

# BURIAL VAULTS: THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

by Wayne Stellmach



When Aristotle philosophized that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” he certainly was not talking about burial vaults. But when you consider the principles underlying Aristotle’s thinking, it actually does apply. And it is important to the families that you serve.

Human interaction with objects was the area of study that led to Aristotle’s observation that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. He believed that objects were made up of a potential that circumstances then manipulated to determine the resulting effect or outcome of the object. He further recognized that human interpretation and personal associations played a role in understanding those objects.

Let’s first take the purely functional aspect of a burial vault which is to prevent the gravesite from settling and to protect the contents from the intrusion of water, insects and other natural elements. The product components (parts) are concrete, reinforcing liners and sealants. The resulting outcome is strength and protection against the elements. But the circumstances that this product is being used to house and protect a loved one for eternity lead to an even greater whole which is peace of mind for the family.

However, the potential of the burial vault is even greater when other product components are used to help create a meaningful experience. The carapace provides a blank slate for the creative expression of love, memories and tribute to person whose life is being commemorated. The steel, plastic, canvas or other materials used in the construction of the carapace are parts. The print that is placed upon the carapace is a part. The highlighters that might be used to write messages on the carapace are parts. Yet when they all align to deliver an experience for the family, who could disagree that the whole is so much greater than the sum of these particular parts?

Of course, the significance or meaning of something is not inherent in an object, but rather is drawn from the personal associations or interpretations of people. The more that the burial vault is used to express who that person was through photographs or symbols of what was important to him or her, the more significant it becomes to the family and friends as they say their final goodbyes. The meaning of things, in this case the burial vault, arises out of personal

associations and social interactions. That’s why a burial vault can be so much more than a functional thing.

Parts aligning to produce a product far superior to any single component...the product becoming part of the committal service...and families interacting to build an enduring experience...is powerful synergy and is Aristotle’s theory at work when it pertains to the burial vault.

This is all contingent on Funeral Professionals seizing the opportunity to help burial families create memorable services by offering ideas on what can be done. Sadly, too often families are unaware of the ability to personalize a vault and incorporate it so beautifully into the committal service. Funeral Professionals who do suggest this simple addition (often at no extra cost to the family) are rewarded by seeing the impact on families and friends – who will certainly remember this service when it comes time for other arrangements down the road.

A poignant example of the impact of a personalized burial vault was recounted by a burial vault provider who received a call from a funeral director who was helping a family plan the services for their 16-year-old daughter. The girl had been very active in music and BMX racing and the funeral director wished to reflect these passions on the girl’s burial vault cover. The proactive funeral director found some clip art and sent that to the burial vault provider asking if it could be incorporated into the vault carapace image. While it certainly could be done, the burial vault provider took the extra steps to download photos from the girl’s Facebook page of her playing her instrument and riding her BMX bike. With these and other photos, plus adding her name and birth and death dates, a beautiful and very personal carapace was created and displayed at the graveside committal service. The family was astounded, touched and extremely grateful. It’s really all about the person and making it personal makes it special.

Another word for effective alignment of components is synergy - and that extends to every component comprising a good funeral service. So far we’ve been discussing the burial vault and how its parts align to create a greater whole, but the burial vault is also just one part of the funeral service. The casket, memorial videos, memory tables, music, flowers, family and friends sharing stories, the

celebrant, the funeral home facilities, the funeral directors, the tent, chairs, greens and other components of the graveside setup – all of these and other parts create a synergy that forms one entity or experience that is worth far more than if the parts were independent of each other.

However, funeral professionals realize that a good funeral takes more than a mundane laundry list of required components. Even if all of the parts are common from one funeral to the next, what makes a funeral more impactful than another is deliberate work to align everything and make it meaningful – beginning with the funeral professional engaging with the family to truly understand the person who is being commemorated and extending throughout the entire service. In other words, directing. Most families don't know what they can do and are naturally overwhelmed by the situation. A good funeral director is an educator and in many respects an event coordinator. We have to continuously improve the experience for families, regardless of the products that

they choose, and the only chance that will happen is if they make fully-informed decisions. Good experiences will also increase the chance that families will return again for your help in creating a similar positive experience.

While Aristotle was not thinking about burial vaults when he reflected and wrote about objects and human interaction with them, he actually was pensive about death and the soul. Having studied under Plato, Aristotle adopted the Platonic view that the soul is imprisoned in the body and is capable of a happier life only when the body has been left behind. He wrote that the dead are more blessed and happier than the living, and said that to die is to return to one's real home. Perhaps Aristotle would have been quite at home with the ritual of the committal service and the integration of various components including the burial vault to create a greater experience. But that's purely conjecture. The reality is the families you serve. Help them walk away with good experiences where the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts. **FBA**



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