

I Never Wanted to Become a Mortician...
but in some ways I have become one.

Tim Schnabel

When I was a boy wondering out loud what kind of “job” I might enjoy doing as a grown up, my mother thought I would make a good mortician. Aside from complimenting me on my friendliness and my caring about people, she focused on the material benefits and the smart uniform (suit) required by the profession. My sisters and I were aware that our classmates whose fathers owned the two local funeral homes never wanted for much in the world of stuff. And if having “stuff” were a measure of success, my mother surely wanted that for her children.

However, while extending support to the bereaved seemed to be a calling, I was never intrigued with the science of the mortuary business. The role of a compassionate mortician is critical to any successful funeral home and of solace to a deeply grieving family. I realized long ago that there was little that could be done to assuage the profound and long-term loss of the bereaved with a short-term relationship between mortician and surviving relatives. I was clear I wanted to do more - much more.

I knew as a young man I would carve a career in a helping profession – teacher, therapist, coach, and consultant. Today, I am privileged to work with individuals, couples, families and organizations, helping them make the changes with which they are satisfied leading to more fulfilling lives. Being in relationship with patients where there can often be hurt, pain, scare, anger and sadness can be challenging. Mine is most often a joyful profession because it is one of healing, reconnection and new possibilities.

However, as a part of my profession, I have unwittingly become an undertaker or mortician. Some of the couples I see as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist have unknowingly hired me to help them dismantle their painful and often long-term unfulfilling marriage. I sadly become witness to a death... the grieving and mourning of broken dreams and the eventual permanent loss of a primary relationship.

It did not have to come to this for a good many of these couples! Had they been willing to seek help much earlier, they might have found a way to repair and heal, to solve problems cooperatively instead of competitively. They could have discovered ways to infuse their relationship with vitality, trust, comfort, passion and renewed commitment. By doing so, they could have actually become stronger individually and as a couple.

Unfortunately for these folks, postponing seeking help for as long as they have, it is a stretch beyond their reach overcoming entrenched bitterness, hurt, resignation and sometimes... contempt.

Painfully, these folks show up in my office with their relationship already showing signs of advanced rigormortis. As I am pro-marriage, it is not my job to play God and foretell;

it is my job to create a safe enough space where, after repairing what they can, they come to their own realizations and decisions. It is a profoundly touching moment when one or both express to the other, “I don’t want to hurt you, but I don’t want to do this anymore.” There is relief in letting go... Often one partner or both will follow with, “I wish we had come here years ago.”

When this occurs what I can do, as I am not anti-divorce, is help them dismantle their marriage with dignity and, where there are children, foster the creation of an emerging bi-nuclear family with a minimum of suffering. There are two types of divorces: one with pain and hurt; the other with pain and hurt cloaked in hostility. If a couple can begin closure on their marriage without resorting to blame, making the other wrong and therefore punishing, then in a somewhat bittersweet manner, my mother was partly right – I make a good mortician.

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