



Livingston Memorial
Visiting Nurse Association & Hospice

GRIEF AND MEANINGLESSNESS AND THE VALUE OF RITUALS

by Stacia Sickles, MSW, LCSW
Director of Grief & Bereavement Services

A colleague tells this story about the death of his grandfather:

When my grandfather passed away earlier this year, we were unable to have a funeral due to the COVID restrictions—no one from out-of-state could come, no one could host a wake or visit the funeral parlor and view the body and at the cemetery no more than 10 people, including the priest, could be there as he was interred. So we were denied all of the comforting traditions and rituals that our family typically relies upon to express our grief. It wasn't the fault of Western Culture, it's just that current restrictions have caused us to have to adapt the way we mourn.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically impacted our daily lives, our coping mechanisms and our sense of security and safety. The sorrow of the world and our own personal sorrows may feel especially overwhelming. Social distancing has changed our way of being in the world and hindered our ability to gather, whether with friends and family or for a traditional funeral, causing severe strain and feelings of isolation. Grief is not meant to be done alone therefore we may have to rethink how we intentionally grieve during a pandemic.

The grief we feel when faced with the death of a loved one challenges our physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual wellbeing. These dimensions are interwoven, and to focus only on one dimension to the exclusions of the others is like driving a car with one tire. We need all four tires to move forward. Therefore we need to acknowledge all five dimensions if we want to move through the pain of grief.

The first four dimensions (physical, emotional, cognitive, and social) are more often the focus of traditional physical and mental health care. Spirituality is often ignored, avoided, or too personal to address. So let's go there.

I want to recognize that spirituality is innately human and a need within all of us; we are wired for it. Spirituality is the recognition of a belief or feeling that there is something

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greater than oneself and can be divine in nature. Spirituality is our personal relationship to that something greater than our self. It comforts us when faced with a pending death of a loved one or when we grieve and mourn a death.

“Death and dying pose a fundamental question to human existence, perhaps the most poignant and fundamental question that can be posed—such a question does not tolerate an ‘answer’ since the question deals with an unfathomable mystery, and mysteries are never answered—they are lived through and endured.” — Edward Miller.

Research has indicated that during this time of loss, spirituality concerns become more important to us because the death of a loved one brings us face to face with mortality and the mystery of death. Death cannot be fully understood—causing us to explore, question, and seek meaning. What is meaningful to us is not always measurable. We grapple with the unknown and want answers. Perhaps then, the pain will lessen.

The challenge for the mourner is to allow oneself to explore this crisis of meaninglessness or what others have referred to as the “dark night of the soul.” We need to wrestle with the whys, our spiritual distress, and our lack of meaning and purpose. We need to question, “Who am I now?” And find our way to tolerate the feelings of emptiness, helplessness, despair, and others. “What is grief asking of me?” “What do I need?” This is soul work—it is often downward in nature and we must be willing to connect with what is deep, dark, unpleasant. This is not negative, but necessary. By embracing the hurt, the pain, the mourner can begin integrating the loss into their life and in time move from soul work to spirit work; the ability to embrace hope and the expectation of good that is yet to be. Grief is not something we can go around—we have to go through and we need to gather all that will see us through this time of bereavement.

Our needs are unique and what helps one person may not help another. But I’d like you to consider the role of rituals in your life and during this time of grief. A ritual can be a formal ceremony or a series of acts that we perform the same way, in a particular situation. Think about your daily routine. Are there a series of tasks that you complete in the same order each day? Daily routines are meaningful practices that we may take for granted. Rituals, routines, give us purpose. The North America Culture is slowly chipping away at the use of authentic ritual and ceremony when it comes to death.

“When a person is born we rejoice. When they are married, we celebrate. When they die, we pretend nothing happened.” — Margaret Mead

For many, when we speak of rituals around grief and mourning, public displays of bereavement such as funerals or religious customs—such as “sitting Shiva” in Judaism—come to mind. Most cultures have some public mourning ritual. Since the turn of the twentieth century many of our American death rituals have disappeared despite being rooted in past traditions and generations. When I was a child funerals were events. There were family viewings, ceremonies, burials, gatherings, remembrances, casseroles, visits to the cemetery on Sundays, etc. Now, funerals are optional.

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There are many influences to the minimization of ritual in regards to death. Medical science has afforded many the opportunity to live longer—creating a generation who hasn't experienced a death until well into adulthood. We live in a very mobile, fast-paced society that values self-reliance with a more intellectual than spiritual focus on life. This results in the devaluation of funerals and a loss of death symbols. We also strive to avoid pain thus missing the role of hurt — especially in grief. Hence we don't want a funeral because they are sad, we'd rather have a celebration of life — that sounds better to our ears. Our culture also struggles with the reality of death and goes to great lengths to deny mortality. So if you are looking outside yourself for meaningful rituals, they may be hard to find. But you can create meaningful rituals that allow you to connect with and move through your grief; promoting an emotional and spiritual connection with your loved one. The use of rituals can restore a sense of control when our lives feel so out of control. Rituals can counterbalance the chaos that follows a loss.

“Ritual is a pattern imposed on the mere flux of feelings by reason and will, which renders pleasures less fugitive and grief more endurable.” — C.S. Lewis

Rituals can be small or elaborate. Rituals tell our story—who we are, what we want to be, and what or who is important to us. They can be derived from family, culture, religion or simply created. Rituals provide us with structure, connection, purpose and meaning. We are familiar with public mourning rituals but what about creating your own personal rituals to remember and mourn your loved ones? Here are a few examples of what others have done to bring ritual into their mourning.

- Lighting a candle in honor of your loved one whether for a special occasion or simply at dinner time.
- Recognizing certain dates of importance such as birthdays, anniversaries, the day of death with ceremony, a special meal, sharing stories, looking at photos, etc.
- Creating a memory book, gathering photos, cards, memorabilia and placing into a memory box for your loved one, to be shared at special occasions or when in need of connection.
- Listening to music enjoyed by your loved one or watching a favorite movie of theirs, perhaps a Sunday afternoon ritual.
- Visiting their burial site or a place of meaning for you both.
- Making a donation in honor of your loved one to a charity they supported everyday holiday season, for instance, or creating a scholarship in their honor and presenting it to the recipient every year.
- Keeping something special that reminds you of your loved one, a linking object that you can carry with you or take out when needed.
- Using the china of a loved one every Mother's Day or on another day of importance.

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- Creating a garden, planting a tree, creating a work of art, carrying on a tradition of theirs in their honor.
- Read or speak out loud a poem, prayer, something inspirational, perhaps every morning.
- Wearing something of your loved ones such as a piece of jewelry, clothing item, or something that reminds you of them.
- Caring for something that mattered to them such as washing their car, gardening, volunteering.
- Cooking food they enjoyed and having others share in the feast.
- Creating a special altar with a photograph, flowers, incense, candle, etc.

And then there are rituals to help with getting through the day ...

- Mini-rituals that help us start or end the day. Coffee on the patio, a walk around the block, a mindful meditation, watching the sun set, deep breathing rituals etc.
- Writing in a daily journal, talking out loud to our loved one, calling a friend, walking the dog, etc.

There are times when a more structured ritual is needed when grieving such as on special days like holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and others. There are no rules. If the funeral experience did not meet your needs, you can create and organize a time to gather with those you love and honor your loved one anytime. You can create a ritual to be used on a daily basis, weekly, monthly, yearly or just once. That is the beauty of personal rituals—they are for you by you. The key to any ritual, especial when it comes to grief, is that it is simply meaningful to you. Rituals are everywhere, how we prepare for sleep, how we start our day, how we do our shopping—why not also bring them with intention to how we grieve and mourn a loved one?

If you, or someone you know, are struggling with grief after the loss of a loved one, please contact us. We're offering both one-on-one and group counseling through HIPPA-compliant Zoom sessions. Call us at (805) 389-6870.