Cynicism is certainly no stranger to our profession, sometimes internal and other times from those outside the industry. One example is a disparaging phrase that I have occasionally heard: "I can teach a monkey to embalm!" Presumably this is based on a belief that embalming is mundane, as the deep-rooted saying is based on studies that have shown that monkeys can be taught rudimentary tasks through repetition. But is it fair to characterize embalming as rudimentary? Or to put it another way, should embalming be rudimentary?

Let’s first take a look at one of those monkey studies. Wittig and Richmond (2014) tested seven monkeys on performing basic image-selecting tasks to ascertain if they would remember one or more sample images and forget or ignore the distractor images. The monkeys performed well, initially solving the task using a stimulus repetition rule. Therefore, it is fact that some tasks can be taught to monkeys after continuous repetition priming. Repetition priming refers to a change in behavioral response to a stimulus following re-exposure. This change can be expressed in reaction times, accuracy or response bias, and is often facilitatory in nature.1

So does this pertain to embalming? Candidly, I do believe that all of us are guilty of falling into the same repetitious actions after a couple long days or nights in the preparation room. However, as embalmers we must remember that every deceased body that is lying on our table is special and different and thus deserves special care, including the possibility of extra time and effort or possibly restorative art procedures. Yet too often I find that embalmers are rushed to complete a task, easily dominated by the undertaking at hand, or simply too idle to put in the extra effort. We know it’s wrong, so why does it happen? And how can we change this behavior? Consider the theory of cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Changing Actions not Minds)
Cognitive dissonance, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is, “psychological conflict resulting from simultaneously held incongruous beliefs and attitudes.” Fortunately, our human nature is to parallel our beliefs with our actions. Intrapersonal dissonance is uncomfortable; we prefer congruency in our lives. Cognitive dissonance is a very powerful motivator which will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action.

As an example, smokers continue to smoke despite knowing the harmful effects of their actions. As a previous smoker, I was very aware of the negative effects. I wished to quit, but when someone would counsel me about not smoking, it only made me want to light another cigarette. I needed and wanted to bridge the gap between my beliefs and actions. This tension between opposing thoughts, or cognitive dissonance, was central to changing my behavior. I replaced my morning cigarette and coffee with a morning jog and a half gallon of water. Before I knew it, I was in much better shape and not craving a cigarette as soon as I woke.

As a professional in the field of funeral service I believe we are all motivated to serve and protect families in need. Don’t get caught up in the same old techniques and activities. Be proactive, change repetitious “monkey” behavior, and soon the distress of dissonance will disappear as you raise the standards and make an impact in the profession.

Experimental Research
Let’s say ten patients are waiting in a doctor’s office ready for surgery. No paperwork is filled out, no individual medical history is obtained, and no vital statistics are

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Leading by Example (The Hero Effect)

Forbes magazine says, “Successful leaders have learned the mastery of anticipating business patterns, finding opportunities in pressure situations, serving the people they lead and overcoming hardships.” 3 This definition should match an embalmer’s job description. True leaders in the field of embalming make an impact much further than in the preparation facility.

Forbes goes on to define leaders as those who create an approachable environment, allowing people the comfort to ask questions and share perspectives. Using my own experience as an instructor, I encourage students to do this and have found that they become even more inquisitive, absorb more knowledge, and establish lifelong learning habits. “If you’re not learning, you’re not growing – and over time becoming irrelevant in your work” (Forbes, 2013). Successful leaders must know and share in a collectivism environment with their colleagues.

Especially if you are or will be in management, don’t be that person who is intimidating and doesn’t sway from the way in which you perform. We’ve all known people like that and while they may be good at their job, it is doubtful they will ever experience what I like

to call the “hero effect.” Believe me, it’s a wonderful feeling when you know you made a positive impact, and it also advances the profession.

During our last commencement ceremonies, I actually experienced this hero effect for the first time. Throughout the day, I was approached by several parents of graduates who would usually initiate the conversation along the lines of, “you must be the teacher my child told me about.” I thought that perhaps my younger age must make me stick out like a sore thumb; perhaps I needed some gray hair and some optic facial sulci. The other thought that ran through my head was, “Oh dear, this could be bad.” But in fact what they told me was possibly the most treasured experience of my life: “You are my child’s hero.” That’s what it’s all about.

Going into funeral service, even at a young age, I understood funeral directors/embalmers to be superheroes. They come to the rescue when the family calls and they make the dead look alive. They complete a job that no one else can do or wants to do, all for the benefit of the greater good. We are all heroes but we must continue to learn, think critically and problem-solve in a moment’s notice lead. We must inspire and educate so that we can continue to be heroes for our families and for the new members of our profession.

**Conclusion (Take that and Stick it in your Aspirator)**
Training your monkey is a dubious task and I have to advise you to please not attempt this at home. But if you are still convinced that training your apprentice like a monkey, to embalm a body using the same old techniques and fluid mixtures, go right ahead. However, “results suggest that monkeys performing nonspatial visual short-term memory task are incapable of ignoring information about recency, and have little or no capacity for the active memory processes that humans willfully employ when storing information in working memory” (Wittig & Richmond).

I am not trying to change the way my audience thinks or their beliefs. I am simply providing the tools to change behavior, so that dissonance can be alleviated. I will continue to train my students to be the best embalmers they can be. I will demonstrate for them how to lead and think critically. By giving them the tools to research and experiment with new and innovative techniques, they will inspire all incoming embalmers in the profession to set the highest standards so that they can obtain hero status. I hope that you will too. **FBA**

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