



THE PROFESSION THAT CANNOT BE AUTOMATED

How AI is quietly stripping funeral service of its humanity and integrity.

BY CALVIN M. AMATO

We live in an age where nearly everything can be optimized and packaged. And the world keeps calling this progress, as if “convenience” is the same as “meaning.” Meals arrive with a tap. Conversations are summarized into bullet points. Apologies are rewritten until they sound just right. The hard edges of life are sanded down into something shareable, photogenic, safe.

Now deathcare professionals, of all people, are being sold the same

promises: speed, palatability, scalability, consistency. The funeral profession is being told to keep up, to modernize, to innovate, to adopt the tools everyone else is adopting and to stop being sentimental about the “old ways.”

But funeral service is not a product line, and it is not a feed, and it is not a brand campaign dressed up as care. The moment we treat human grief like a workflow problem, we have lost the plot.



Tools are not the enemy, however, and no serious professional would pretend as though technological advances haven't propelled the profession. We use instruments, chemicals, refrigeration, transport systems, printing, video and software because modern deathcare requires modern infrastructure. But there is a difference between technology that supports human presence and technology that replaces it, and AI is not neutral on that line.

AI is not just speeding up our administrative work; it is encouraging a culture where the appearance of compassion is equated with compassion itself. It tempts us to perform care, generate care and stage care without the slow human work of listening, absorbing and responding. If we surrender to that temptation, the profession will look polished, but it will feel hollow in the exact moments when families need something real.

The primary seduction of AI in funeral service is not efficiency – it is image. We now live in a world where being “seen” matters almost as much as being “good.” Firms feel pressure to “show” their community they are compassionate, and that pressure quickly turns compassion into marketing inventory: the hand-on-the-shoulder photo; the bowed headshot; the tasteful images of candlelight, prayer circles and quiet casket-side moments, all framed as content. AI makes that temptation all the more dangerous because it can produce the perfect caption, tribute language or community statement in seconds. We can present as sincere without having to sit with sincerity.

A profession that once valued discretion now risks confusing visibility with virtue, and families become props for brands' emotional messaging. Grief is not a content category, and death is not your “aesthetic.” The people who trust us at their worst are not material for our social strategy. If our first instinct after a tender moment is to package it, we have drifted away from what this work requires.

There is a particular strain of dishonesty that has started to flourish in modern professionalism, and

it is not the obvious kind. There is no outright lying. Instead, it is a softer form. Say someone curates themselves into a version that looks more mature, compassionate and wise, while quietly avoiding the labor it takes to be those things in real life. AI is a perfect companion to this dishonesty because it gives people a shortcut for sounding like the person they wish they were. Then, they're rewarded for the performance with “likes,” praise and professional validation.

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In funeral service, that is not just annoying; it is dangerous, too, because families do not come to us for a performance or a persona. They come to us because they are undone, and they need someone steady enough to meet them where they are, without turning their pain into a social post. Funeral professionals should be deeply suspicious of anything that makes it easier to look compassionate but harder to actually practice compassion. If we cannot tell the difference between real care and scripted care, we eventually will become a profession of beautifully phrased emptiness.

The rise of AI-written obituaries has made this clear. Obituaries never were meant to be “content.” When done well, an obituary is one of the last public places where a family's voice can exist without interruption, where the truth of a life can be expressed in language that feels authentic to the people who lived beside that person. AI often produces something smooth, and the smoothness is the problem. Albeit respectful, smooth writing can be empty. It flattens every life into the same tonal shape – “beloved,” “cherished,” “missed,” “survived by” – until unique people start sounding interchangeable, like they all lived within the same template. Families might accept this offering because they are exhaust-

ed and overwhelmed and cannot imagine writing through shock. And firms might accept it because it is fast and “professional.” But speed is not the highest virtue in a profession built around memory. If we outsource the obituary, we outsource the listening it necessitates.

Additionally, obituaries matter because they often are the first public record of how a family wishes to carry a death. And that is not poetic exaggeration. Some families need formal dignity. Others need plainspoken honesty. Others need humor because humor is how they survive. And others need the careful tenderness of understatement because the death was complicated.

AI cannot feel when the room has shifted. It cannot recognize when a family is asking for permission to tell the truth about addiction, estrangement, suicide, violence or long-term illness. It cannot notice the pause before someone says, “We did not talk for years,” then choose to protect that sentence, treat it gently and write it in a way that honors what reconciliation never came. It cannot carry the weight of an adopted child’s language, a partner’s quiet resentment, a parent’s guilt, or a family member’s subtle

revelation of love through the things they do not say. If we normalize AI-written obituaries, we normalize the flattening of grief into something that reads well but says little. And once the profession forgets how to write true memories, it will forget how to hear them, too.

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The most haunting thing about AI-generated grief language is that it can sound correct even when it’s spiritually false. An AI-generated condolence email can hit all the right notes but still land with a thud because it contains no evidence that a real person understood what happened to a real family. A follow-up message can be worded beautifully but still read like it was written for a broad audience rather than a widow who cannot eat or a father who cannot stop pacing at 3 a.m.

AI does not appreciate the texture of silence in an arrangement room after someone finally says the cause of death out loud. AI has never witnessed a mother’s face change when she sees her child for the last time and realizes it truly is the last time. It can mimic the language that surrounds those moments, but imitation is not presence, and families can feel the difference, even if they never name it. In funeral service, words are instruments, not decorations, and if the instrument is hollow, the sound will be hollow, too.

This is why the profession needs to stop hiding behind the comforting lie that today’s families “just want convenience.” People want convenience for things that are innately convenient, but death is not one of those things. Grief is not a transaction, and it is not a service ticket you can close. A family might want online forms, electronic signatures and simple logistics because the world is complicated and they are overwhelmed, but they still want a human being who will look them in the eye and tell them the truth with kindness. They want someone who will not panic when they panic, someone who will not rush them when they freeze, and someone who will say – and mean – “You do not have to decide everything today.” AI can help you generate a sentence, but it cannot be the person who stays when the room falls apart. If the profession confuses convenience with care, it will continue delivering speed in the name of modernization

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when families are really asking for steadiness. That is how trust dies – quietly and without scandal. Families simply will stop believing us.

Synthetic compassion is not harmless, even when it appears tasteful, because it trains us to avoid discomfort rather than hold it. The best funeral professionals are not good because they use perfect phrasing; they are good because they possess the courage to remain human when families are not OK, to be steady when the room is shaking, to speak plainly when euphemisms would be easier. They know how to sit in silence without filling it, how to answer questions without referencing scripts, how to set boundaries without humiliating people, and how to maintain dignity when chaos is pulling at every corner of the room. AI cannot build your backbone nor teach your nervous system to remain calm in the face of trauma. If the next generation of directors is trained on AI-generated language, we risk creating professionals who sound compassionate without being compassionate. And that would not be a small loss – it would be the collapse of our craft.

AI AND GRIEF THEATER

There is a word for what happens when a profession starts prioritizing the appearance of emotional intelligence over the practice of it, and that word is theater. AI accelerates grief theater because it produces the cues of compassion on demand, and those cues are seductive when you are tired, busy and overwhelmed. A funeral director can generate a service script in minutes, and the words might sound like what a good director would say, but the difference is that the words were not drawn from the family's tone, their pauses, their contradictions, their humor, their anger, their guilt and their particular way of loving the person who died. Families notice when the care they receive feels rehearsed rather than responsive. Funeral directors cannot become professionals who outsource emotional labor to a machine, then step into its generated scenes like actors who have memorized lines and blocking.

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Grief theater also changes how we measure success, and that is one of the most corrosive effects of all. Instead of asking, “Did the family feel held?” we start asking, “Did the service look good?” Instead of asking, “Did we listen well?” we start asking, “Did we say the right things?”

AI is particularly dangerous because it offers the “right things” without requiring the listening that makes those things “right” for a specific family. It can give you a polished tribute, but it cannot give you the humility to avoid overstepping or the maturity to hold silence. It cannot navigate a room where siblings hate each other, where a partner is excluded, where a parent is ashamed, where the truth is heavier than any script can convey. If funeral professionals let AI become the default voice, they will start managing families rather than serving them. That is not professionalism; that is distance disguised as excellence.

There is another layer of grief theater that is even more unsettling because it involves the deceased themselves, not just our language about them. AI has made it possible to generate voices, messages and simulations that can be used in memorial settings, and the public is increasingly fascinated by this novelty. People say it is “comforting” to hear a voice, see a re-creation or watch a generated clip. And, yes, it might feel soothing for a moment, but funeral service professionals should ask the hard questions: soothing for whom, and at what cost, and for how long?

When we use simulations to avoid the finality of death, we give families a hit of relief while delaying the painful integration that grief requires. Funeral professionals should not be dealers of artificial closure because artificial closure collapses when real life returns.

This is not about shaming families for what they seek when they are desperate; grief makes people reach for anything that feels like a handhold. This is about protecting the integrity of the space we hold. The funeral home is one of the last places where society still acknowledges death as final, and finality matters. When we introduce simulation into that space without discernment, we risk turning the funeral home into a place that keeps people in a loop, continuously engaging with the deceased through generated artifacts. That is not remembrance; that is addiction to proximity, and it can devolve into a refusal to accept what has happened. Funeral professionals should be careful not to confuse novelty with healing, because healing is rarely novel, and it is almost never algorithmically exciting. The profession must remain brave enough to honor reality, even when reality is unbearable.

There is a quieter form of grief theater that shows up inside firms, and it is worth naming because it is happening everywhere. AI-generated internal messaging can make leadership sound thoughtful, compassionate and supportive, without requiring leaders to actually change the conditions that are hurting their staff. A memo about wellness is easy to gen-

erate, an inspirational speech is easy to draft, and a message of thanks is easy to send, but none of those mean anything if the schedule remains brutal, the pay remains low, the training remains shallow and the culture remains punitive. AI can act as a fog machine that makes workplaces seem humane as they continue to grind people down. If funeral service wants to stay human, it must stop dressing up harm in pretty language, whether that language stems from a leader's ego or a machine's output. A profession that cannot tell the difference between care and the appearance of care harms its own people first.

There is another modern and unsettling layer to this conversation: the rise of AI-curated, AI-generated and AI-altered images. These are being created by funeral professionals and quietly passed off as though they are real. With a few prompts and clicks, we can manufacture a "better" version of anything: the deceased, the arrangement room, services, even ourselves. We're smoothing hardship into elegance and turning the messier realities of our work into a polished fiction that photographs well. We can generate portraits that never existed of the deceased. We can stage grief-adjacent moments, perfect lighting, invent "candid" scenes and build a visual narrative of tenderness that is devised rather than earned.

This use of AI often is justified as a tool for marketing, education or comfort, but the ethical problem is the same whether the motive is tender or opportunistic: These images replace honest representation with professional illusion. When we do this without

clear disclosure, we alter the record of what happened, who we were and how we behaved, and we condition the public to accept a curated version of funeral service. There is a vast difference between the respectful restoration of a damaged photograph and the outright creation of a new reality. When we blur that line, we teach families and communities that the truth is optional as long as the final product looks "better," that grief should be aesthetically managed, and that our role is to manufacture comfort rather than hold humanity. If the public ever realizes we are doing this casually, the profession will be accused of being dishonest in an arena where honesty is sacred.

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Grief is about not only highlighting the best parts of a person but also integrating the truth, and that truth is often complicated, unfinished and painfully human. When memorialization is heavily edited, it makes mourners feel as though the hard parts of life should be hidden. It is tempting to call this refinement "comfort," but comfort that is dependent upon denial has a price, and the price often appears later, when the numbness wears off and the mind starts wandering. Our job is not to curate a perfect narrative; our job is to help families carry what is real without being crushed by it. If we deliver memorials that look flawless but erase the hard parts, we offer something that photographs well but heals poorly.

A profession that cares about truth also must consider the downstream consequences of normalizing fabricated images. Once families see that "anything is possible," this possibility becomes the expectation. It is one thing for families to choose flattering photos; it is another for family members to feel ashamed if they're unable to produce idealized portraits, as if the deceased's real face is not worthy of public mourning. That shift would punish the elderly, the disabled and the chronically ill because the algorithmically improved version would become the standard of dignity. Funeral service cannot participate in a culture



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where dignity requires digital correction. The dead do not need to be optimized to be worthy of grief, and the living do not need to be edited to be worthy of love. When we accept the opposing premise, we convey to families that real life is less acceptable than a generated life.

And then there is a sickness we rarely discuss: the growing desire within our ranks to “go viral.” Some of this content is disguised as education, and some of it is disguised as awareness, but the driver behind it is the same: attention. The virality mindset changes ethics by inches rather than by explosions, and it considers how something looks before asking whether it is right. It nudges professionals to capture, package and narrate moments; to plan the post while the family plans the goodbye. And AI makes that process effortless by generating hooks, scripts, captions and emotional arcs on demand. A profession built on discretion cannot afford to become addicted to visibility. The dead are not props, and the living are not content partners.

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Virality culture encourages misguided confidence; it makes people believe they must be right because an audience is applauding them. But the funeral profession does not answer to an audience; it answers to families, the deceased and the moral standard we uphold when no one is watching. The internet rewards novelty, speed and emotional spectacle, and funeral service is not meant to be novel, fast or spectacular in the ways the algorithm likes. The algorithm does not care if family members feel violated after the fact by something they agreed to while in shock, and it does not care if a staff member’s boundaries and privacy are slowly eroded. AI can help you gain momentum and engagement, but neither should be the be-all and end-all. A thousand “likes” will not sit with a mother as she cradles her baby’s blanket and holds back tears in the arrangement room, and a viral post will not hold a family together when conflict erupts at the visitation. If the profession starts taking its cues from what performs, it will lose its ability to do what matters.

AI is revealing what we have been neglecting or ignoring: training, staffing, and the time and bandwidth required to do this work well. AI is attractive in environments where people are stretched thin, underpaid, burned out, and expected to operate like

machines while delivering care that is anything but mechanical. If we want to resist the pull, we cannot simply shame the tool; we must address the conditions that make AI feel necessary. We must acknowledge that directors are expected to do removals, arrangements, embalming, services, aftercare and community outreach with no real recovery time, because depleted humans always will be tempted to automate wherever they can.

This is why the profession must stop pretending as though innovation in technology is a substitute for investment in people. You cannot build a humane profession on exhausted staff and then patch the humanity gap with software. The gap is not a technical issue; it is a moral one. If firms want to protect the human core of deathcare, they must protect the humans doing the work, and that means fair pay, sustainable schedules, strong mentorship, clear boundaries, and leadership that refuses to normalize burnout as the cost of doing business. It also means training that treats emotional presence as a skill, not as something people either “have” or “do not have.” Presence can be developed when the culture values it. AI never should be used as a replacement for mentorship. Mentorship is not information transfer. It is formation. A profession that replaces formation with generation will produce staff that look competent until real grief tests them.

Lastly, there is a high-stakes ethical risk that many firms are treating far too casually when it comes to AI: privacy and data. We handle names, addresses, social security numbers, dates, relationships, photos, personal stories, circumstances of death and medical realities that families might not want circulating beyond the arrangement room. AI tools retain, process and route data in ways that are not always obvious to the user, and the profession cannot afford to be naive about that. Families do not expect their most vulnerable details to become input in systems we do not fully control. Trust is our currency, and once it is spent, we do not get it back through better marketing; we get it back through improved ethics.

A CLEAR ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

If this profession wants to stop drifting, it needs lines that are specific enough to enforce. Vague values are easy to praise but impossible to practice.

The first line is disclosure. If AI is to be used to generate a family-facing narrative, we should receive permission first. Secretive AI use erodes trust quickly. Families should not have to wonder whether the words they received came from a person who listened or a system that guessed.

The second line is authorship. The family's voice must remain central, which means AI can assist with grammar and structure, but it should never write the record of a life it did not – and could not – know.

The third line is consent. If a family requests AI-generated media, the firm must explain what that means, what is real (and what is not real), and what emotional consequences can occur.

The fourth line is privacy. No identifying family details, photos or sensitive information should be entered into AI tools that are not approved for secure handling. Staff should be trained as if this is a matter of professional confidentiality. Additionally, firms should have a “no performance” standard that protects families from being exploited for marketing. No photos of families in vulnerable moments, no staged compassion shots, no behind-the-scenes depictions of remains, no posts that use the dead or the grieving as proof of a brand's goodness – even if consent is obtained in a moment of shock. Consent does not mean something is condonable, and funeral homes should be brave enough to refuse opportunities that could harm families later. Firms can educate the public without turning private sorrow into public fodder, and they can build community presence without documenting every tender moment for an audience. A profession that values dignity should act like it values dignity, even when the algorithm begs for more. When in doubt, choose discretion.

The ethical framework also should include a training mandate. Even good policies fail if staff do not understand why the policies exist. Staff should be trained to recognize AI-written language in their own work and to refuse the temptation to use AI as a substitute for listening. They should be taught to conduct interviews so that writing the human details afterward comes easily. They should be taught how to write plainly, how to speak gently and how to hold silence without panicking. Those are professional skills that protect families. Policies should include oversight, not as punishment but as stewardship, because we cannot pretend that everyone uses powerful tools wisely when left to their own devices. If the profession wants to remain human, it must train humans to be worthy of that responsibility.

So, the conversation must mature, and it must become specific. Loose statements about “embracing innovation” are exactly how integrity becomes diluted. We should embrace technologies that reduce administrative burden: scheduling platforms, secure documentation tools, systems that improve coordination, and accessibility tools used with clear consent. And we should refuse technologies that replace human presence: AI that addresses families directly, as if it were us; AI that produces obituaries without

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real interviews and real authorship; AI that generates images and presents them as truth; and content strategies that treat funerals as brand fuel. We should refuse anything that turns a family's worst day into marketing inventory, even if it is technically "legal," because legality is not the ceiling of ethics in a profession that claims to be sacred. We should choose tools that serve the work, not tools that slowly rewrite what the work is.

Funeral service is embodied care in a time when everything is becoming disembodied. A real body, a real family, a real room, a real voice, a real silence, a real hand shakily signing a form, a real child staring at a casket and trying to understand a concept too abstract for their mind. AI does not know what it is like to stand in the presence of that reality and not flinch, and that is why it never should be allowed to become the voice of the profession. It can assist us in the background, but it cannot replace the human core of what we do, because what we do requires presence. If we forget that, we still will have funerals, we still will have merchandise, we still will have logistics, and we still will have words, but we will not be the profession we've long claimed to be, and families will feel that loss long before the profession admits it.

Once families suspect that we are outsourcing our humanity, we never will convince them otherwise. Trust is built on small moments, and it is lost the same way. AI increases the risk of tiny betrayals that no one perceives as betrayals until after the damage is done. The family that senses a "templated" response will not call you out; they will simply stop

opening up or, worse, stop showing up. The family that realizes their story was turned into a generic paragraph will not complain; they will simply feel unseen. The family that notices their grief being used for engagement will not confront you; they will simply tell their friends, and your reputation will rot from the inside out. Funeral service will not collapse from one scandal alone; it will collapse if the public no longer believes we mean what we say.

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If there is a manifesto for the next decade of deathcare, it is this: We will use technology to support our work, not replace the human heart of it, and we will stop confusing polished language with moral presence. We will not sell simulated compassion as care, and we will not trade authorship for convenience. We will not let "virality" become a value, and we will not allow the dead to become marketing nor the living to become data. We will defend the parts of this work that cannot be automated, even when it costs us time, because sometimes patience is the point, sometimes inconvenience is the point, sometimes simply sitting with someone is the point. The world can advance all it wants, but funeral service must remain one of the places where humanity is not optimized out of existence. ☰



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Calvin M. Amato is a funeral professional at Jacob Schoen & Son Funeral Home in New Orleans, Louisiana, as well as an autopsy assistant and brain-recovery specialist working in collaboration with academic research institutions including Harvard and Boston University. He serves as vice president of the Center for Death Education and sits on the boards of several grief-focused organizations. An internationally published author, Amato is committed to pushing the boundaries of modern deathcare and advocates for forward-thinking solutions that meet the consumer demands of 21st-century funeral service.