

# A Final Dress Rehearsal: Interview with a Mortician

by T Newfields

*Charles Purdez (a pseudonym) runs a small funeral home in New England. An undertaker for thirty-two years, he was interviewed by T Newfields in the winter of 2005.*

**Q:** *How did you become interested in this line of work?*

**A:** I was born into. My father had a funeral home and grandad started it all.

**Q:** *What sort of training do undertakers generally undergo?*

**A:** It varies from place to place. In my case, I learned the basics by observing dad. Also, I've always been interested in biology. Some aspects of this job could be called 'scientific', but the most important thing we do is to comfort the living. They are the ones needing help: the dead are in God's hands.

**Q:** *What do you enjoy most and least about this line of work?*

**A:** There's a modicum of job security and steady supply of customers. Like least? You've got to be good at dealing with all sorts of people. Particularly in small towns, you haven't got much privacy. Also, you have to confront prejudice. Most people dislike what they don't understand and have warped ideas about morticians. Necrophiliacs or unduly morbid folks are rare in this profession. And conscientious morticians aren't swindlers either.

**Q:** *Doesn't your work ever get to you?*

**A:** I try to keep my work life and private lives separate. However, I can't help but feel a sense of waste with suicides – it's sad to realize how so many don't value their own lives.

**Q:** *How much does a typical funeral cost?*

**A:** Think of it this way: a funeral should cost about as much as a wedding. It is similar to a wedding in some respects. Most people expect a funeral to

cost a month's earnings or so. Often, however, when all things are factored in it comes closer to what most people earn in year. When I was younger I used to believe this was a huge waste of money. However, if it helps others honor folks dear to them, who can say whether that's a waste?

**Q:** *How's the funeral business changing?*

**A:** Several trends stand out. Cremation is becoming more widespread in many parts of the world. Also, large multinational funeral services are edging out smaller companies. Death is a profitable business and some large funeral services are now listed on stock exchanges. Finally, a backlash against this is emerging through the development of do-it-yourself funeral movements. That's good for the average consumer, but not for me.

**Q:** *What advice do you have for persons looking for a funeral service?*

**A:** First of all, it's good to do the groundwork in advance since we never really know when death will approach. Communicate your preferences to others. Get your memorial preferences down on paper, legally notarized if possible. Since prices for funeral services vary widely, those concerned about money should shop around.

**- T Newfields**

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