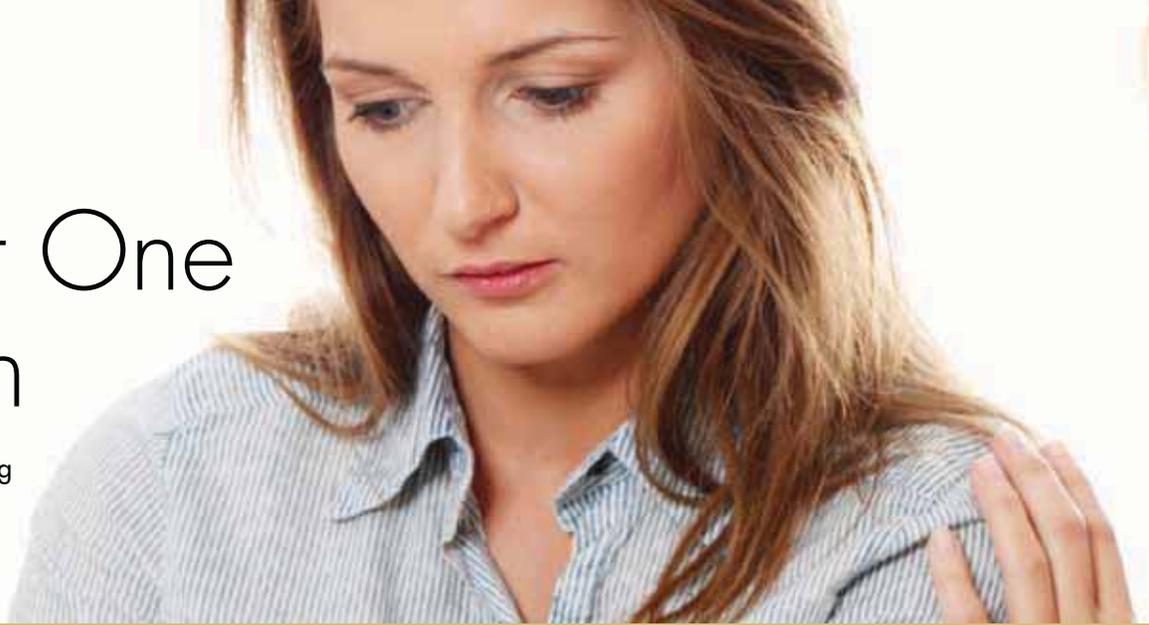


The First One to Touch

by Doug Manning



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When my wife died eleven months ago I wrote an article about that experience and the role of the funeral director in the process. The article stirred up a great deal of comment and a wide range of responses. Several wrote to tell me how sorry they were that I was mistreated and assured me that it would not have happened in their funeral home. One even offered to fly to my home to give me comfort. I appreciated each response, but felt that the point was missed. The article was not about any failure on the part of my funeral home. They did their jobs very well. My point was that the way we define our jobs does not meet the needs of grieving families.

One funeral director wrote to say that he had never agreed with what I had written in the past and that I owed every hard-working funeral director an apology. I wrote him back and said I was sorry he disagreed but I stood by what I had said in the article. Now these months later, I do want to apologize. Not for what I wrote, I still stand by every word and concept. But I want to apologize because I did not go to the next step and talk about what we could do to fix the problem. I have always responded negatively to those who only know what is wrong but have no solutions to the problems that they rant about. When I was a clergy person I used to jokingly say that I was a “problem mentioner” not a “problem solver.” After I told folks what was wrong, my job was done. And I did just that in the article.

I should have also made it clear that the funeral directors are not the only ones who miss meeting the needs of grieving families. The church gets a tremendous amount of criticism and loses many members through their lack of knowledge or interest in responding to the hurts of their own members. Too often even friends do not know how to respond and miss the chance to help.

This leaves the funeral profession with a great opportunity to be the first ones to touch a family and, believe me, the first one to touch becomes

the hero. The issue then becomes - what does the funeral director need to do to be the first one to touch?

Even though the needs are simple, this is not an easy question to answer. How someone in a small town funeral home responds will certainly differ from how someone in a busy funeral home in a large city responds. The principles are the same for both person, but each must find their own way to meet the needs of the bereaved. For some it will require a great deal of staff training and major changes in the structure of their business. Others will just need to realize the need is there and learn new ways of responding.

Perhaps the best way to respond to the question of “How do we do it?” would be for me to walk through my experience step-by-step and explain what I needed and how the funeral director could have responded and become the hero.

As soon as Barbara died I wanted and needed to tell someone what was happening to me. I call this “establishing the significance of what I have lost.” This is what families are thinking and feeling when you arrive at first call. They want to tell the “death story.” How it happened, where everyone was, what we saw, heard and felt.

If the person making the call had just sat down with us for a very few moments and allowed us to explain how she died and how it hit us, he would have been a hero. This would not have taken more than ten minutes and the funeral director would not have needed to say more than, “I know this must hurt,” or, “What a shock that must have been.” The family would have taken it from there.

First call is a wonderful time for us to provide a ceremony of passage. Allowing the family time to view the loved one and say goodbye is vitally important. Acknowledging the loss, taking care with the transfer, and simply leaving the bag unzipped and offering a final time is all that is needed to create a ceremony. However, if we are leaving this important and vital moment of touch to

a removal service, an apprentice, or a part-timer, and hoping that they are doing our job for us, do we really know how our families are being treated? This may take some conversation, some oversight, or some changing of job expectations. Every effort should be made to assure that the “touch” of that first impression is exactly what your families need.

If the removal happened when we were not present, then a visit from the funeral home would do wonders. Even after meeting the funeral director at first call, that gap between the death and the time the family comes in to make arrangements needs to be filled. I wrote about “The Gaps” in a previous article in an effort to explain that black hole of time when families are spinning and need a gentle touch of assurance and guidance from the professional they have hired to help them. Once again, it does not take long, but what a difference the touch of a visit or phone call can make.

Ceremonies speak when words fail. Every time we offer a family a way of expressing their grief through simple ceremonies we help them heal and become the ones who touch. Arrangement is a great time for ceremony. Instead of just saying, “I am sorry we have to meet under these circumstances,” the funeral director could have simply lit a candle and said, “This is a time to remember your loved one and to plan a service of remembrance. The candle represents her presence among us and reminds us of a love we have lost.” Sounds simple and it costs a candle, but the family will never forget you taking

the time to notice and remember. The ceremony lets the family know they are in a safe place where they can express their grief.

These are just a couple of examples of the hundreds of ideas for ceremonies that help us heal and allow us to be the first ones to touch. We are actively working at the task of writing ceremonies that can be offered to families at each step of the process and that fit the differing ages and manners of death, as well as devising ways to train staff and make them comfortable in the new world of being the first ones to touch.

Some of the ideas we will offer in the coming articles may be things that you are already doing and we will just provide a new approach or creative twist. You may never have considered some of the suggestions that will be made here and, hopefully, will find a few interesting or exciting new ways to enhance your service to families.

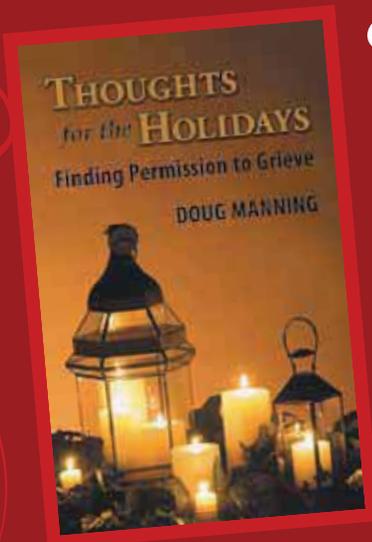
I like the idea of doing more than just mentioning problems. We will be writing more “How to Solve Problems” articles in the months to come.

Doug has been one of the most prominent speakers and authors in the grief counseling field since he started work in this area in 1982. Prior to that, he was a minister for 30 years.

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THOUGHTS by Doug Manning
for the **HOLIDAYS**
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