In his popular book *The Tipping Point*, author and social sciences thinker Malcolm Gladwell says that an idea, product or service has reached the tipping point when it has achieved a moment of critical mass or reached its “boiling point.”

Another way to think about it is to picture a seesaw. The tipping point is the moment that, thanks to mass and acceleration, the horizontal board tips from one side of the fulcrum to the other.

As you’re well aware, final disposition has already tipped toward cremation. In 2016 – for the first time – more Americans (50.2%) chose cremation than body burial. But given the mass and acceleration we’ve been seeing for decades, we knew for a long time it was going to tip.

So here we are, in a post cremation-tipped world. As you also already know, NFDA predicts that the seesaw is not going to tip back to body burial. In fact, projections put cremation as the chosen form of disposition for almost 80% of American deaths by 2035.

I would argue, however, that we are still wobbling on the fulcrum when it comes to the future of the funeral. Which way will it tip? Will we tip toward embracing the necessity of full, elements-rich, personalized funerals or will it tip the other way, into a future largely devoid of meaningful death ceremonies?

In many ways, my friends, it’s up to you. It’s up to all of us who are passionate about funeral service.

**CREMATION AND THE SIX NEEDS OF MOURNING**

This article explores the ways in which meaningful funeral ceremonies that include cremation help the bereaved meet their mourning needs so that, ultimately, they can reconcile their grief and go on to find continued meaning in life and living. Since cremation is increasingly a given, it is even more essential that funeral directors educate families about the purposes of funerals and help them craft ceremonies that will help set them on a path to healthy mourning. Cremation is simply a form of disposition, and families need help understanding that funerals are essential rites of passage, regardless of the means of disposition.
**MOURNING NEED**  
**Acknowledge the Reality of the Death**

When someone we love dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and finality of the death if we are to move forward with our grief. Typically, we embrace this reality in two phases. First, we acknowledge the death with our minds; we are told that someone we loved has died and, intellectually at least, we understand the fact of the death. Over the course of the following days and weeks, and with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

You have opportunities to help cremation families understand the importance of confronting the reality of death. Encourage them to spend time with the body before cremation. Offer them the option of a public or private viewing of the body, as well as a full ceremony followed by cremation. Try to keep the guest of honor around for as long as possible. In the funeral process, sequence is important, and historically, one of the last things we did is take care of the disposition of the body. (Of course, stay sensitive to cultural differences in the meaning and appropriateness of body viewing.) Be sure to provide the option of having family members accompany the body to the crematory. According to NFDA research, fewer than 12% of Americans associate cremation with a funeral that includes a viewing. Each and every day, you have the opportunity to change that statistic.

**MOURNING NEED**  
**Move Toward the Pain of the Loss**

Healthy grief means expressing our painful thoughts and feelings, and healthy funeral ceremonies allow us to do just that. People tend to cry, even sob and wail at funerals because funerals force us to concentrate on the fact of the death and our feelings, often excruciatingly painful, about that death. To their credit, funerals also provide us with an accepted venue for such painful feelings. They are perhaps the only time and place, in fact, during which we as a society condone such openly outward expression of our sadness.

With compassionate education, you can discourage cremation families from skipping funeral ceremonies altogether, which many are predisposed to do. Explain the importance of having some type of ceremony, particularly one that allows them to confront their pain. Fortunately, meaningful rituals have the capacity to hold contradictions. It’s okay to celebrate the life lived while also embracing one’s sadness. And remember that the full range of emotions, including sadness, is more accessible when the guest of honor is present.

**MOURNING NEED**  
**Remember the Person Who Died**

To integrate grief into our lives, we must shift our relationship with the one who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. A meaningful funeral encourages us to begin this shift as it provides a natural time and place to think about the moments we shared – good and bad – with the person who has died. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral invites us to focus on our past relationship with that one, single person and to share those memories with others.

At meaningful funerals, the eulogy (or remembrance) attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the deceased and the characteristics he or she most prominently displayed. At the visitation and the reception that follows the ceremony, many mourners will informally share memories of the person who died. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able to “tell the story” – of the death itself, of our memories of the person – the more likely we will be to reconcile our grief.

In addition to incorporating lots of opportunities for remembering into the ceremony, you can help cremation families remember the person who died by encouraging them to create permanent memorials. Many families don’t realize they can get a niche in a columbarium or still do a traditional burial of cremated remains. Families often need to be educated about these options. If they do a scattering, they still need coaching about their options to create a permanent memorial. There are a multitude of creative ideas to help cremation families get this mourning need met, and the more they are put into use at a funeral or memorial ceremony, the better.

**MOURNING NEED**  
**Develop a New Self-Identity**

Another primary reconciliation need of mourning is the development of a new self-identity. We are all social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Alan Wolfelt but also a son, brother, husband, father and friend. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity as defined in those ways changes.

The funeral helps us begin this difficult process of developing a new self-identity because it provides a public venue for public acknowledgment of our new roles. If you are a parent of a child who dies, the funeral marks the beginning of your life as a former parent (in the physical sense; you will always have that relationship through memory). Others attending the funeral are in effect saying, “We acknowledge your changed identity and we want you to know we still care about you.” On the other hand, in situations in which there is no funeral (most common in conjunction with cremation), the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed and often that person is more at risk for being socially abandoned.

In 2015, 32% of Americans who were cremated had no service. That equates to millions of mourners who did not benefit from the chance to begin reconstructing their self-identities in the context of social support.

**MOURNING NEED**  
**Search for Meaning**

When someone we love dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? What happens after death?

To heal in grief, we must explore these types of questions if we are to become reconciled to our grief. The funeral provides us with such an opportunity. For those who adhere to a specific religious faith, the meaningful funeral often reinforces that faith and provides comfort. Alternatively, it may prompt some to rethink their faith or their previously held world view.

Funerals are a way in which we as individuals and comm-
MOURNING NEED
Receive Ongoing Support From Others

As you know, funerals are a public means of expressing our beliefs and feelings about the death of someone loved. In fact, funerals are the public venue for offering support to others and being supported in grief, both at the time of the funeral and into the future. Funerals make a social statement that says, “Come, support me.” Whether they realize it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, “Don’t come to support me.”

Funerals also let us physically demonstrate our support. At meaningful funerals, we are encouraged to embrace, touch and comfort each other. This physical show of support is one of the most important healing aspects of meaningful funeral ceremonies.

Another is the helping relationships established at funerals. Friends often seek ways in which they can help the primary mourners. May I bring the flowers back to the house? Would you like someone to watch Susie for a few afternoons? Friends helping friends and strengthened relationships among the living are additional benefits of meaningful funerals.

Finally, and most simply, funerals serve as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or their family members, we attend the funeral if at all possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. By attending the funeral, we let everyone else there know that they are not alone in their grief.

Today’s families desperately need you to educate them about the social support function of funerals, regardless of the means of disposition. Please help them understand that not only do they need and deserve the support of others, but those others also need and deserve support. Everyone who cared about the person who died and/or his or her family often have a natural impulse to gather. They need a time and place to get together. Cremation does not change this essential truth.

When someone we love dies, we must mourn if we are to fully love and live again. Yet when the need to mourn is greatest, some people are inclined to want to run away from it. Please don’t let the families you serve that choose cremation as a means of disposition run away from the painful but necessary encounter with grief. The body of the person who died is essential to this encounter, and spending time in the body’s presence helps activate all six mourning needs we have just reviewed. Cremation is not the problem; cremating immediately or prematurely is.

Remember: Your role is to offer information, education and choices. I challenge you to consider these six mourning needs each time you sit down with a new family to plan funeral services.

I hope you will be among the gatekeepers of the funeral who will ensure that even though cremation has already tipped the scale, we must all work together to be certain that meaningful funerals are here to stay. Let’s all climb on that side of the seesaw board together and work to ensure that full, elements-rich, personalized funerals stop their precarious wobble and solidly claim their rightful place for the future.

Alan D. Wolfelt is a respected author, educator and consultant to funeral service. He advocates for the value of meaningful funeral experiences in his death education workshops across North America each year and conducts an annual training program on the “WHY” of the funeral for funeral directors in Fort Collins, Colorado. The 2018 training will be held June 18-20. For more information or a descriptive brochure, call the Center for Loss at 970-226-6050, visit centerforloss.com or email drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.