Why Is the Funeral Ritual Important?

Rituals are symbolic activities that help us, together with our families and friends, express our deepest thoughts and feelings about life’s most important events. Baptism celebrates the birth of a child and that child’s acceptance into the church family. Birthday parties honor the passing of another year in the life of someone we love. Weddings publicly affirm the private love shared by two people.

The funeral ritual, too, is a public, traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone loved. Rich in history and rife with symbolism, the funeral ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the deceased, encourages the expression of grief in a way consistent with the culture’s values, provides support to mourners, allows for the embracing of faith and beliefs about life and death, and offers continuity and hope for the living.

When words are inadequate, have a ritual.

Anonymous

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Unfortunately, our mourning-avoidant culture has to a large extent forgotten these crucial purposes of the meaningful funeral. Individuals, families, and ultimately society as a whole will suffer if we do not reinvest ourselves in the funeral ritual. This article explores the grief-healing benefits of meaningful funerals—benefits we are losing to the deritualization trend.

A helpful way to teach about the purposes of authentic funeral ceremonies is to frame them in the context of the “reconciliation needs of mourning”—a twist on what some author’s have called the “tasks of mourning.”

**EARLY FUNERAL RITES**

The history of the funeral service is a history of mankind. Funeral customs are as old as civilization itself.

Every culture and civilization attends to the proper care of their dead. Every culture and civilization ever studied has three things in common relating to death and the disposition of the dead:

- Some type of funeral rites, rituals, and ceremonies
- A sacred place for the dead
- Memorialization of the dead

Researchers have found burial grounds of Neanderthal man dating to 60,000 BC with animal antlers on the body and flower fragments next to the corpse indicating some type of ritual and gifts of remembrance.

With no great psychological knowledge or custom to draw from, Neanderthal man instinctively buried their dead with ritual and ceremony.

**THE ROLE OF FEAR**

Primitive man lived in a world of fear. He reacted to most natural phenomena such as weather events based on that fear. He eventually attributed many life events to his instinctive knowledge of a higher being or power. In his primitive mind, life and death events were the acts of spirits. Since he was not able to see or sense these spirits, he lived in a world of terror.

In an effort to enact some type of truce with these “gods” or “spirits,” man devised charms, ceremonies and rituals to placate these spirits. Although we may find ancient burial customs to be strange or in some cases repugnant, they obviously arose for a reason. The first burial customs then, were crude efforts to protect the living from the spirits who caused the death of the person.

Fear of the dead caused the burning of bodies to destroy evil spirits. Many primitive tribes even today simply run away from their dead, leaving them to rot. Zoroastrians similarly allow their dead to simply rot or be devoured by vultures. They consider fire to be too sacred to be put to use disposing of the dead and burial is thought to be a defilement and injury to mother earth.

Others place the body deep in the jungle to be devoured by wild beasts. In Tibet and among the Kamchakan Indians dogs are used for this purpose because they believe that those eaten by dogs will be better off in the other world. Herodotus tells us that the Calatians ate their own dead. It was considered a sacred honor and duty of the family. Queen Artemisia supposedly mixed the ashes of her beloved with wine and drank it.

To this day, certain African tribes are known to grind the bones of their dead and mingle them with their food. The Zulus burn all of the belongings of the deceased to prevent evil spirits from hovering in the vicinity. And some tribes set up a ring of fire around the bodies of their dead to singe the wings of the spirits and prevent them from attacking other members of the community. Other tribes throw spears and arrows into the air to kill hovering spirits or eat bitter herbs to drive away or kill spirits that may have already invaded their bodies.

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION**

This fear of the dead carried over into what was developing into religious thought.

The Polynesian word tabu expressed the view that a person or thing coming into contact with the dead was set apart and shunned for a religious or quasi-religious reason. In English this thought is rendered “defilement” or “pollution.” To most people a dead body is indeed taboo. In Hebrew belief, the dead were considered unclean and anyone who came in contact with the dead were declared unclean. “Whosoever is unclean by the dead shall be put outside the camp, that they defile not the camp in the midst of which the Lord dwells” (Numbers 5:2). In old Persian scriptures, a similar taboo is expressed. Anyone who
needs of mourning are the six needs that are the most central to healing in grief. In other words, bereaved people who have these needs met, through their own grief work and through the love and compassion of those around them, are most often able to reconcile their grief and go on to find continued meaning in life and living. **How the Authentic Funeral Helps Meet the Six Reconciliation Needs of Mourning**

**Mourning Need #1: Acknowledge the reality of the death.** When someone loved dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and the 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...
Mourning Need #2: Move toward the pain of the loss.
As our acknowledgment of the death progresses from “head understanding” to “heart understanding,” we begin to embrace the pain of the loss—another need the bereaved must meet if they are to heal. Healthy grief means expressing 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. For at least an hour or two—longer for mourners who plan the ceremony or attend the visitation—those attending the funeral are not able to intellectualize or distance themselves from the pain of their grief. To their credit, funerals also provide us with an accepted venue for our 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.

Mourning Need #3: Remember the person who died.
To heal in grief, we must shift our relationship with the person who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. The authentic funeral encourages us to begin this shift, for it provides a natural time and place for us to think about the moments we shared—good and bad—with the person who 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 traditional funerals, the eulogy attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the deceased and the characteristics that he or she most prominently displayed. This is helpful to mourners, for it tends to prompt more intimate, individualized memories. Later, after the ceremony itself, many mourners will informally share memories of the person who died. This, too, is meaningful. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able “tell the story”—of the death itself, of our memories of the person who died—the more likely we will be to reconcile our grief. Moreover, the sharing of memories at the funeral affirms the worth we have placed on the person who died, legitimizing our pain. Often, too, the memories others choose to share with us at the funeral are memories that we have not heard before. This teaches us about the dead person’s life apart from ours and allows us glimpses into that life that we may cherish forever.

Mourning Need #4: 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. We are all a son or daughter, possibly a brother or sister, a husband or wife, a parent, or a friend. When someone close to us dies, our 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 social venue for public acknowledgment of our new roles. If you are a parent of a child and that child 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

and weeks, and with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

Meaningful funeral ceremonies can serve as wonderful points of departure for “head understanding” of the death. Intellectually, funerals teach us that someone we loved is now dead, even though up until the funeral we may have denied this fact. When we contact the funeral home, set a time for the service, plan the ceremony, view the body, perhaps even choose clothing and jewelry for the body, we cannot avoid acknowledging that the person has died. When we see the casket being lowered into the ground, we are witness to death’s finality.

“Balian: After being borne to the cemetery on flower-decked bamboo towers and there fed, the princess and her attendants were led to troughs where they were killed by being stabbed, the princess being the last to die. In another type of widow-sacrifice the women, apparently partly hypnotized and drugged with wine sometimes to the point of not even crying out when meeting incandescent heat, jumped into the fire and were burned alive.”
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 where there is no funeral, the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed and often that person is socially abandoned. In addition, having supportive friends and family around us at the time of the funeral helps us realize we literally still exist. This self-identity issue is illustrated by a comment the bereaved often make: “When he died, I felt like a part of me died, too.”

Mourning Need #5: Search for meaning.
When someone loved dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? Why does it have to hurt so much? What happens after death? To heal in grief, we must explore these types of questions if we are to become reconciled to our grief. In fact, we must first ask these “why” questions to decide why we should go on living before we can ask ourselves how we will go on living. This does not mean we must find definitive answers, only that we need the opportunity to think (and feel) things through.

On a more fundamental level, the funeral reinforces one central fact of our existence: we will die. Like living, dying is a natural and unavoidable process. (We North Americans tend not to acknowledge this.) Thus the funeral helps us search for meaning in the life and death of the person who died, as well as in our own lives and impending deaths. Each funeral we attend serves as a sort of dress rehearsal for our own.

Funerals are a way in which we as individuals and as a community convey our beliefs and values about life and death. The very occurrence of a funeral makes 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 support me.”

Funerals let us physically demonstrate our support, too. Sadly, ours is not a demonstrative society, but at funerals we are “allowed” to embrace, to touch, to comfort. Again, words are inadequate so we nonverbally demonstrate our support. This physical show of support is one of the most important healing aspects of meaningful funeral ceremonies.

Finally, and most simply, funerals serve as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or his 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.

“Hindu: Those who have come out to honor the dead march around the pyre, but are forbidden to gaze into the flames. They are expected, however, to see to it that the skull bursts in the burning. Hindus believe that at death the soul is trapped in the skull, and must be released. If fire does not split the skull, it is broken by blows from a cudgel.”

“Azande (a people of north central Africa): As part of the cycle of mourning, the Azande organize beer dances sometime after a year has elapsed following a death. The Azande know certain traditional and extremely obscene songs which they consider wholly improper to sing on any but certain occasions. One of these is the feast at which a mound of stones is placed over the grave of a person some years after burial.”

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