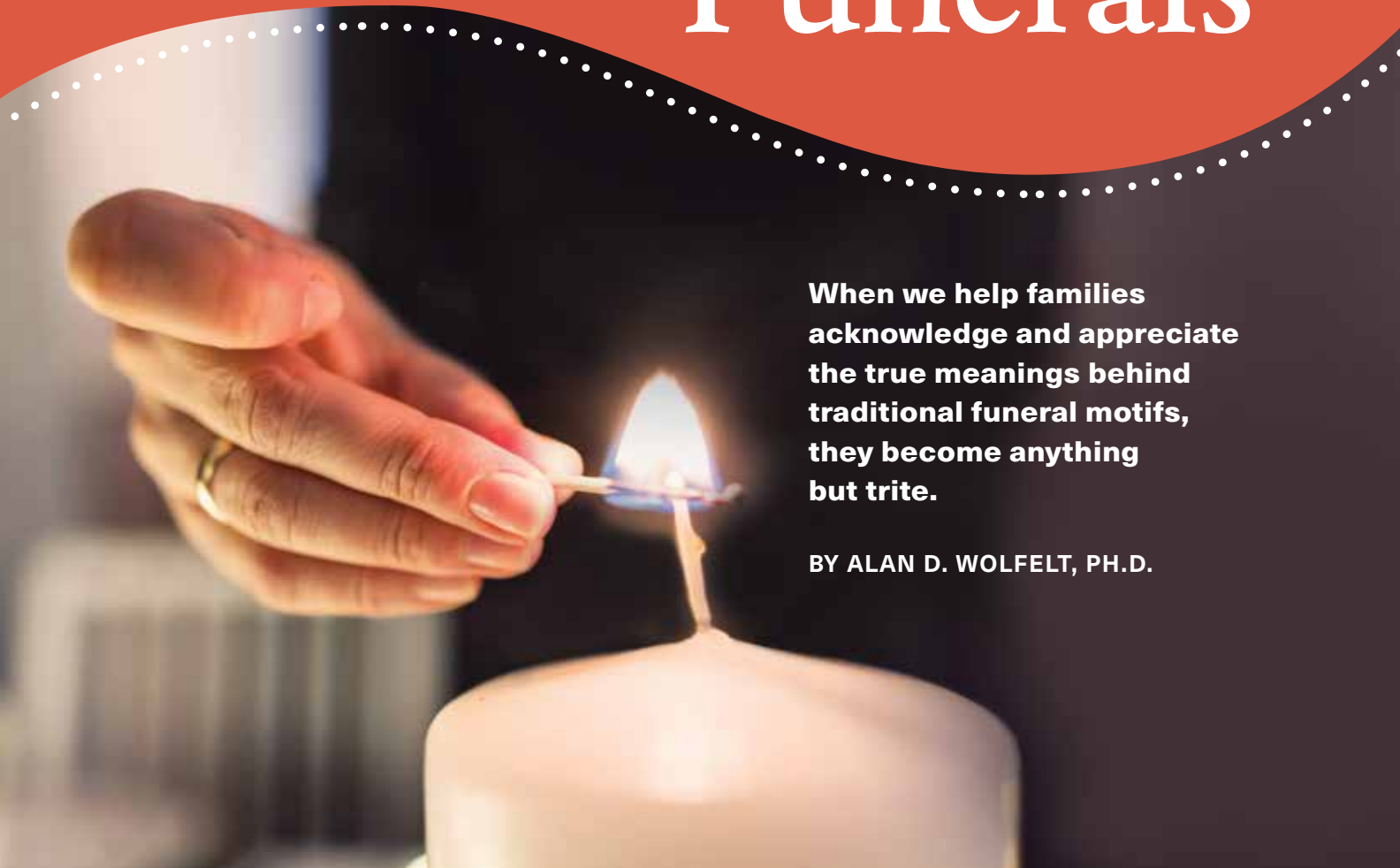




The Value of Symbols *in* Funerals

**When we help families
acknowledge and appreciate
the true meanings behind
traditional funeral motifs,
they become anything
but trite.**

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

Even those of us who work in funeral service sometimes take the funeral ceremony and its common elements for granted. We can forget that people who have never been to or planned a funeral might be mystified by the elements that make up a service. If they have never been educated about those elements, they are likelier to dismiss them as unnecessary or even trite. This puts them at risk of living out what T.S. Eliot observed years ago: You can have an experience and miss the meaning.

In previous articles, I've advocated for educating families about the value of funeral elements such as visitations, music and eulogies. Here, I will outline the value of symbols. My hope is that this will inspire you to harmonize your offerings and suggestions as you work to honor families' choices.

A symbol's value refers to the meaning it conveys and the distinction it represents in a specific context. In the funeral ceremony, symbols such as crosses (for Christians; other faiths use different symbols), flowers and candles provide points of focus and comfort for mourners. Doves and butterflies symbolize peace and the release of the soul from the body.

In many cultures, the ultimate funeral symbol is the precious body of the decedent. Another example is a headstone, a symbol to which we can return repeatedly, even generations after a loss, to honor someone who has died.

Because they represent such profound beliefs and values, these symbols can encourage

the transformation of grief (i.e., the internal response to loss) into mourning (i.e., the shared social response to loss). Furthermore, symbols provide the comfort of tradition. Their continuity and timelessness ground mourners at a time when all else seems chaotic.

Educating families about what the various funeral symbols represent might help them feel more comfortable with including such imagery or items in their ceremonies.

Some families like to provide funeral attendees with a small gift that reflects the person who died. For example, if he or she were a gardener, they'd give out a packet of seeds; a golfer, a golf ball or tees; a car enthusiast, a miniature model car.

Some funeral symbols are mostly social, particularly flowers and food. They rep-

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resent support and love when words elude us. Even the tradition of wearing black to funerals is socially symbolic. It says, "We are bereaved. Please give us your consideration and support."

Flowers and food, however, are sometimes judged as unnecessary by bereaved families. "We don't need all those flowers or that food," they say. Encourage them to set logic aside and consider the flowers and food symbols of love and support; accepting them from friends is, in essence, accepting their support. As Cesar Chavez once noted, "The people who give you their food give you their heart." Provid-

Symbol	Meaning
Candle flame	<i>Spirit, life after death</i>
Cross	<i>Faith</i>
Doves	<i>Peace</i>
Butterfly	<i>Transformation, release</i>
Angels	<i>Protection of the soul</i>
Cup	<i>Nourishment, abundance, faith, comfort</i>
Jewelry	<i>Connection through linking objects</i>
Flowers	<i>Support, love, beauty</i>
Trees	<i>Continuity, eternal growth</i>
Water	<i>Source of life</i>
Food	<i>Support, comfort</i>

ing food for families in grief is a beautiful way to express support.

Symbols hold the unique ability to make meaning, convey history and bestow value that transcends spoken language.

Symbols shouldn't be tied down by literal or logical interpretations. We all know that flowers die, but this doesn't mean they aren't a powerful symbol of love and life. To the family, it might not seem like they need another tuna casserole, but that's not necessarily the point. It's about what the gift represents: community, comfort, care. An Oxford study, among others, has shown that "breaking bread together" promotes emotional

and physical well-being. Sharing food as you tell stories about the decedent often elicits genuine tears and laughter.

Some families employ the "in lieu of flowers" option to redirect friends who want to demonstrate support. Although donations to a meaningful charity might seem to have more lasting value, I would suggest encouraging families to consider saying, "In [their] memory, donations may be made to..." and avoiding "in lieu of flowers" altogether. That way, friends and family members who wish to give flowers – socially understood to convey love, beauty and support – can still do so.

When you see a family that is considering eliminating traditional symbols in the funeral ceremony, I encourage you to

step into your educator role. Tell them that for all of human history, symbols have been a powerful medium for the expression of authentic emotion. Symbols hold the unique ability to make meaning, convey history and bestow value that transcends spoken language. ☰

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. Contact him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.



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