it's just a shell. It's interesting to me that he would say that and I did notice that he would deal with, he sort of compartmentalized the body in a way. He cleaned the head, did the lips, the eyes, the cheeks (set them), then moved on to the hands and arms. It might be a case of where he's doing things the most efficient way, but it seemed, especially when he was dealing with the head, it seemed particularly compartmentalized, which would support the shell idea. But on the other hand, to keep referring to the man by name and keeping him in the process, it was kind of interesting telling him what he was going to do to him and stuff like that. My biggest fear in the embalming thing was, first time when I see it, not that I want to see an embalming, but that I want to observe them doing the embalming, because I'm interested in the funeral directors themselves, as my group. But I didn't want to come across as like this morbid curiosity, I want to see dead bodies, creepy shit, because that's not, I mean if I could witness an embalming without having to see a dead body, that's fine by me! And it wasn't particularly horrible as I said, I mean there were parts where I had to look away, when the blood starting flowing, when he started cutting into the guy's neck. It's very weird because I've had stitches, and I've gotten tattoos, so blood doesn't bother me. What bothered me was him cutting into his neck and there not being any blood. I mean he was cutting into his neck and there was just I don't know, it was just, flaps of skin. It was weird. And of course then he started digging around in there with his fingers trying to find the veins which was kind of, I had to look away at that as well. And then the blood first started draining, I looked away but eventually I kind of got used to it, it didn't bother me as much. So, he kind of mixed in the embalming chemicals and let them sit for a while, and started draining out the blood, and then started putting in the embalming fluid, and then the last thing that he did, as I said he kept washing and cleaning the body throughout the process, and then the last thing he did, oh and something else he did which isn't a personal touch of his, per se, but something that he personally insists on is sticking cotton behind the ears so as the embalming fluids going in, sort of making the body kind of stiff and stuff, it keeps the ears out, rather than back, so that they look more normal, like they would be if they were standing up. So that was interesting. And then he really...I don't know if I'm projecting which is entirely possible, but he seemed to be simultaneously treating this man both as a body and as a person. Like where he needed to treat him like a person he was treating like a person, and where he needed to treat him like a thing he was treating him like a thing. One of the things they do is when they clean the body, apparently cleaning the body during the embalming process it helps the fluid flow better, so it helps them "pink up," as they say, which is true—there were places where he was purple before, for example, and after he looked more, I don't want to say normal, because there's something about the skin color of a person that's been

embalmed that's not quite right, kind of like a doll that's supposed to be realistic, but doesn't quite have the right skin color. I don't know what it is, but there's something about an embalmed person's skin that just doesn't, it's like they look as real as possible, but they look like wax figures almost. But I wonder if it's a multi-tonal thing? Like they're all just one color. They're all just that flesh color as opposed to like, darker here, lighter, there, mottled here, freckled there. I think that's it. It's depth and variety of skin color. Kind of like color-treated hair is all one color, so you know it's a dye job. With living skin there's different colors all going on at once—with an embalmed body it's a flat color. Like a bad dye job. So he was doing that, and washed his hair, washed his face, shaved him. One thing I thought was interesting, they both commented on how dirty his fingernails were, but they didn't clean his fingernails. I wonder if they'll do that before the funeral. The funeral's not until Monday and I wonder if they'll do that before the funeral. I would hope so. I would hate to show up to my grandpa's funeral and his fingernails are dirty. It's just kind of gross. So he did his thing, cleaned the body, did the embalming. As I said Bob came in and was very, very talkative. That's something that I've noticed--once you get the guys talking, they will just talk your ear off. Which is phenomenal, because you're never at a loss for material. Because they talk about their business. They talk about anecdotes, and history, and what their business is like, both personally, and on a larger more abstract scale. They're great informants because they just talk and talk and talk. It's awesome. I mean I could probably ask these guys a yes or no question, and they'd give me an open ended answer. He then dried him off, cleaned off the table, cleaned up after himself, cleaned up all the equipment and all that stuff. Again, not nearly as gross as I thought it was going to be. They did this thing called aspirating, so they stick this tube in your chest cavity and kind of suck everything out. Which is sort of gross. But it is what it is. That didn't bother me as much as the embalming part, well really the going into the neck part. Because he was talking about the sound it made hitting bone and stuff like that, but I would think that would be a sound/feel combo, and since I couldn't feel what that sound was, it didn't really bother me at all. Then he put the sheet over him up to his neck and that was it. It took about an hour and a half I think, and he was telling me what he was doing step by step, and it was good. It was really fascinating. Now I kind of want to talk about, just put on the end here, just some of my other impressions from the rest of the day. The woman for the consultation was very interesting. I guess she had taken care of the thing a few years ago, but kind of needed really sort of, what are we spending this on, what are we spending that on? She was talking about how awesome the nursing home was that her mom had been in, that her mom had died in. I guess her mom just died yesterday, but she had no problem with me being there, and anytime Paul stepped away from the room, she would turn to me and talk to me, and talk about how awesome

the nursing home was, and kind of chat. Today was a good day. It was a long day. I'm exhausted. But so that was my very first day of official fieldwork. Which is kind of exciting. I'm kind of being a real anthropologist now. It's neat. But anyway, so that's it. I am signing off.<sup>19</sup>

I included this long stretch of my field notes because this was my complete, unedited reaction as audience to Paul's ritualized performance of embalming a body for display during a funeral. In his text *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner discusses the transformative power of performance, and how any performance, whether it is social or aesthetic drama, enacts a change on its audience. Whether or not that change is permanent or temporary depends on the performance. He argues that the function of performance is to provide "a place for, and a means of, transformation."<sup>20</sup> In comparing the two, he writes:

Rituals carry participants across limens, transforming them into different persons...Aesthetic drama compels a transformation of the spectators' view of the world by rubbing their senses against enactments of extreme events, much more extreme than they would usually witness. The nesting pattern makes it possible for the spectator to reflect on these events rather than flee from them or intervene in them. That reflection is the liminal time during which the transformation of consciousness takes place.<sup>21</sup>

For Schechner, transformation is the entire point of any performance, whether it changes our social status, our way of thinking, or even just being different because of having witnessed the performance.

I don't necessarily agree with his argument, aligning myself more with Goffman's idea that any influence on the observer/audience is intended, rather than a specifically transformative one. What I do like about Schechner's argument here is the idea that liminality can be extended to the audience of an aesthetic drama, so transformation, while maybe not the intention of the

performance, will occur regardless. And even though the intent of a rite of passage is a change in status, much like the audience of an aesthetic drama, the participants in these rites undergo a transformation of consciousness. They emerge knowing what they didn't know before; they reflect on what the rite meant, and in what ways they are now different.

There were two layers of performance going on here—Paul's usual ritualistic work of embalming, and his inclusion of me in the process, explaining to me step by step what he was doing. He moved back and forth between these two layers. I entered into the embalming room having no idea how central embalming is to the work that funeral directors do. I assumed that it was a sanitation process first and foremost, performed essentially to allow for an open casket. I was a naïve outsider, then was, albeit merely symbolically, initiated into those who know. Following Schechner, the embalming had elements of both social and aesthetic drama, because it felt like a rite of passage to me, and I did witness an extreme event and reflect on it. In both ways, my consciousness was transformed.

Much like Schechner's aesthetic drama audience, I was shown an extreme event and was able to reflect on it. I use the word "extreme" here because it was a close-up view of what the embalming process actually is. More accurately, it was extreme because although the practice of embalming is one of the ways in which we deny death, to do an embalming or any death work is to squarely face it. By observing the embalming, I faced death. I then thought about the experience and tried to make sense of it, and I'm considering it more

deeply now. For example, at the time I was narrating my thoughts, I felt that Paul might be in some sense code-switching—treating the deceased alternately as a person or a shell, as various steps warranted it. He often addressed the man by his name, and included him in my instruction. He was telling us both what he was doing. On the other hand, as he cleaned the body from head to toe, it seemed very compartmentalized to me.

Now, in reflecting back on my reflection, I believe I was right. For example, calling the man by his name seemed to be common practice for Paul. He may not say those things aloud when he is alone in the embalming room, but I would venture to say that he thinks them in his head. And in the funerals I've observed since, I noticed that the funeral directors always address the deceased by name. It is important for the mourners to think about the person, rather than the shell, so it is important for the funeral directors, who always insist they work with the living.

On the other hand, witnessing the embalming was like a rite of passage because I felt, as is mentioned at the end of the dictation, as if it made me a real anthropologist. I entered the room as a student, and left feeling like I was doing real work. It was particularly significant because I was initially afraid I wouldn't get much access to the behind-the-scenes work. Being able to witness the embalming made my fieldwork real to me in a way it had not been through initial interviews.

And though certainly not as stressful or dangerous as many initiation rites, it was definitely a challenging experience. As a member of our death-phobic

culture, I am just as uncomfortable around it as anyone else. For example, at the beginning of my notes, I mention that if I was able to see the man's face, I was ok, because I could see he was a person, and not just a dead body. A dead body equals death, and death is scary and unclean, as evidenced by the smells I recorded. Not having trained the way morticians do—and honestly never even having taken an anatomy class or dissected an animal in biology—I had not had any experience that might have lessened my discomfort in watching the embalming. So when Paul cut into the man's neck to pull out the arteries, I struggled to maintain my composure. Most cultures outside of the West take care of their own dead, and do not embalm. Some within the West haven't adopted the practice of outsourcing death work, either. Each of these smaller, uncomfortable moments within the larger experience lent to it the feeling of passing some sort of test, not only as an anthropologist, but also as a human, experiencing something that not a lot of people in our culture get to experience.

Schechner argues that both the audience of an aesthetic drama and the participants in a social drama enter a liminal phase because they both emerge from the experience transformed. I have written here about how witnessing the embalming was transformative for me (and thus liminal), in both senses as Schechner discusses them. In my next chapter I will address in more detail other experiences and observations of liminality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *On Narrative*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 155-156.

<sup>3</sup> Field notes, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch Funeral Home, March 4, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Field notes, Flanner & Buchanan Funeral Home, March 10, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Rick, Interview, Menlowe Funeral Home, September 7, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Carol, Interview, Menlowe Funeral Home, September 7, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Field notes, Cook Fields Funeral Home, October 9, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Field notes, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, March 4, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Field notes, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, August 14, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Field notes, Flanner and Buchanan Funeral Centers, March 10, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Field notes, Cook Fields, October 9, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Field notes, Menlowe Funeral Home, June 18, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Field notes, Menlowe Funeral Home, June 25, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Field notes, Cook Fields Funeral Home, October 9, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Mark, Interview, Menlowe Funeral Home, June 18, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Field notes, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, March 9, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 193.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4: LIMINALITY DATA

In this chapter I discuss liminality as it presented itself in my research, I focus on liminality in my discussion of funeral directors because I believe their marginal status is the main reason why they are able to do the work they do—how they are able to help the bereaved achieve *communitas*. I address this in more detail later, but it is significant to note that, since *communitas* can really only be achieved unconsciously, funeral directors must remain unnoticed in their work. And they do.

As discussed in the Introduction, I use the term “liminality” in its fullest sense in my work. It is the in-between stage of a rite of passage, after the rite has begun, but before it is completed, and those undergoing such a transition are also liminal. To push the concept further, those in the margins of society are also liminal; thus funeral directors, whose work with the dead relegates them to the margins are also liminal. Liminality manifested in several other ways during my fieldwork. As has been mentioned, the funeral director is a liminal figure in US American culture, working in the margins of society, because we are a death-denying people. Their work is also liminal, in that the bulk of their work involves the liminal stage of our final rite of passage—we are dead, but not yet buried, and we have one last ritual performance to complete before our bodies are

disposed of. They fade into the background at funerals, moving in and around the margins of the funeral site, working to make the funeral go as smoothly as possible. Mourners are themselves liminal, in between finding out about the death of a loved one and moving on from grief, and the funeral director is there with us in that in-between time and place, helping us in our transition. There are liminal places, spaces in which the uninitiated (non-funeral director) cannot go in a funeral home—the offices, the embalming room, living quarters if it is an older home. I sometimes even found myself in these in-between places as well.

The first leg of my fieldwork involved interviewing several funeral directors throughout the state of Indiana. I began by asking them how they thought people outside of the industry saw them. I felt this was important to ask—I was assuming, as an outsider to the industry, that they were often marginalized because of their work. I wanted to see if this was true in my consultants' experiences. In my interviews and fieldwork, I learned that what marginalization does happen, happens because we don't discuss death anywhere else. Death is liminalized—it is pushed to the margins of our consciousness, so death workers are as well. I saw this several times in my conversations with my consultants.

The following examples from various interviews and field notes demonstrate this. I'll begin with Geoffrey of Cook Fields Funeral Home in Lafayette, who told me:

There seems to be a lot of mysticism about what we do. It has changed quite a bit. I think it's looked at as somewhat as a comparable profession to ministers, nurses, maybe doctors, things like that. I think in some areas of the country unfortunately, it's been demoted almost to a necessary evil, shall we say, almost the form of being, your license is a disposal person, and that's it. I see funeral service as respect for the dead...Some people seem curious. Others take three steps back. There's a joke about a guy

on airplanes not wanting people to talk to him, telling them he's a mortician. Some people act like they can catch something from you. I've seen people in his business who epitomize the old stereotype, but others don't. It really seems to be 50/50 in my experience.<sup>1</sup>

When I asked Paul from Colley, Frank, and Froebisch Funeral Home about this, he told me people seem very curious about what he does for a living. He gets the odd story every once in a while; people have asked if they "chop off your legs if you're too long to fit in a casket." He also mentioned that at mortuary school, they are taught not to euphemize death, but that it is a struggle for them, because as a culture we don't talk about death. In trying to be considerate of people's feelings, it can be a challenge not to use euphemisms. And when people find out what he does, a long conversation often ensues, so he does believe that it is important to be as up front as possible about death. He told me:

And then you always hear everybody's story about who passed away, and things like that, their experiences. It's one of those things that I think, the culture wants to know about it, but they've made it such a taboo to talk about it. People are dying to talk about it. It's one of those things, like religion or politics. Everybody's got an opinion, everyone's very curious about it, and they're trying to understand it. So it's just trying to, it's not something you learn in school, it's not taught in church. It's one of those...taught by itself, and no one deals with it until it's time to deal with it. Until they have to deal with it.<sup>2</sup>

Paul recognizes the fact that we marginalize and therefore liminalize death, and that it affects the way people see him and the work he does.

Paul is not alone in this recognition. Ronald of Jefferson and Richardson has turned it into a personal joke when meeting new people for the first time. He mentioned that people often tell him jokes they've heard about the industry, so he replies in kind: They'll say to you, the person sitting next you, well what do you do

for a living? Well I always say I work for the layaway department for a large family-owned corporation. And just leave it alone. If they come back and say, well what business, then I tell them and they get a kick out of it.<sup>3</sup>

Ryan, who works at Jefferson and Richardson's North branch, had similar experiences to Paul, in that most people he meets seem very curious and have a lot of questions about what it is he does. For Ryan, it offers the opportunity to educate people about his line of work. Like Paul, he laments the fact that most people have no idea what funeral directing really entails, because we don't talk about death unless we have to. Ryan also mentioned that as a teenager, he was embarrassed explaining to people what his family did for a living because of their reactions, so he wouldn't tell anyone when they asked. This exemplifies the liminal nature of the work.<sup>4</sup>

Much like Paul and Ryan, Carol, a grief counselor for Menlowe Funeral Home, recognizes that her work is marginalized, but she feels that it should not be. She argues that we need to start talking about death, bringing it back to the center, and she takes every opportunity she has to get the conversation started. She says:

I think people are just curious about me. Because I'm just naturally a very upbeat, happy person. Most people in the funeral service are. I mean, just what a zany group we are! So I think they're fascinated at that, but then they're also, those are the people who will talk to me. People, I personally wear my name badge, and people go, they'll back off, that sort of thing. And then the cashier will say oh my grandmother died last week. I do that as permission to talk about death. I just have thousands and thousands of stories that people have shared with me, and I always say to them almost immediately. You know, when you can talk to people about death, you can talk to people about anything. It's almost always a heart-to-heart connection. There's no competition. There's no, who's trying to

impress anyone when you're talking about death? It's the most beautiful way to communicate with people.<sup>5</sup>

Related to the general cultural practice of marginalizing death is how we portray death and death workers in various ways, such as jokes, urban legends, gory news stories, movies, and television shows. I asked my contacts what they thought about the media's portrayal of funeral directors, such as the show "Six Feet Under," or horror films in which the villain is a creepy undertaker figure. I asked them if they thought negative images might be damaging to the way their profession is perceived. Carol responded:

Well, damaging in that it really, it just makes them more afraid. It exaggerates what they might already have...We had a gentleman in here whose kid threw, wanted to go up the steps, and he goes, don't you dare, there's dead bodies up there and they'll get you. The guy working the door was horrified, but he couldn't go against the dad, and the kid just screamed, you know? It was not good.<sup>6</sup>

I wondered whether or not those in the funeral industry shared any of those jokes or stories, and most told me "no." They don't want to contribute to the misconceptions of the job.

Renee, also from Menlowe, mentioned the negative press that the funeral industry sometimes gets, such as price gouging, and the crazier stuff, like the guy down south who was burying supposedly cremated bodies in his backyard. She said, "We're human. There's a mystique about us. '6 Feet Under' was the best thing for the business because it shows us as human. The rest of who we are." I think that's a key point—because funeral directors are marginalized, they are seen as not necessarily human. As liminal figures, they are ambiguous in nature. During a rite of passage, liminal figures are not part of their society—they

regain personhood after coming through the rite on the other side. Because funeral directors are perpetually liminal, always working in the space between death and burial, they don't necessarily show as fully human in our culture. Sometimes they are a villain from an old Western or a horror film, sometimes they are the punchline to a joke, and sometimes they are a news story. Funeral directors recognize this, and work to change it. I will speak more on how they do this work later on.

Funeral directors are not the only liminal entities in death work. Space and place often have a liminal feel in the funeral home. My fieldwork began at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch Funeral Home. On my first day I attended a funeral, and wrote some notes afterward about the experience. Much of those notes focus on liminal space and place. As the funeral was going on, I stayed off to the sides and in the background as much as I could, even more so than the funeral directors themselves. Where they greeted people, I tried to remain unseen by sticking to the back of the room, or other places in the room where there were no mourners gathered. Then, as the funeral progressed and the minister took over, Paul, Bob, Susan, and I moved into the foyer. Paul shut the door and told me that at that point they always step out and let the mourners and the minister proceed on their own.

Later in the day I was given a tour of the funeral home, and in my notes continued to notice liminal space. I commented on the embalming room, a space behind the scenes whose door is often closed. At one point during a conversation with Paul, he stepped into the embalming room to check on

something. Susan noticed me looking and shut the door behind Paul. I remember feeling frustrated at the time, thinking I would not be able to witness an embalming and that my research would be incomplete. But I realized that space was also liminal in this sense, and that I, as uninitiated, would not be able to physically go everywhere my consultants went.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually that first day, after Susan had left to go do some paperwork, Paul invited me in to witness the embalming. Most of my notes from that experience reflect the performative aspect of funeral work, but there were definitely liminal moments, since both of these are parts of any ritual process. These liminal moments included space once again—during the entire procedure I mostly stood in the corner by the door, venturing out of that small space I had given myself on the edge of the room only when Paul asked me to come closer to get a better look at what he was doing. I don't think I consciously was making sure I had a way out, although I'm sure it was in the back of my mind.

There was also the geography of the body Paul was embalming. Paul kept switching back and forth between treating the deceased as merely a body and as a person. When he was cleaning the body, for example, he was very methodical and cleaned each part of the body, in order, beginning with the head and moving down toward the feet. If he would do anything invasive, such as the moment he cut into the deceased's neck, Paul would refer to the person by name, saying things like, "Now Mr. So-and-So, we will be doing x." The body, then, seems to reflect the liminal nature of death work itself. Whereas the professional career of a funeral director is perpetually liminal, since their work is

utilized during the liminal stage after death and before burial, the funeral director is able to cross back and forth between these borders of life and death to do what is necessary for the bereaved to more easily move through this rite of passage.<sup>8</sup>

As has been mentioned, I also had my own experiences with liminality, in being excluded from certain meetings, consultations, and spaces within the funeral homes, such as being shut out of the embalming room on that first day of fieldwork. I was not allowed to go on any death runs (i.e., where they pick up the body of the deceased) at any of the funeral homes, and initially I was not allowed to attend certain funerals.

Although I was typically allowed to sit in on most consultations at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, there was one I was asked to stay out of. I was able to listen in, though, which reiterated my status as non-funeral home personnel (read: uninitiated). Paul asked me to stay in the back room because he was worried that the consultation would be emotional, and that the family might not be comfortable with me being in there because of that.<sup>9</sup>

At one point I wrote of my frustrations of not being able to participate in everything I wanted to. Renee, Paul, Donald, and Mark were having a business meeting, and I was not invited. While I did realize that these were businesses first and foremost and that my work and I were not priorities, I still wanted to be everywhere and do everything. I had specific ideals in place for how fieldwork was supposed to go, and when it did not go that way, I felt disappointed. I was not “initiated,” as it were—I was liminal to the liminal.<sup>10</sup>

I even experienced this outsider feeling just through lack of experience.

These quick notes are from one of my first days doing field work:

I got here at 9:15. I just sort of hung around for an hour. They were dealing with paperwork, like insurance filing, obituaries, follow-ups, etc., and Paul told me about his cruise. Bob told me about how they give out a scholarship every year. Bob also told me about how they're disinterring an infant from 1967 or so...the parents bought plots in a different cemetery, and want the baby who lived only an hour or so buried between them. I've been left alone in the kitchen. I wonder if I'm supposed to be more assertive and just follow Paul everywhere. I feel weird just following him around, but I obviously can't just sit here...I don't know...<sup>11</sup>

I often felt the most obviously liminal when meeting with clients, whether it was for a consultation or a funeral. I wrote the following after having already attended several funerals for my fieldwork: "I still feel so conspicuous and voyeuristic. Do I follow the lead, say sorry, etc., or do I try to stay as much in the background as possible? I should ask what they want me to do."<sup>12</sup>

I even chose to stay on the edges occasionally, in liminal spaces, never feeling completely comfortable at people's funerals or consultations. While I was witnessing the first embalming, I stood in the corner of the room, as far away as I could be and still be able to observe what was going on. I stood off to the side at funerals, behind the funeral directors when I could, out of fear that I might upset the mourners, never realizing that they probably never even noticed I was there. Funeral directors themselves are rarely noticed by anyone not having participated in funeral arrangements, except when to get directions to the cemetery.

On the other hand, I even felt moments of wanting to “go native,” which shows a longing to belong, emphasized by my liminal status as observer, not intern or job shadower, like I wanted to believe I might be:

Right now is just office stuff. They're all going about their day as if I'm not even here. I'm just hanging out. This is great. I wanted the nitty gritty...Paul is saying embalming should be done right away (regarding a baby?) This is today's consult I'll be at. I guess the baby's been dead for three days. You know, I definitely do have swings of wanting to “go native.” Funeral directors are so fun, entertaining, nice. I wonder if I could get a part time job working at one of them...I wonder if that would be a conflict of interest? Maybe I'll look into this...<sup>13</sup>

I never actually looked into part time funeral home work, but the urge was definitely there for a brief period.

Further, my liminal status did not just keep me from certain things. I was also included in ways I might not have been, were I part of a grieving family or even interning. For example, during the potentially emotional consultation I was kept out of, Bob took the family into another room at one point. Susan turned to me and whispered, “Would you like to put in your notes that the granddaughter ran the show?” Then chuckled. I guess they're like any other business—they make fun of the customers. Sometimes it's the only way you can deal with the stress.<sup>14</sup>

I had a similar experience at Jefferson and Richardson, in which a funeral director shared some gossip with me:

Joe told me a story today about a family he was meeting with for the second time. The death call came on a Wednesday, and the family came in to the funeral home on Thursday. The sister of the deceased made the appointment. She, her husband, 2 daughters, their husbands, and a friend were all at the initial consult. Joe explained everything, the price list, basic stuff, etc. Joe goes to do some paperwork, mother shows up—

she is the legal next of kin, and therefore the one whose desires regarding funeral arrangements are met. The sister says to Joe, only talk to me. Mom snaps, I'm paying, I'm in charge. They argued. Joe says, we need to set differences aside, I'm going to step out, let you talk. Then they start yelling, daughter's in mom's face, mom says call security. Mom insists on the two of them being separate. Joe made arrangements with the mother, told the sister, sent them home. Day of the funeral, the sister showed up late, then wrote her name on all the flower arrangements (meaning she wanted to take them all home). But the mom wants them all, and says her daughter stole everything the dead sister ever had. During the service, the sister's husband was making rude remarks to the minister. After, sister threw herself on the ground, screaming about her mom. Joe keeps saying I need to talk to Dennis, because he was there. I keep wondering why, if the funeral directors don't like being told this stuff, why they tell it to me. People tell them things because they're liminal. They tell me things because I'm liminal too—I'm an outsider here because I'm not a funeral director. People assume they're safe because they're outsiders; they assume I'm safe for the same reason.<sup>15</sup>

These last thoughts get at a very important aspect of the liminality of funeral directors—an aspect that is central to the real work they do, which is to facilitate *communitas* amongst mourners. People feel comfortable telling them things—they get out what they need to get out to reconnect with each other.

Renee mentioned her own experience with this aspect of their liminal status. She told me about the importance of knowing how to work with different families, and gave me some examples of families not getting along, particularly with second and third marriages. She said, "We see the whole gamut of human nature in the business." They see everything. People misdirecting anger, double lives, etc. She also said that when a young person dies, the family will often be nitpicky and angry with the funeral director, or families will bicker about options. They take their grief and anger out on the funeral directors on these occasions.

And the funeral directors allow it because they know that it can be central to the healing process.<sup>16</sup>

Their liminality is also a subtle, subconscious thing, (subconscious to the mourners) as evidenced by the fact that they get told things they would not otherwise be privy to. For example, after the consultation I was not allowed in, Bob, Paul, and I discussed what went on later:

Bob starts telling me about the current family. The funeral will be for a man who hanged himself. In the consultation are the son, and his girlfriend. Turns out it was her husband who hanged himself. She was apparently camping with the son. His daughter found him. Bob says, how do you tell the daughter all that? The son moved in with his step-mom/girlfriend afterwards. Bob used to be the coroner. Paul says they're privy to a lot of info that they probably shouldn't know. Bob says he doesn't always want to know. Sometimes the families put them in the middle of things. Paul says, "I don't know why people tell us this stuff." I think it's because of their liminal status.<sup>17</sup>

Tom, from Barlow Funeral Home, is also often told personal information and family gossip that people would never mention to most strangers. Because funeral directors are marginalized, because their profession makes them outsiders, people feel comfortable telling them these things. Tom mentioned to me, as did Paul and Bob, that he really doesn't want to know. He will even tell families ahead of time that he doesn't want to hear any gossip or anything else incriminating about the deceased or the deceased's family.<sup>18</sup>

I even had my own experience in oversharing. In one of my interviews with Carol, the grief counselor at Menlowe at the time of my research, I found myself telling her of my own death experiences, without her even prompting me to do so. As I've mentioned, part of the reason I pursued this research was all the

people I've lost over the years. As I was driving home, I recorded some reflections on the conversation I had had with Carol. She was talking about some of her personal experiences with loss, and somehow I found myself sharing my own. At the time, I had had quite a few family deaths in a very short time, and it was starting to take a toll on my mental health. I was exhibiting obsessive compulsive behaviors regarding leaving my husband for work in the mornings. I shared with her my fear of flying that came following the death of my grandfather, my anger and grief at the suicide of my cousin. All things that I don't talk about with most people, and yet here I was, unloading all of this on a stranger. But—she was a liminal stranger, and therefore safe; safe, for being on the margins.<sup>19</sup>

This seemingly natural inclination to share such personal information with funeral directors begs the question—do people share these things about themselves and their families because funeral directors are merely liminal figures, with all the social positioning that entails, or is there something more? I will speak to this more thoroughly in my analysis, but I believe it is connected to the *communitas* that funeral directors help facilitate with mourners.

This leads me to my final discussion of the liminal social status of funeral directors. I want to address how funeral directors navigate this liminality, because it is this ability to move comfortably within their liminal spaces, as well as crossing social borders between life and death, that allows them to facilitate *communitas*, which I will address more thoroughly in the following chapter. One of the questions I asked people initially was whether they thought it was more or

less difficult working in a small town versus a larger city. I believe this is relevant to the discussion of liminality, because, in a small town, funeral directors might be more or less marginalized. On one hand, in small towns, everyone knows each other, so people might be more comfortable around them. On the other hand, knowing everyone might make it seem like death is more in-your-face, and so funeral directors might be even more marginalized than they would be in a larger community,

Mike, a director's assistant at Barlow, told me that he felt his work was somewhat easier in a small town, because in large cities, the only interaction you have with most families is when a death occurs. In a small town like Batesville, on the other hand, everyone is more comfortable with each other. He said, "in Batesville, when a death occurs, for the most part you see them out on the street, or at church, or in a restaurant, or whatever, and basically you, you're comfortable going up to them and speaking with them, and in the same aspect they will approach you."<sup>20</sup>

Paul saw it as a mixed bag. He told me that he felt it could be "harder working in a small town because you know people, but on the other hand, you're involved in community stuff, and there's less volume."<sup>21</sup>

This involvement in community activities came up often, as an essential part of the work funeral directors do. As I mentioned above, funeral directors recognize their marginality, and work to show themselves as human, and as valuable members of their communities. This is most often done by volunteering. Everyone participates in community service, whether this is through the funeral

home as a sponsoring business of local little leagues or festivals, or if it as individuals working in their own communities. In one interview with Tom, he told me:

I think to be able to do this and do it well there's a fine line we have to...I mean you kind of have to feel for the families a little bit emotionally, I think to do this job well. But you can't let yourself become so involved that you let it affect what you do. So like I say, you walk a fine line....I think you have to have some kind of emotional attachment to the situation to do it justice. But you can't get sucked in, because then you take it home with you...You have to find other outlets, because if you eat, sleep, and drink this, you're going to get burned out.<sup>22</sup>

Outlets usually involve hobbies, like golf or fishing. But the emotional attachment is a little trickier. Usually this means community involvement. Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, for example, offer scholarships and sponsor a local children's' softball team.

Carol at Menlowe told me about the ways that they manage their image in Lafayette. She said that Menlowe tries to be everywhere; for example, they sponsor Lafayette's Tour of Terror every October. But by "everywhere," she meant only in Lafayette. She said that they won't do Purdue students, that the east side is their market. They think it might be crossing a line, because it would mean the death of young people.<sup>23</sup> In other words, they try to bridge their liminality in Lafayette, but purposefully maintain their liminality in West Lafayette.

Rick, who worked at Menlowe at the time of my research, told me the following:

That's actually one of our requirements. We're required to be affiliated with some type of community club or, Paul's on the Rotary, I'm on the board at the Community Center, Barb, she's involved with Meals on Wheels, Jeff is a Lafayette Leader, High Noon Club, just whatever organization that we

might have time for...I don't want you to think we're being forced to be out there, to interact with people. It helps when they come in here and they recognize somebody. You know, it's like, ok, I've never been to a funeral, which may sound weird, but there's a lot of people who have never been to a funeral service. Even in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. And they come in here and they recognize somebody and they kinda, we're good, the rapport has been established, they can say ok, (whispers) you know, this may sound kind of strange, can I ask you a question real quick. (laughs) and you know it's always something off the wall, but they feel comfortable coming to us because of the relationship we have out in the community.<sup>24</sup>

Rick is pointing out that because of their marginalized position in our society, funeral directors find it particularly important to have a positive presence in their communities. People are uncomfortable facing death so directly, and so create a social gap between themselves and those who work with death. Funeral directors recognize this, and do community work to help bridge this gap. They bridge the gap because otherwise people might not trust them enough to allow them to facilitate *communitas*, which is a necessary human connection. I will discuss *communitas* more deeply in the next chapter.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Geoffrey, Cook Fields Funeral Home, interview, October 9, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch Funeral Home, interview, September 6, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald, Jefferson and Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 9, 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Ryan, Jefferson and Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 10, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, March 4, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, March 9, 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Menlowe Funeral Home, field notes, June 18, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>12</sup> Menlowe Funeral Home, field notes, June 18, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Menlowe Funeral Home, field notes, June 18, 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> Menlowe Funeral Home, field notes, June, 18, 2009.
- <sup>17</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> Tom, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, July 9, 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> Mike, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Paul, Colley, Frank, and Froebisch Funeral Home, interview, September 6, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Tom, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, July 9, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Rick, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.

## CHAPTER 5: SOCIAL SOLIDARITY DATA

At the end of my last chapter, I discussed a few of the ways that funeral directors navigate their liminality, including doing community service. In this chapter, I briefly revisit that discussion of community service to discuss social solidarity, a necessary component in this instance of facilitating *communitas*, which is what I believe to be the primary function of funeral work. I then discuss the various ways in which funeral directors fulfill this function, including establishing a rapport with their communities and customers, knowing what people want, allowing them to personalize the funeral, and aftercare.

It is important for funeral directors to be seen as valuable members of their communities. As William E. Thompson writes in his essay, "Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead," "morticians and funeral directors are fully aware of the stigma associated with their work, so they continually strive to enhance their public image and promote their social credibility. They must work to shift the emphasis of their work from the dead to the living, and away from sales to service."<sup>1</sup> Funeral directors understand the taboo nature of their job in handling the dead. But they also realize that in order to do their work successfully—that is, to help the bereaved to properly process their grief, which I believe facilitates *communitas*—they must earn the trust of their communities. They must create a

sense of social solidarity with their communities. As I mentioned in the last chapter, this begins by creating a presence in their communities. Everyone I worked with maintained some form of community involvement.

Funeral directors, then, find community service to be an important way of creating a connection with their communities. When I began my field work, I had no idea how involved with their communities funeral homes actually are. I assumed they were just hiding in the background, appearing only when people needed them. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, they sponsor local sports teams and events, participate in community social groups, and some even offer scholarships for local students. Geoffrey from Cook Fields Funeral Home talked about how funeral directors are always involved in doing things for the community, and will gear activity towards clientele, so a firm that works with Jewish clients a lot will be active in the Jewish community, etc.: “This firm has historically served a large portion of the Catholic clientele, so there are things that I do that maybe some of the others don’t.” [Some of his community service is directly involved with St Mary’s Church.]<sup>2</sup> In other words, funeral directors connect to their communities in ways that best fit each other. This connection becomes the first step in establishing a rapport and a sense of trust with their communities. This is important because funeral directors need to be trusted in order to successfully facilitate *communitas*. If they did not make an effort to bridge the gap created by their marginal status, they might not be able to do their jobs effectively.

Essentially, community service acts as an attempt at image management. Funeral directors are “linked to the American death orientation whereby the industry is the cultural scapegoat for failed immortality.”<sup>3</sup> They are acutely aware of this, and so try to dispel that link as best they can. In the course of my research, every person I worked with made some reference to the fact that they work with the living, rather than the dead. I observed this distinction myself. From my notes: “Watching Geoff do cards, etc. It struck me how much care these people really put into it. Like when David demurred when I asked about the death of the baby. I thought he’d know, but I realized after it was tacky of me to ask. They just really care a lot, making the survivors feel taken care of.”<sup>4</sup>

Each funeral director I interviewed had a lot to say about community involvement. Carol at Menlowe said:

You know, we’re such a death-phobic society. Menlowe spends thousands and thousands of dollars in the community, and so what we’ve been trying to do since we already spend the money, you know, every chicken noodle dinner, and we love being involved in the community, but we’re trying to do with our advertising and marketing, and just all the different places we’re involved in. Church groups, we’re really involved with pastors and just the education about our business, and about the value, general service, and it is where we’re remembered. You’re making memories. It’s really gone extremely well.<sup>5</sup>

Funeral directors really see their job as working with the living, rather than the dead.

I noticed, for example, the way they all referred to their clients. They say “my family;” they use “family” instead of “customer.” Rick, from Menlowe, even pointed that out to me after I had heard it a few times. I wrote the following notes after a conversation with him: “Rick always refers to the deceased by name,

whether to the families, or to each other [colleagues].”<sup>6</sup> I noticed other little touches, like the way they made sure to always keep the books, cards, and flowers straightened. Their main concern is always with the mourners, rather than with the deceased.

One thing that most of the funeral directors I spoke to believe disrupts the creation of social solidarity is the presence of discount funeral homes, while those who do provide discount services believe they are giving people what they need. Funeral directors see the business side of their work as important for the community as well. The primary issue surrounding discount homes seemed to be quality of care, rather than being undersold. For example, Tom told me that the other funeral home in Batesville had started advertising as a discount funeral home. Although Barlow traditionally served the Catholics in Batesville, while the other home served everyone else, Tom felt he was trying to gain more business by providing discount packages. He argued that the cost might be cheaper, but then the service itself is cheapened.

Tom also discussed the large chains and how their pricing structures differ from small, family-owned homes. For example, he told me that while the chains may outsource cheaper caskets, they charge more for services in order to stay competitive. Further, he said that they typically demand payment upfront, whereas he will offer families he knows 30 days to make a payment. He will try to talk families down from expenses he sees as unnecessary.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of this was Jefferson & Richardson, a family-owned chain. A few months before I went back to Barlow, I sat down with Ronald from

Jefferson & Richardson. He told me that they outsource their caskets in order to save their customers money. They even created a sub-chain of discount funeral homes called Legacy. I was curious about outsourcing, and whether or not they were able to provide the same individualizing services that the smaller homes who used either Batesville or Aurora casket companies, since it was these two homes that originated the embroidered cap panels and LifeSymbol corner pieces. He assured me that they are able to offer all of the individualization that anyone else does.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, it seems that, even though they have different ideas of how to provide their communities with what they want and need from a funeral, and will market themselves in that context (the image management I mentioned above), both small and large funeral homes believe they are serving the public.

When I refer to this as image management, I don't mean to imply that funeral directors are insincere in their vocal focus on working with the living. I believe they do see their work as focused on the living rather than the dead, and they consider themselves "people people." I asked Ryan from the North Jefferson and Richardson if he felt his work or the funeral industry were stigmatized in our culture, and he answered speaking to the rewards of working with families as he and his colleagues do:

It is very rewarding, as far as helping people. There's not a lot of jobs where on a regular basis, people will come up and thank you after the fact. They might not thank you when you first come in because they're grieving, but by the time they go through the process and they know what you've done, and helped them out, you get thanked a lot. In a lot of industries people work their whole life and they never get thanked, so it's rewarding in that way.<sup>9</sup>

However, making sure the public knows their work is rewarding by contributing to their communities is one way they try to break that link to “failed mortality.”

I was curious, too, about whether the size of the community affected the relationship funeral directors have with their communities. I discussed this briefly in my last chapter, as it related to the liminal status of funeral directors. I believe it is relevant to mention here as well, since the funeral directors I interviewed had definite opinions about this topic as it pertains to their relationship with the community at large. I asked everyone I interviewed if they felt that funeral directing was more or less difficult, depending on the size of the town. The answers seemed to be similar across the board. From my notes during an interview with Rick from Menlowe Funeral Home: “Rick, like most of the other people I interviewed, say that it is easier working in a small town, because you know people. You already have an established rapport with people. They know you and trust you.”<sup>10</sup>

Tom, who originally worked at a funeral home in Cincinnati but now works for Barlow Funeral Home in Batesville, believes that small towns deal better with death, that they understand it better. He pointed out that since people often come into Barlow several times a month because everyone knows everybody, they are used to dealing with death in a way that people in large cities might not necessarily experience.<sup>11</sup>

Ryan, who works at the North branch of Jefferson and Richardson, also agrees that small town work is easier in terms of community relations. He told

me that when he worked in a small town, that they often served entire families, and had been for generations, so there was an established history with people that one might not necessarily experience in a large city. Now, working for a large chain in a large city, he feels that the community connections are not as strong because people don't know him, and have to trust that he'll take care of them.<sup>12</sup>

I also interviewed Mike Barlow from Barlow Funeral Home. He is not a licensed funeral director, but assists with consultations and viewings. Unlike his colleague Tom, who grew up in Cincinnati before moving to Batesville as an adult, Mike grew up in Batesville. Yet his answer was very similar to Tom's:

For me, I think it would be hard [working in a large city] because Batesville's so close-knit that everybody knows everybody, and I think the families are more comfortable, and I think we're a little more comfortable with them, in that respect. Basically in large cities there's such a high volume, you don't get to know the people. Most of the funeral [...] pretty much you don't see them again unless another death occurs in the family. Where in Batesville, when a death occurs, for the most part you see them out on the street, or at church, or in a restaurant, or whatever, and basically you, you're comfortable going up to them and speaking with them, and in the same aspect they will approach you.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the answers I received, it would appear, at least according to the funeral directors themselves, that it is easier to create social solidarity with a smaller community, based simply on the idea that people interact more often with each other. Whether or not it is true that small-town funeral homes have a better relationship with their communities than larger cities remains to be seen. In my own experience, growing up as a third-generation German Catholic in Cincinnati, I know that my family has been using the same funeral home since my

grandfather buried his parents. I suspect that there are plenty of other cases like mine, but I also know that as people become more secular and more interested in either green burial or even alternatives to burial, I can see that people in larger cities might lose some of the connection that manages to stick around in smaller towns. Future research might provide a more definitive answer.

Another way that funeral directors try to establish trust with their communities is by developing an understanding of what people actually want when they are planning their own funerals in a pre-need situation, or, as happens more often, when they are planning the funeral of a recently deceased relative or friend. In my first interview with Ronald from Jefferson and Richardson, he spoke extensively on creating an experience in which people will feel most comfortable. He told me that the first thing he will do when a family walks in is to offer his condolences, and to let them know that he understands how they're feeling. He mentioned a sign he used to keep above his phone that said "Remember that your families do not have funerals every day." For Ronald, then, funeral service is first and foremost about trying to make the families they serve as comfortable as he can.

Ronald is not alone in this practice. Geoffrey from Cook Fields will adjust his business practices to fit the community in which he is working to make the experience for comfortable for families. From my notes during his interview:

Geoffrey talks about the little touches—he has two branches in rural areas, and he rarely will wear a tie in those meetings. They'll come in in blue jeans, and so he tries to make them as comfortable as possible. He's had families request no ties.—"dad wasn't one for that." People want to

be treated fairly. He'll base things on the family he's meeting with. To make them as comfortable as possible.<sup>14</sup>

Exactly how to make families comfortable varied between funeral homes as well as individual consultants. For example, the feeling around Colley, Frank, and Froebisch tends to be relaxed, almost familial. From my notes after a funeral:

They are less somber than I expected. Bob patted a woman in consultation on the shoulder like, hey, buddy! Said, "sorry 'bout your mom." They ask everyone who comes in the door "how are you?" But not in an "I know your loved one is dead" way, but in a "hey how's it going" way. Laughing and chatting in the foyer, mostly at regular [volume] levels.<sup>15</sup>

I observed a consultation as well, in which the mood was the same. Paul, Bob, and Susan were all present for the consultation. I noticed that Susan teased the woman in the consultation, and had seen her do this with another family as well. Her teasing was not malicious or callous; rather she seemed to be trying to take people's minds off their grief. Bob often joked around as well. They were serious at times, and always respectful, but they never acted sad. They were sympathetic, but seemed to draw the line at empathy. The family seemed to follow suit; they were not overly emotional during this consultation.<sup>16</sup> As there are a lot of business decisions going on during this type of meeting, it makes sense not to be particularly emotional. I wonder if funeral directors are conscious enough of the compartmentalization of emotion regarding death in the US that they deliberately try to prevent emotional reactions in situations like a consultation, knowing that it will be more important to express grief during and following the funeral. I did not happen to pursue this train of thought in the

course of my fieldwork for this project, but it would be worth exploring in future research.

Returning to the point at hand, each of the funeral directors I worked with had their own beliefs on how to determine their families' needs and wants, as well as how to go about creating that experience for them. Donald, who works at Menlowe, says that he suggests the values of both sides to all the choices the families have, such as whether or not to have a viewing. He told me that he always tries to remember he has no idea what they want, who they are, or what they'll choose.

Rick, also from Menlowe, believes they should be honest with families about how they look, or if there is something that might make them look odd, so he'll talk about what he might need to do. Gary, from Cook Fields, told me that he won't work for anyone who doesn't make care and presentation of the body top priority, and mentioned a couple examples of homes he doesn't like. I overheard one funeral director on the phone with a woman whose father wanted to have his ashes scattered at his favorite golf course. As scattering ashes is frowned upon, if not downright illegal, he told her to go scatter them late at night when the place was closed.

Even the funeral industry as a whole has been changing over the last several years to create as personal and individual an experience as they can. As was discussed in the Introduction, individualism is highly valued in mainstream US culture. The funeral industry recognizes this and offers myriad ways to individualize a person's funeral. Families can purchase an embroidered cap

panel, which is the piece of fabric on the inside of the coffin that faces out while the lid is open. They can also purchase corner pieces that are small sculptures that come in a variety of themes—fishing, golf, and military service to name a few. Caskets can be painted to reflect the deceased's personality. Traditional suits and dresses are losing ground to dressing the body in their favorite team sweatshirt or athletic gear.

Depending on the space the homes have for funerals, props from the person's life can also be brought in. At Jefferson and Richardson, they have had funerals in which the deceased's motorcycle was brought in, or a six foot statue of Elvis Presley sitting on a bar in a yellow jacket, holding a guitar. At that funeral, rather than traditional music, they played Elvis songs the entire time. More often at most homes, families are encouraged to bring in photos and other items that will help show what the person was like in life. Ronald said, "That's important. That's important to those people. So, we encourage it all."<sup>17</sup>

Each funeral director I interviewed talked about creating a personalized experience for the mourners. Mark "believes in individualized funerals. He encourages people to bring in photos and things for people to help remember their loved ones. He never pushes for people to select anything."<sup>18</sup> Rick "believe[s] in giving the person a funeral they would want. He feels as though it's about them. He likes to suggest anything that will help celebrate the person, make it a big party, rather than making it a sad affair, or cookie cutter."<sup>19</sup>

Jefferson and Richardson, as a larger company with a chain of homes, can accommodate more than just the individual personality touches that are now

common to many funerals. For example, although Indiana state law requires a license to embalm a body, families can and do participate in dressing, cosmetics, and hair styling. And because they are in many neighborhoods around Indianapolis, Jefferson and Richardson have a wider experience of religious practices that they accommodate in other areas of preparation. For example, Ronald told me that Mormon families have a specific person from their church come in and dress the body, as they are supposed to be dressed in a particular way. Hindu families will wash the body in addition to dressing it for the funeral. And because traditional Hindu ceremonies involve cremation, those who want to are able to gather at the North branch where their retort (the cremating machine) is located, and can place the body of their deceased loved one into the retort. He believes that it is good for the grief process that families be as involved as possible in every aspect of the funeral.

Further, as society changes, the funeral industry changes right along with it, always accommodating people's wishes, in order to maintain the trust they work on building through their community involvement. For example, more and more, funeral homes are offering green burials and adjusting to other modern-day concerns. I originally thought green burials were illegal in Indiana, but after I found out that I was mistaken, I asked everyone whether or not their home provided environmentally-friendly services. A green burial involves embalming chemicals that do not have a formaldehyde base (if there is to be a viewing—some families choose no embalming and thus no viewing), and any casing that will naturally biodegrade, such as linen shrouds, or bamboo or wicker caskets.<sup>20</sup>

Although any funeral home can offer green embalming, not everyone can offer green burial. As most individual funeral homes do not own their own cemeteries, they do not have control over the rules the cemeteries have in place. For example, at most cemeteries in Indiana, a vault is a required purchase in order to have your loved one buried there. The argument for it is that the vaults, being made of concrete or metal, will not break due to the pressure from the ground above it, so they help avoid sink spots in the land. Jefferson and Richardson, however, as they also own several cemeteries throughout Indianapolis, are able to provide green burial. They offer this service at one cemetery in particular, where they have set aside a few acres for it.

Finally, I would like to discuss aftercare, which is another way in which those in the funeral industry emphasize their work with the living, and are able to continue to work with and in their communities. For example, Menlowe has a staff member dedicated specifically to aftercare, Gail. I interviewed Gail about her role as an aftercare specialist. She began by telling me that Menlowe will follow up with grieving families. I believe this is a common practice for many funeral homes, but not all are large enough to have a dedicated staff member. Although some people do not want follow-up care, those who do receive a picture frame. They have the option of meeting either at Menlowe or their own homes. How often they visit is up to the families—some people only meet with Gail once; others choose to meet more often. Menlowe also offers what Gail called “Remembrance Services.” These are held at their second site, which is often used for memorial services rather than full funerals. They occur twice a

year, and include people who experienced a death within a specified time-frame. She told me that they will have often over 400 people, and each person who attends gets a keepsake.

Menlowe also offers grief support groups, both open and closed. Originally they offered five themed groups, including one for children, one for teens, one for people who lost pets, and even one that offered cinematherapy. Only the basic one remains, though they do offer a day camp for children that is offered twice a year. As a final note, Gail mentioned to me that she will leave her nametag on when she goes out because it opens channels—people see it as a green light to engage her about her work. She told me she does this because she believes it is important that they take advantage of every opportunity to do community outreach.<sup>21</sup> In other words, just like the funeral directors she works with, Gail believes that establishing a connection to the community is essential to funeral work.

Carol from Menlowe was the aftercare specialist when I began my research. She was very passionate about aftercare as a key element to funeral work. Like Gail, she mentioned the grief support groups, and talked about how many there were and how many people had participated over the years. She told me a story demonstrating the benefits of aftercare that involved a young third grade teacher who died of cancer. Carol was called in to act as a sort of grief counselor for the children in the class. Most of the students were unaware that their teacher had died. Carol is very big on establishing a dialogue about death early on, because she believes that if children learn they can talk about death,

they will be able to process it more easily as they grow up and experience more loss. She said that often when they go to trade shows or senior job fairs, people will avoid walking in front of their booth: “They really are afraid that we’ll jinx them.” So for her, providing aftercare, getting to speak to these children about death, dying, and funeral work was a really important part of community outreach.<sup>22</sup>

Being active in their communities, discount funeral homes, accommodating unusual requests, and green burials are just some of the myriad ways funeral directors create social solidarity with their communities. In the next two chapters, I will demonstrate how, through this solidarity and through their liminal roles in our society, funeral directors facilitate *communitas* for mourners.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> William E. Thompson, "Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead: Morticians and Funeral Directors," *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12 (1991): 403.
- <sup>2</sup> Geoffrey, Cook Fields Funeral Home, interview, October 9, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> M.C. Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death and Dying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 278.
- <sup>4</sup> Cook Fields Funeral Home, field notes, October 9, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Rick, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Tom, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Ronald, Jefferson & Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 9, 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> Ryan, Jefferson & Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 10, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Rick, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Tom, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009. Current population of Batesville is just over 6500, according to the latest census.
- <sup>12</sup> Ryan, Jefferson & Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 10, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Mike, Barlow Funeral Home, interview, October 7, 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Geoffrey, Cook Fields Funeral Home, interview, October 9, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, March 4, 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>17</sup> Ronald, Jefferson & Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 9, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Mark, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, June 18, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Rick, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald, Jefferson & Richardson Funeral Centers, interview, March 9, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Gail, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, July 9, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.

## CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS

### 6.1: Introduction

As was previously mentioned, it is my argument that funeral directors, in their role as both actor and director in funerary custom, through their liminal status as death workers and the social solidarity they create with their communities, facilitate *communitas* for mourners.

The funeral director functions both as an actor and a director. He has roles within the relationship of mourner to death worker: He is respectful, he is familiar when necessary, he jokes, or is serious when necessary, and it is part of his role to determine exactly what the mourner will need in each interaction. In this case, he is perhaps a master at improvisation. His movement back and forth between director of ritual and actor within ritual is one more example of his liminality, his lack of concrete place. He is always crossing these borders. In a small town, he will know the mourners, and will act with empathy. In a larger setting, he will act with sympathy. His liminality is what makes people comfortable baring their souls to him. If the modern American ideal is a society with no death, does the funeral director with his living tableaux and focus on the life of the individual give this to us as much as he can?

In American society, which values the individual above all else, and which also tends to require that mourning be done, if publicly, then quietly and tastefully, is social solidarity maintained by the average American funeral? Do we suffer in silence, alone? Or are we bonded together by the knowledge that we are all suffering silently and alone? Does the utilization of the funeral director and funeral home preclude the social ties that Turner discusses? How involved are we as creators of the social drama of a funeral? Since the preparation is no longer in our hands, are we no longer united as creators?

Every funeral director I've spoken to insists that he works with the living. In our death-denying society, we seem to have lost the ability to connect with the deceased and our fellow mourners. I believe that the most important work funeral directors do is to help us connect with each other while we try to navigate our liminalizing grief. In this chapter, I will analyze the data I recorded and discussed in the first several chapters, in terms of the theoretical frameworks I discussed in Chapter 2, and attempt to explain what it means for funeral directors to facilitate *communitas*, how they do this, and in what ways I observed this happening.

## 6.2: Analysis of Performance Data

I mentioned early on in my chapter about performance data that I recognized performance almost immediately in my fieldwork observations, as I watched the wife of a funeral director clean up after a funeral. Funeral directors themselves see the performative nature of their work as well. At one point, two

of my consultants were discussing the negative view some people have of the funeral industry, which critics see as filled with money-hungry businesses who take advantage of people in one of their most vulnerable states.<sup>1</sup> These two consultants likened their work to a play: “people get mad because they feel they’re being gouged, but they don’t see the production—lights, costumes, etc. All those people have to be paid. Funeral directors have to pay staff, embalmers, etc., and they also have to pay for utilities and things.”<sup>2</sup> Funeral directors acknowledge that there is performance involved in the work they do.

Victor Turner has written extensively about the connection between ritual and performance: “I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance*, *enactment*, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules ‘frame’ the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame.”<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 2 I asked some questions regarding the fluid nature of ritual as performance. Regarding funeral direction as encompassing rituals not only in the funeral itself but also in the preparation and post-funeral events, how does the funeral transcend its frame?

One of the most common phrases I heard in interviews and fieldwork was “cookie-cutter funeral.” To varying degrees, the funeral directors I worked with encouraged their families to adjust the look and performance of the funeral to create a more individualized ritual. Where some folks prefer to have the deceased person in a suit or dress, others change that as well—my uncle and cousins, for example, were all buried wearing the sweatshirt of their respective favorite sports team. There are now cap panels and LifeSymbols, both of which allow the families to personalize the casket with things the deceased loved in life.

Some homes even allow motorcycles and other large props to be included in the tableau with the body.

There are larger changes as well. I was able to see the retort (cremating machine) used by one of the funeral homes I worked with. They told me that some religions, such as Hindu, traditionally involved the family cremating the body, so they will allow people to gather at the retort and participate in the cremation process.

With the push toward DIY funerals and green burials, most of the homes I worked with included more options than in a traditional funeral. People can wash and dress the deceased, build their own caskets, or bury the deceased in biodegradable shrouds. More broadly, people can have cremated remains turned into memorial reefs, fireworks, tattoo ink, or even shot into space. Indiana has strict laws that require the presence of a licensed funeral director in the picking up of a body and embalming (not everyone who works with mourning families can embalm), as well as regarding body viewing and disposal (burial or cremation), so there is not quite the broad variation as may exist in other states, yet the funeral directors I worked with will do what they can to provide a personalized experience.

Victor Turner writes: “the questions that lie at the foundation of theatre and theatrical performance lie at the foundation of ritual and ritual performance—questions about the relationship of actors to text, of actors to audience, of fiction to fictive reality, and so on.”<sup>4</sup> So if we look at funeral ritual as a performance, we begin to see questions about these relationships emerge. What is the

relationship of the actors (funeral directors, mourners, ministers, friends) to the narrative script of the funeral? What roles do people play? Quiet or raging grief? Emotional support or supported? Family friend? Spouse? Child? Who touches the body and who can't look? Do people say the expected lines, such as "I'm so sorry to hear about..." "...in a better place," "How are you *doing*?" Who performs the eulogy? When is the point that people cease to express dislike for the deceased and begin speaking of him or her as "such a good person"? All of these questions lie at the foundation of funerary ritual performance. I witnessed some of the possible answers to these questions as I was conducting my fieldwork.

From my first day of fieldwork, in which I observed a funeral at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, I saw examples of various roles played. Roles played are usually the most obvious answers to those questions mentioned above. As I watched Susan put away chairs and straighten up following the funeral, I saw a stage crew striking the set following a performance.

As I progressed in my fieldwork, I saw other roles and rituals demonstrated by the funeral workers. There was a lot of behind-the-scenes action, aspects of funerary ritual that most scholars ignore. As Schechner writes: "In limiting their investigations mostly to what happens during the performance itself, scholars are following modern Euro-American theatrical convention: You don't go backstage unless you're part of the show."<sup>5</sup> As my work focused on the funeral directors themselves, rather than mourning ritual, the pre- and post-performance practices were more relevant. This included staging, in terms of the

layout of the room in which the viewing would be held, including where flowers and photos would go; where to set up funeral cards and guest books, and even lining up of the cars for the procession to the grave site. Once at the grave site, there would be the set-up of chairs and flowers around the grave.

Embalming, dressing, and making up the body is an essential part of an open-casket funeral, and can also be seen in light of performance theory. The look of the body affects whether or not the mourners see the funeral as having been a good or bad one. It is part of the staging, but it can also be seen as part of the costuming in funerary performance. Where mourners are expected to wear black or other dark colors, and traditionally wear more formal attire, the deceased also has dress requirements for his or her role. Again, traditionally, the deceased would be put in a suit or dress; these days, however, often an outfit is picked that represents the person at his or her most alive moments.

Further, prepping the bodies is much like the behind-the-scenes ritual processes that Richard Schechner discusses as part of the “seven-part sequence of training, workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath.”<sup>6</sup> Schechner talks about how the performers still have rituals to follow before and after the actual performance, even though they are not public.<sup>7</sup> The tableau is always set up before the mourners show up. The body is embalmed, dressed, set into the casket. The mourners don’t even really see the funeral directors lining up the cars—as I have mentioned, until I began my fieldwork, I had always assumed that the mourners themselves did this.

Then there are the rituals that happen after the funeral is over, such as the actual burial or cremation of the body.

The role that seems to be one of the most important to the funeral directors themselves is that of active community member. This takes many forms, including sponsoring little league teams or community events, or participating individually in social groups and activities. As I have mentioned several times, everyone I worked with made it clear that they see their jobs as working with the living, rather than the deceased. In regards to their business, they focus on the families they serve, and being active in their communities seems to be an extension of this focus. I will discuss this more deeply later on in my analysis as I connect their liminality and their focus on social solidarity to the experience of *communitas* mourners feel at funerals.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Durkheim argues that mourning rituals and the roles that are fulfilled by mourners function as maintenance of social ties, be they familial, friendly, or otherwise.<sup>8</sup> As the relationships between the deceased and the bereaved vary, so too do the performances of those involved in the funeral.

The mourners at the first funeral I attended at Colley, Frank, and Froebisch seemed to demonstrate their closeness with the deceased, as I suppose is true at most funerals, by the level of grief displayed. The adult children of the deceased cried the most, although no one was very loud. This funeral involved the directors, the mourners, a family member giving the eulogy, and friends and more distant family there for support.

The same was true at the next funeral I attended with CFF. This was the funeral of a war veteran, and included the 21 gun salute, which has its own ritual and performative aspects. In addition to the same roles and performances in the funeral previously mentioned, this one also involved a minister at the grave site, as well as the employees of the cemetery, who would bury the casket once everyone had left.

I also wondered about the differences in behavior of the funeral directors when there were no families around. How did their performance of funerary ritual vary from their other day-to-day activities? Victor Turner writes:

One has the feeling that rituals are magical, that for some reason as yet unknown to science they can communicate to people, not despite their artificiality, but because of and through their artificiality. Rituals are efficacious and we wonder how. Just as we know that a good stage magician is performing tricks—that is, really not levitating that elephant or sawing that woman in half—we still marvel at the beauty of the illusion and the mastery with which it is presented; so we marvel at the mastery of illusion in ritual while we affirm its illusory nature...Perhaps this is the critical difference between aesthetic theatre and ritual—the actors on stage must always seem to be the characters they portray or they have failed; the ritualist must always seem to be nothing other than what he is, a frail human being playing with those things that kill us for their sport. Stage drama is about the extrapolation of the individual into alien roles and personalities; ritual drama is about the complete delimitation, the total definition of person.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of the funeral director, does this ritualist always seem to be a fellow frail human playing with grief? Perhaps if mourners were to see the funeral director as he is when he is merely funeral home employee, his in-the-background-but-there-when-you-need-him image would be shattered. We marvel at the illusion of life he has created with the funeral tableau—do we really want to know the trick?

In several places my notes discuss these differences. At one point I compared two consultants, Mark and Donald, and the way they acted with families versus how they acted in the office. They demonstrated different speaking styles with their families, the former more reserved, and the latter more empathetic. I believed the difference in their demeanor to be related to the nature of each funeral—Mark’s family was burying a 96 year old, and Donald’s was mourning the sudden loss of an infant. One line from my notes regarding this difference sticks out to me: “It’s almost as if they behave the way they think the family needs them to behave.”<sup>10</sup> This illustrates perfectly to me the fluid nature of the roles a funeral director can or will play.

Bernard Smale, in an essay on Funeral Directing in Britain, writes:

Bereavement roles are neither sought nor willingly accepted, and few of those who become newly located realize the degree to which they are guided, however benignly, by directors. For example, whilst a bereaved wife is “virtually” a widow immediately upon her husband’s death she is, in a sense, in limbo. The activities and sentiments developed through the funeral ceremony ratify her “actual” status as a widow; by passing through a sequence of events she emerges significantly changed.<sup>11</sup>

I witnessed people create a sense of solidarity with grieving families, giving them what they needed—did they need someone to take care of all the details because they were too distraught? Did they need someone to act as an empathetic ear or shoulder? Did they need someone to ensure a business transaction happen smoothly? Whatever the issue, the funeral director shifts and changes to fill these needs, and guides them through their roles in the grieving process. This fluidity is created and maintained by their liminal status in our society.

### 6.3: Analysis of Liminality Data

Those in the funeral industry occupy a liminal space in US culture. This is manifested primarily in two ways. One is our fear of death, which keeps anything to do with death in the margins, including those who do death work. Two is the work the funeral director does, which, from the outsider point-of-view, focuses on our final rite of passage from life into death, the liminal time in this rite of passage—our mourning, the deceased person’s status after death but before burial.

There has been much written about funerary and mourning ritual as a rite of passage and its liminal phase. Turner writes: “Funerary ritual constitutes a passage from one set of ordered relations to another. During the interim period the old order has not yet been obliterated and the new order has not yet come into being.”<sup>12</sup> Van Gennep tells us that:

“[Mourning] is a transitional period for the survivors, and they enter it through rites of separation and emerge from it through rites of reintegration into society. In some cases, the transitional period of the living is a counterpart of the transitional period of the deceased, and the termination of the first sometimes coincides with the termination of the second—that is, with the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead.”<sup>13</sup>

The mourning period involves a parallel transition for the mourners and the deceased. The mourners enter into their liminal phase once a person dies. They must participate in the ritual display of separation from and disposal of the deceased, and once their mourning is over (or at least no longer interrupts daily function), they leave their liminal status and reenter society. The deceased

themselves are entered into liminal status through these same rituals, and leave their own liminality once buried, cremated, or whatever form the disposal takes.

Turner also argues that: “Liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, ‘inoculated’ against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state.”<sup>14</sup>

Mourners are polluting, in the sense that we often feel awkward around people in grief, even if we ourselves have suffered from the death of a loved one. We don’t know what to say, or how to act. Sometimes, when people seem particularly disturbed by their grief, we often even avoid them.

The deceased are polluting, as well. Gary Laderman writes:

At the center of this network of significations and system of symbols related to death was the corpse, an irresistible object that evoked feelings of dread, fear, and resignation as well as reverence, respect, and hope. This object occupied a liminal place in society, and the uncertainty surrounding the lifeless human body led to the necessity of positioning it within a meaningful (physical and imaginative) context.<sup>15</sup>

The dead are polluting in the literal sense, as evidenced by our need to sterilize and embalm dead bodies, as well as laws like those in Indiana which require a licensed funeral director to handle and process them. They are also polluting symbolically. There are many superstitions surrounding dead bodies, such as holding our breath while we pass a cemetery and putting sheets over mirrors. And in our death-phobic society, they represent our greatest fear.

Because of their work, funeral directors are also considered polluting, and are also perpetually liminal. The mourners eventually leave their liminal phase and are reintegrated back into society. The deceased are moved out of their

liminal phase through mourning and disposal rituals. But the funeral director stays in that liminal place, waiting to serve the next group of bereaved.

Turner's definition of liminality also marks those in the funeral industry as perpetually liminal. His definition includes "the condition of being... permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system,"<sup>16</sup> and that "they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs."<sup>17</sup> The idea of death work as polluting, the subsequent marginalization of those doing the work, and the work's permanent focus on the mourning phase of our final rite of passage contribute to their enduring liminality.

As I discussed in the chapter including liminality data, I saw many demonstrations of the liminal status of funeral directors. In interviews, several discussed with me the perceptions people often have of the work they do. Some mentioned that some people are hesitant to shake hands. Others will ask a lot of questions about the work they do, even adding in questions based on misconceptions like cutting bodies to make them fit into a casket or hanging them upside down to drain blood and other fluids.

To me, though, the biggest demonstration of their liminal status was the stories people shared with them. Usually this was just people wanting to share their own experiences with death upon finding out their profession. Carol from Menlowe, for example, told me that she wears her nametag out and about on lunch breaks as permission to talk about death, and the people she encounters on these daily outings often take her up on the opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

Occasionally, people take the opportunity to unload personal and family strife onto the funeral director. Because they are seen as marginal figures, perpetually liminal, they are not seen (in their professional capacity) as members of society, so social rules no longer apply. Whereas most would not share family secrets with strangers, they often feel comfortable doing so with funeral directors. Recall the story shared with me by Bob and Paul from Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, involving the discovery of an affair through the death of a woman's husband.<sup>19</sup> Paul expressed his discomfort at the things people often share with them, telling me that he didn't understand why people told them those things.

This last example also demonstrates the layers of liminality I discovered while working on this project—the funeral directors are marginal figures, so people feel comfortable sharing personal information they would not otherwise share with strangers. And the funeral directors shared those things with me because I was not one of them—not one of the initiated, not a member of the funeral industry.

These layers also manifested in physical space. Turner addresses this corporeal aspect: "The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another."<sup>20</sup> Dead bodies are usually transported from the place of death to the funeral home, and then to the cemetery, or even to a person's home if they choose to keep cremated remains.

Ravina Aggarwal discusses space and liminality as well. She writes:

Because death marks a symbolic and literal border, death rituals are particularly productive junctures for the study of indeterminacy and multimarginality...death rituals themselves induce horizons that are fraught with ambiguity and subject to mediation. Cultural meanings of death are not static, originary, or fixed in predetermined structural oppositions. Rather, they are themselves composed, authenticated, and even disrupted in living space.<sup>21</sup>

The funeral home has many liminal areas that are off-limits to mourners, such as the embalming room, the business office, and other areas marked only for staff. I had my own experiences with not being allowed in certain places. I was not allowed to enter the embalming rooms of most of the funeral homes I worked with, the one exception being Colley, Frank, and Froebisch. Even there, my first day working with them included the experience of Susan shutting the door to the embalming room after she noticed that I glanced in.<sup>22</sup> There were consultations I was not allowed to sit in on, funerals I was not allowed to attend, and I never did accompany anyone on a death run.

#### 6.4: Analysis of Social Solidarity Data

In what seems to be an attempt to counterbalance their marginality, those in the funeral industry seek to create a sense of social solidarity with their communities. They do this in several ways. The funeral homes often sponsor local events or teams, and staff are expected to volunteer or belong to some community service group or organization. To varying degrees, they provide the funeral the family wants, from green burials to motorcycles in the room, and even allowing families to participate in dressing the bodies or cremation. And all

provide some form of aftercare, whether that involves just calling to follow up with families, as happens in smaller towns; offering grief support groups, or even just offering to connect people with resources that can help them deal with their grief.

Durkheim wrote extensively on social solidarity: "For his part, when the individual feels firmly attached to the society to which he belongs, he feels morally bound to share in its grief and its joy. To abandon it would be to break the ties that bind him to the collectivity."<sup>23</sup> Later he writes: "For a family to tolerate that one of its members should die without being mourned would give witness thereby that it lacks moral unity and cohesiveness."<sup>24</sup> Both society and the individual are responsible for requiring and performing ritual acts that maintain social solidarity. The bereaved follow mourning rituals, and the funeral director assists in the production and performance of those rituals. Durkheim argues that societies always have an ideal to which they aspire, and social cohesiveness falls under that ideal. According to Durkheim, then, mourning rituals help in maintaining that ideal.

Above in my discussion of roles involved in funerary ritual, I mentioned that people tend to express grief in relation to their closeness with the deceased. I typically saw adult children of the deceased demonstrating the most grief, likely because the spouse had preceded them in death. This seems to support Durkheim's assertion that demonstrations of grief and rage at the death of the loved one vary in intensity based on the severed relationship.<sup>25</sup>

Durkheim is not alone in his assessment of the important role funeral rites play in creating social solidarity, and that relationships can be demonstrated

through mourning ritual. Van Gennep saw the same connection: “During mourning, the living mourners and the deceased constitute a special group, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and how soon living individuals leave that group depends on the closeness of their relationship with the dead person.”<sup>26</sup> Van Gennep was discussing liminality, but his assertion holds true with what I witnessed both in my research as well as personal experience.

Davin Mandelbaum, in his essay for Feifel’s interdisciplinary collection of essays on death, writes:

Participation in the ceremony has yet another effect on the participants. It gives them a renewed sense of belonging to a social whole, to the entire community...The villagers and visitors go in procession, led by music, to clear the cremation ground, build the pyre, prepare the feast, and do other work in preparation for the ceremony. These group activities and the dancing which follows not only bring general enjoyment but enhance feelings of social unison.<sup>27</sup>

Later he argues that “rites performed for the dead generally have important effects for the living. A funeral ceremony is personal in its focus and is societal in its consequences.”<sup>28</sup> Much like Durkheim, Mandelbaum sees the essential nature of mourning ritual for social cohesion.

Vicki Lensing tells us that Funerals have several goals, including physical, social, psychological, and sometimes religious. She writes:

The social goal is to provide group support for the mourners by the community recognizing the change in relationships brought about by the death. The psychological goals are to assist the mourners in accepting the reality of the death and provide a starting point to process the feelings associated with grief.<sup>29</sup>

Lensing, a funeral director, wrote this article to speak directly to her colleagues in the funeral industry. Her essay speaks directly to the roles played by funeral directors and their work in creating connections with those in mourning.

Perhaps the most significant way in which death workers create social solidarity is through the Othering of death. I mentioned above how mourners are seen as polluting, because we are so death-phobic as a society. We fear death and try to prevent and avoid it as much as we can. We associate those in mourning with death, so we either try to avoid them as well. When we can't, the exchange is often awkward and uncomfortable, because we don't know what to say, even if we have experienced loss and grief ourselves. We cannot face death, so we have the funeral director do it for us. For most mainstream American funerals, funeral directors take care of everything regarding the deceased—when we show up, the living tableau has been created for us. Through the funeral he is able to focus the ritual on life, and we are able to keep death on the margins. Our loved one, made up to resemble his or her living self, doesn't represent death for us. Death is nowhere to be found; death is not present. The funeral director creates social solidarity—us versus them—in this way, but in this instance it becomes us versus death, the ultimate outsider.

### 6.5: Conclusions

Thus far, I have discussed the performative nature of funerary ritual through examples of the funeral directors' roles and performances. I have also addressed the ways that funeral directors are perpetually liminal, and how,

whether to combat that liminality or to utilize it to serve their families, they work to create social solidarity with their communities and the mourners they work with. It is from this perpetually liminal state that funeral directors facilitate *communitas*.

Turner writes: “*Communitas* is most evident in ‘liminality,’ a concept I extend from its use in Van Gennep’s *Les Rites de Passage* to refer to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life.”<sup>30</sup> Later, he argues that “in liminality, *communitas* tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition.”<sup>31</sup> As has been discussed above, mourners are liminal while they are going through the funeral process, and funeral directors are liminal because their work centers on the funeral process. And even though we are not experiencing the same transitional period, we almost always perform the funerary ritual process with them. We are connected because they are perpetually liminal, and their liminality allows us to connect and reconnect with one another.

Because we are a death-phobic, death-denying culture, the transition through the mourning process is rarely easy. We are afraid of death particularly because it makes us feel emotionally connected to those we have lost, in such a way that threatens our cultural glorification of the individual. We are also forced into a liminal state by death, which is different from our experiences of other rites of passage, which we usually choose to go through. Turner writes: “One might also postulate that the coherence of a completed social drama is itself a function of *communitas*. An incomplete or irresolvable drama would then manifest the

absence of *communitas*.”<sup>32</sup> Death for us potentially creates an irresolvable drama, and the potential for a lack of *communitas*.

I think it is important to recall here that the funeral industry is changing to move beyond a standardized ritual experience for funerals in the US. In many cultures, funerary ritual, like any other ritual, follows specific patterns to which it is essential to stick to. Indeed, Durkheim’s analysis of funerary ritual among indigenous Australians demonstrates the importance of adherence to patterns and expected behavior. And it is perhaps these patterns that make achievement of *communitas* easier during the liminal phase of this type of ritual. However, in the US, individuality is valued above the community, which is reflected in this move away from the “cookie-cutter” funeral. The funeral directors I spoke with told me that the move was initiated by funeral goers, rather than by the industry itself. And this makes sense. Individuality is threatened by our emotional reaction to the death of a loved one, which is sort of a double social breach—there is the death itself, and then the forced acknowledgment that the person mattered to us; their loss is *felt*. In trying to maintain individuality vicariously through the deceased, we hinder our own potential achievement of *communitas*. So the funeral director’s work here is two-fold: by giving people the funeral they want, funeral directors earn or maintain the trust of their families; this trust then makes mourners more amenable to the resolution of the social breach, and thus attainment of *communitas*.

When he discusses the four stages of social drama, Turner also addresses the possibility of a resultant permanent schism. As I saw through my

fieldwork as well as in my own personal experiences, relationships can be irrevocably damaged by death. He writes:

This process only works where there is already a high level of *communitas* in the society that performs the ritual, the sense that a basic generic bond is recognized beneath all its hierarchical and segmentary differences and oppositions. *Communitas* in ritual can only be invoked easily when there are many occasions outside the ritual on which *communitas* has been achieved. It is also true that if *communitas* can be developed within a ritual pattern it can be carried over into secular life for a while and help to mitigate or assuage some of the abrasiveness of social conflicts rooted in conflicts of material interest or discrepancies in the ordering of social relations.<sup>33</sup>

Funeral directors, who see the work they do as a service to the living, often function as mediators between family members. This work would not be possible if they were merely seen as polluting, fringe-dwelling outsiders. But because social solidarity with their communities is already established, they are able to help us make that connection with each other.

Turner argues that *communitas* is essential to our ability to function as social beings: “exposure to or immersion in *communitas* seems to be an indispensable human social requirement. People have a real need...to doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status from time to time even if only to don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade.”<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, in discussing our need for *communitas*, he writes: “What [people] seek is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared.”<sup>35</sup> We see mourners as polluting-- we fear what they represent. They need to connect to others, but since we try to deny death, *communitas* isn’t always easily achieved. Funeral directors help

people do this by effectively moving them through this rite of passage to the experience of *communitas*.

Because of the specific way that we fear death—emotion is to be avoided as much as possible—we run the risk of an unresolved social breach and a lack of *communitas*. *Communitas* is essential to our ability to function as social beings. People, as social animals, fundamentally need to connect with each other through shared profound experiences—profound because the connection is then deeper. Without *communitas*, there would be no social cohesion, and for society to exist, there has to be cohesion and connection. So through death, we're put in this situation where, as people with a specific world view that favors individuality and independence, we need to connect to each other to be able to heal, but we are fighting it every step of the way. The funeral director, because of his perpetually liminal status, is able to move easily in the peripheries of our consciousness to effectively give us a ceremony that celebrates our independence and individuality (staying away from cookie-cutter funerals), while encouraging us to connect with each other through various means, whether that is prayer at a religious ceremony, sharing stories, knowing when to be light-hearted, or knowing when to be reserved. They can be present when we need them to be present, and they can disappear when we need them to disappear—we don't see them setting up the viewing, or the guest book, or lining up the cars, or connecting with the minister. Simultaneously part of our culture and liminal to it, the funeral director can swing in and out of our awareness. They are always adapting to what we want as a culture—developing green embalming chemicals

in order to provide open casket viewing for those who want them, cap panels, and even having people sitting up at their own funeral.

I believe that funeral directors are thus providing for us a seemingly unique experience, while still helping us perform the common rituals necessary for achieving *communitas*. For us, death is the ultimate breach in social relationships, and because of the way we try to avoid dealing with it, we often are faced with an incomplete social drama, in which there is no resolution or acknowledgment of permanent separation. Funeral directors can use the performance of funerary ritual and their own performances as directors of the action to help us reach the resolution we need to complete the social drama created by a death.

If the modern American ideal is a society with no death, funeral directors, through performances as director and actor, with their living tableaux and focus on the life of the individual, give this to us as much as they can. Social solidarity is about in-group/out-group dynamics, and *communitas* is a sense of camaraderie we feel when we have a shared experience. The funeral director offers us the shared experience of collective grief in the funeral. Through his production of the funeral—in handling the dead, giving us a show of life, indeed allowing us to keep death marginalized—he preserves social solidarity with us by maintaining death as the outsider. As we the living are the insiders, death becomes the ultimate Other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, 1963; Lisa Carlson, *Caring For Your Own Dead*, 1987; memorial societies, discount funeral homes.

<sup>2</sup> Field notes, Menlowe Funeral Home, June 25, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 392-393.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Field notes, Menlowe Funeral Home, June 25, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Smale, "The Social Construction of Funerals," in *The Unknown Country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA* (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1997), 117-118.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, ed. Edith L.B. Turner (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 41.

- <sup>13</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 147.
- <sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97.
- <sup>15</sup> Gary Laderman, "Locating the Dead: A Cultural History of Death in the Antebellum, Anglo-Protestant Communities of the Northeast," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), 31.
- <sup>16</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 232-233.
- <sup>17</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 125.
- <sup>18</sup> Carol, Menlowe Funeral Home, interview, September 7, 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, April 10, 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, 25.
- <sup>21</sup> Ravina Aggarwal, "At the Margins of Death: Ritual Space and the Politics of Location in an Indo-Himalayan Border Village," in *American Ethnologist* 28, No. 3 (August 2001), 550.
- <sup>22</sup> Colley, Frank, and Froebisch, field notes, March 4, 2009.
- <sup>23</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 403.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 391.
- <sup>26</sup> van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 147.

<sup>27</sup> David G. Mandelbaum, "Social Uses of Funeral Rites," in *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959), 196.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>29</sup> Vicki Lensing, "Grief Support: The Role of Funeral Service," in *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 6 (2001), 49.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 138.

## EPILOGUE

Since beginning the revision process, three more people in my life have died. In February, my aunt lost her life to cancer. In March, another aunt suffered a stroke, and died after a week of hospice care. Yesterday, while driving home from a weekend spent in Cincinnati with family, I received a phone call that my grandmother, who was also recently placed under hospice care after lately rapidly deteriorating after years of suffering from dementia, had finally succumbed. All three of these deaths brought about relief in their own ways. Untreatable cancer, the deepest depression I have ever witnessed, and the complete loss of faculties were not, in my opinion, truly livable situations. Still, I loved all three of these women, and I am saddened by each loss.

The first aunt donated her body to science, and my grandmother's death is so recent, that the only funeral I've attended this year was that of my second aunt. After working on this project for so many years, it was difficult to shut off the part of my brain that insisted on observing the different actions the funeral directors took to care for my family. Once again, I watched two men, the current generation of funeral directors from a home my family has turned to several times, shift fluidly from directing us all to move to certain rooms, to recite certain prayers, to note the guest book and prayer cards; to fade into the background as

we said our goodbyes, comforted each other, and laughed while sharing memories.

My aunt had left the Catholic Church decades ago, upon being “excommunicated” by her local priest when she remarried following a divorce. After her youngest shot himself, she began reconnecting to the faith of her childhood, so there were certain requirements she insisted on for her funeral—some of those earlier patterns that traditional Catholic funerary ritual adhered to. And they were there, like the kneeler in front of her coffin or the rosary wrapped in her folded hands. But she also had her Poopsie sweatshirt on (“Poopsie” was what she called my uncle), and photos of her family resting underneath her hands. The funeral directors had given her her traditional and individualized funeral. And they had given us a chance to reconnect—my cousin-in-law, estranged from my aunt (and thus my immediate family, as my aunt was always with us for family get-togethers) following the suicide of my cousin, was there, mourning along with the rest of us. Family I hadn’t seen in years gathered together to say good-bye to my aunt. We each took our turn saying good-bye to my aunt, but because she had been so well taken care of by the funeral home, we were able to focus on each other, rather than a bad embalming, or a mishandled eulogy. My cousin committed suicide the year I began my doctoral studies, and it created a social breach that we had not been able to resolve in 13 years. His mother died the year that I am finishing my studies, and the unresolved social breach created by my cousin was finally mended with the help of these two funeral directors. They joked with us, prayed with us, expressed

sympathy for us; they took charge when we needed them to, and they disappeared into the background when we needed to focus on each other. Their work with my aunt and with us helped us connect in that deep, visceral, meaningful way that is *communitas*.

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VITA

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### EDUCATION

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 Ph.D., American Studies, 2016  
 Specialization: Cultural Anthropology  
 Advisor: Andrew Buckser

M.A., Linguistics, 2002

**Miami University**, Oxford, OH  
 B.A., Creative Writing and Linguistics, 1999

### PROFESSIONAL AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

August 2015-Present      **Instructor**, Ivy Tech Community College  
 Course: Cultural Anthropology

January 2014-Present      **Instructor**, Indiana University Purdue University  
 Indianapolis  
 Courses: A Question of American Identity;  
 Introduction to Cultural Anthropology; A Question of  
 American Community; Introduction to American  
 Studies

August 2003 – May 2008      **Teaching Assistant**, Sociology and Anthropology  
 Department, Purdue University  
 Courses: Introduction to Anthropology, Andrew  
 Buckser, O. Michael Watson: grading and discussion  
 section instruction  
 Cultural Diversity, O. Michael Watson, Andrew  
 Buckser; Gender and Anthropology, Evelyn

Blackwood; Indians of North America, O. Michael  
 Watson: grading  
**Graduate Instructor**, Visual Anthropology; Cultural  
 Diversity

January 2001 - May 2001 **Teaching Assistant**, for the Chair of the  
 Interdepartmental Program in Linguistics at Purdue  
 University, Ronnie Wilbur: primarily involved  
 administrative work, as well as some assistant editing  
 for the linguistic journal, *Sign Language & Linguistics*

## PRESENTATIONS

"Final Girls: Helpless Victims or Empowered Heroines?" (March 2004). Purdue  
 American Studies Symposium

"The Magic Mask: Folklore in Film." (October 2004). Midwest Popular Culture  
 Conference

"From *Blacula* to *Vampiyaz*: The Blaxploitation Horror Film." (March 2005).  
 Purdue American Studies Symposium

"An Interdisciplinary Study of Funeral Directors in Indiana." (October 2008).  
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"An Interdisciplinary Ethnographic Study of Funeral Directors in Indiana." (April  
 2009). Central States Anthropological Society Annual Conference