

# Decisive moments

*The inspiration for this article was a piece in the March 2011 edition of The Journal concerning Continuous Personal Development (CPD). I felt that some people saw it as a task rather than an opportunity and hope my experience will help others.*

Thanks, Marti Atkins, BIFD student member.

“It’s in our moments of decision that our destiny is created.”  
- Earl Nightingale

**WHICH IS** how I ended up sitting in a Portakabin opposite a straight-talking Irishman discussing my potential of completing the NAFD Foundation Course. I’d never worked in the industry. Never seen a body and organised just one funeral in my lifetime. All with only a glimpse of how well I connect with distressed people in an industry completely unrelated to one based around empathy, loss and bereavement.

My starting gate was a successful career in IT and an idea that I could do more but needed to get some focused personal development under way. This wasn’t new to me; IT is an industry where Microsoft retire their Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE) qualifications almost as quickly as they can be passed but the core skills of quality, service and customer focus are timeless. Tony Robbins fills Europe’s biggest venues with crowds of 10,000 people, all keen to understand more of themselves and how they interact with others. Refining their EQ to enhance their IQ. Paul McKenna has bought a few idyllic islands on the proceeds of telling us the value of self improvement. His books such as Change Your Life In Seven Days are permanent features in the personal development best seller list; “seven days” having sold 900,000 copies. Sometimes the greatest value in learning something totally new is right back in our own familiar field of experience; like the traveller that recognises the flaws and qualities of home from a far country.

Remembering I still have to pay the bills adds a sobering element to wistful planning. The financial justification for the fee is simple; money in a savings account returns a pittance in today’s financial climate so I’ll invest it in the best tax free plan I know; ME! A friend experienced in recruitment gave

me her top ten toughest interview questions for a new funeral director and they lived up to their neat title.

- Why am I interested in this industry?
- Why should I consider it with caution?
- What elements personal to me make me suitable for funeral directing?
- How would I deal with people of strong faith?
- How do I separate front-of-house attitude from the back room production?
- How would I explain events to a client of faith who has lost a child?
- How does an extrovert such as me learn to listen?
- Is this an escape from an imperfect ICT career?

Answering these honestly indicated I really could develop in this direction but not if anyone would trust a former technology engineer in such an empathetic industry. Barry Albin-Dyer’s books Don’t Drop the Coffin and Bury My Heart in Bermondsey were devoured in a bank holiday. An intellectual Hors d’œuvre that served to highlight the need for more information. Time for a leap of faith.

That leap landed me squarely on my face. Back to that Portakabin for day one of the NAFD course and my application form is erratic with constant references to “See attached CV”. The tutor is Michael Dillon; a man of great experience in dealing with people so when he uttered the words “have you been tested for dyslexia?” I missed the enormity of the information he had just presented to me. I looked up self-help websites, read pages through coloured acetates in various fonts and was finally tested at Queen Mary’s University.



*Marti Atkins receiving his foundation certificate from regional chair, Loraine Charter*

Different people react in different ways to being told they are dyslexic & twenty years after leaving secondary school with “Tries hard” ringing in their ears. I’d had my successes and now had a tool to get more and better wins. Better still, I had these tools in addition, understanding the advantages of a dyslexic brain. Lateral thinking, acute analysis skills. Problem solving and refined empathy are just a few of the real and tangible benefits but only if the dyslexic knows this. Otherwise they are operating at half of their potential being more aware of the limitations they and other perceive than they are of their abilities. Academic work took a new and previously unknown pleasure.

I could learn anything – and fast! Joe 90 eat your wooden puppet heart out and I don’t need a revolving cage just a pair of tinted reading glasses to double my reading speed. Michael’s patience and teaching ability surpassed anything I’d experienced at school or university. Even so, I struggled to keep pace. I used pre-school children’s books; refining my flamboyant hand writing to develop a neat, legible script for the required letters. I wrote by hand to long forgotten

English Funeral Home saved the day and showed me just how good this industry can be. We organised a funeral and pressed on, amassing organisational and study skills to fit learning around the pressures of settling dad’s estate, purchasing our new home and getting to know my sister.

I sat the National Association of Funeral Directors mock examination the same day we moved house. The new house was freezing but the goal was insight so I made notes at the desk still wearing my coat and reading the NAFD Manual of Funeral Directing in our warm kitchen. A small electrical fire at Christmas left me revising for the final exam amid dust and electricians or escaping the cold house to a slightly less cold library. The learning experience and critical reflection had taught me that I could not have done this a year earlier so rather than add to the stress it clarified my development; a seminal moment. I could do this and enjoy the experience of learning for learning sake.

In all this time people were telling me their experience of the funeral industry once they are aware of the plan. Ten years on, one young woman at my IT office is still bitter that

relatives just to perfect these letters. When my father died in September 2010 various friends suggested that “Knocking off yer ol’ man jus’ for a few marks in the practical was a bit extreme!” Staff at Alfred

she was told her child could not be taken home the week before his funeral. Elderly relatives started conversations with “I’ve always wanted to ask but...”

With all these experiences, it’s hard to believe that I started this because I thought I might have spotted an interesting career path.

So, to return to the question of valuing CPD and development in an unrelated field. It is not a question of knowing your jobs already, haven’t got time to study or even it’s just my job. Any learning experience can offer a bonus if you choose to take it. It equips you to turn mistakes into something useful; a kind of mental compost heap for your life’s errors. It will make you more employable in a changing market; possibly makes unemployment interesting, all other pressures being manageable. Personal development offers a chance to control events in our lives rather than the plaintiff “It always happens to me”.

What’s my next step next? We’ll be in Stoneleigh for the National Funeral Exhibition in June. A chance to talk to the industry and hear what they might expect of me. A chance to keep up that Continuous and very Personal Development.

#### Acknowledgments.

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