

The Role of Ritual and Ceremony in Bereavement

San Francisco Theological Seminary
Special Reading Course
Instructor: Wendy Farley, PhD
Spring 2018 - DMin, Pastoral Care

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April 8, 2018

Introduction

“The grief in the human heart needs to be attended to by rituals and practices that when practiced, will lessen anger and allow creativity to flow anew.”

-- Fr. Matthew Fox¹



It is not unusual in casual conversation, when talking to (or about) a bereaved individual, for someone to mention grief counseling as a helpful resource. But many lay people and professional counselors don't realize that for most grievers, clinical intervention is not necessary, unless the grieving process has become debilitating to the point where normal functioning is impaired and the individual is experiencing complicated grief.² Jordan and Neimeyer analyzed the value of counseling for people experiencing normal (non-complicated) grief, and found that there is little scientific evidence for the efficacy of grief counseling in these

¹ Matthew Fox, "95 Theses or Articles of Faith for a Christianity for the Third Millennium," YES! Magazine (n.d.), accessed March 24, 2018, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/spiritual-uprising/1326>.

² M. Katherine Shear et al., "Complicated Grief and Related Bereavement Issues for DSM-5," *Depression and Anxiety* 28, no. 2 (January 31, 2011): 4.

cases.³ While acknowledging that research methods in this area need of improvement, Jordan and Neimeyer pointed out that the popular psychotherapeutic approach to grief counseling is based on a medical treatment model in which a clinician diagnoses a patient and then treats the “relatively passive” patient for a specific condition. They conclude that this model may have only limited use for working with bereavement.⁴

If the medical model (clinician/patient/diagnosis/treatment) has limited use, and if clinical interventions are only needed when grief becomes complicated, then what interventions can we offer as counselors, chaplains and educators to assist clients with *normal* grieving? In traditional settings where mourners might seek counseling or spiritual support (church, support groups, counseling centers), the medical model tends to prevail, often because providers aren't specifically trained in bereavement care.⁵ In addition, many are not familiar with alternative or multi-cultural modalities that draw on practices such as ritual and sacred ceremony for working with grief.

Psychological Perspective

In recent years -- in large part due to increasing multi-cultural awareness since the advent of the internet -- therapeutic rituals have become popular in the West for the treatment of both complicated and non-complicated mourning.⁶ Rando observes that mourners who don't participate in appropriate rituals for acknowledging a death tend to have difficulty

³ John R. Jordan and Robert A. Neimeyer. "Does Grief Counseling Work?." (2003. *Death Studies* 27, no. 9: Religion and Philosophy Collection, EBSCOhost). 756

⁴ Ibid. 780

⁵ Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, 1 edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Kindle Location 70.

⁶ Therese A. Rando, *Treatment of Complicated Mourning* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1995). 313.

accepting the reality of the death,⁷ which can be a symptom of complicated grief.⁸ She discusses several psychological benefits of death and grief rituals, including:⁹

- . **Acting out** (a purposeful behavioral expression of an internal thought or feeling).
- . **Legitimization of emotional and physical ventilation** (ritual sanctions a mourner's expression of emotion).
- . **Provision of symbols and outlets to focus thoughts, feelings and behaviors** (the use of symbol concretizes thought and affect, providing mourners with a tangible experience that would not be possible if abstractions alone were employed).
- . **Rendering of control** (after undertaking a prescribed activity with symbolic meaning, a mourner often experiences emotional and physical release and a sense of increased manageability of emotions).
- . **Delimitation of grief** (rituals can channel mourning into a circumscribed behavior with a distinct beginning and end).
- . **Enhancement of appropriate connection to the deceased** (rituals can provide symbolic evidence of the deceased's continued existence in the life of the mourner).
- . **Enhancement of the Six Rs of Mourning:**¹⁰
 1. Recognize the loss
 2. React to the separation by fully experiencing the pain rather than avoiding it.
 3. Recollect and re-experience the deceased and the relationship
 4. Relinquish old attachments to the deceased and to the old world
 5. Readjust to the new world without forgetting the old
 6. Reinvest energy in allowing the lost relationship to take a new form
- . **Learning through gained experience** (the active "doing" in ritual makes the reality of the loss more real and less abstract).

⁷ Ibid. 395

⁸ Ibid. 395

⁹ Ibid. 314-318

¹⁰ Ibid. 393-450

- **Provision of structure, form, and containment for confusing emotions** (rituals can contain emotions by offering protection against overpowering feelings and impulses, and can reduce anger).
- **Prescription of actions for dealing with emotional or social chaos** (rituals can reduce stress overload and provide grounding).
- **Provision of group experiences that allow kinship and social solidarity** (collective rituals facilitate social interaction to promote a mourner's re-integration into a social group).
- **Structuring celebrations, anniversaries and holidays** (appropriate rituals to commemorate occasions can be effective in tapping in to disturbing affects or cognitions associated with the special day).

Spiritual Perspective

It is important to recognize that many of our familiar religious traditions fail to provide bereavement tools for engaging the soul at a deeper level. For example, rituals such as funeral services, holiday customs, liturgies and routine prayer practices are often generic and performed by rote, which some mourners may find lacking in meaning and personal relevance.¹¹ In Bonanno's exploration of grief practices in cultures around the world, he concluded that the way we grieve in the West underestimates our capacity to heal ourselves after an extremely difficult or traumatic event.¹² Modern Western thinking, steeped in a value system that places independence and self-reliance above collective experience, tends to see grieving as a private, individual process rather than a communal one,¹³ so not only do we

¹¹ Terri Daniel, "Ritual and Sacred Ceremony for Turning Pain into Power" (Essay, San Francisco Theological Seminary, Winter 2018, Trauma, Loss and Grief in Theological and Pastoral Perspectives).1

¹² George A. Bonanno, "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?," *The American Psychologist* 59, no. 1 (January 2004): 101.

¹³ Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani, and William Young, eds., *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures: Second Edition*, 2 edition. (London : New York: Routledge, 2015). 43

grieve alone, but by denying the reality of death,¹⁴ we have become estranged from ancient practices that were designed to help us have a more personal relationship with the natural cycles of change and impermanence. As Parkes points out, “We live in a world in which religion and the fundamental idea with which it deals -- birth, death and the meaning of life -- have been taken over by professionals, and quietly downgraded in personal significance.”¹⁵

How did this happen?

As theologian Matthew Fox explains it, we lost our connection to the cosmos. Instead of invoking the energies of the sun and moon, the power of nature and the unseen forces of the universe, traditional Christian death and grief rituals focus primarily on scriptural narratives and religious doctrine, because, as Fox states, “the fall/redemption tradition does not trust the cosmos, and does not celebrate it.”¹⁶

In order to restore the sacred practices and the cosmic connection that has been lost, we can begin by exploring cultures and religions that may be unfamiliar to us, but can offer inspiration and spiritual direction. We can also borrow from indigenous cultures that have maintained a close relationship with the earth and the elements, and use those elements in our own rituals. For example, in the *Grief as a Mystical Journey* workshop that I facilitate, I incorporate a variety of processes drawn from world religions and cultures. Parts of the workshop involve sacred song, which includes a Hindu chant (*Aud Guray Nameh*); a Hebrew chant (Intoning the word *Ruah*); and grief laments from the Celtic Pagan tradition. We create

¹⁴ Ibid. 223

¹⁵ Ibid. 144.

¹⁶ Matthew Fox. *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality: Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-six Themes, and Two Questions* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).75.

altars called “stations of the heart” (based on the Catholic tradition of stations of the cross), and we perform a Peruvian shamanic prayer ceremony using herbs, rose petals, water, fire, earth and stones. These tools invite us into a meditative state where we engage our inner processes by symbolizing them with ritual objects and ceremonial actions to which we assign personal meaning. The practice of creating innovative rituals and ceremonies can steer us away from rigid adherence to traditions and doctrines that may have lost personal meaning for us, allowing us to become more spiritually empowered as we discover new ways to work with emotional pain and inner turmoil.

There are no rules for what a personal ritual or ceremony should look like, but in my ceremonial work over the past ten years, I’ve identified these helpful guidelines:¹⁷

- . Rituals contain a mystical or metaphysical component, such as acknowledging spiritual energy, higher planes of consciousness, divine presence or other unseen forces. This might involve sending a message to the spirit of a deceased loved one, or asking God, spirit guides, ancestors or angels to help with our healing.
- . Rituals can be performed alone or in community. No institutional structure is needed.
- . Rituals are designed to shift energy from one condition to another. A ritual involving breath, dance or movement can release emotional pain from the body. A ritual in which the client draws a picture depicting a traumatic event and then burns that picture in a ceremonial fire helps to release disruptive or obsessive attachments to that image.
- . Rituals work with symbolic representations of emotions and experiences. These symbols can include drawings, personal sacred objects, or objects from nature, such as stones or feathers. Moving or manipulating these objects in a ritual fashion (by burning in a fire, burying in the earth, purifying with water, etc.), symbolizes moving the pain from where it is “stuck” to a new location in spiritual space where it can be transmuted.

¹⁷ Terri Daniel, "Ritual and Sacred Ceremony for Turning Pain into Power" (Essay, San Francisco Theological Seminary, Winter 2018, *Trauma, Loss and Grief in Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*).3

Echoing my metaphysical description of ritual -- and Rando's psychological description --

Anderson identifies these characteristics of healing ritual from a Christian perspective: ¹⁸

- . Rituals connect people to communities of care and to the earth. The experience of community softens the isolation that lingering pain generates. God's healing is the work of restoring and redeeming the whole creation.
- . Rituals make a correspondence between intense emotions or painful memories and words or images to express those emotions. The words and images of Christian rituals make explicit the link or correspondence between God's story and our stories.
- . Rituals foster coherence of meaning in spite of inevitable mystery because the deepest truths of life and faith are hidden in God.

The human need for ritual is universal; it makes no difference whether we send our prayers and ritual offerings to the god of Abraham, the Native American Great Spirit, the Hindu pantheon or the sun, moon and earth spirits... the function of ritual is the same. As Mayan shamanic practitioner Martin Prechtel says, "Humans have a tribal need to express the grief we feel over our natural transitions. These rites of passage must be honored. Otherwise, they are left unattended rather than being converted into beauty and cultural continuity."¹⁹

Conclusion

Ritual and ceremony can provide remarkable healing power while spanning the space between psychology and theology. Anderson offers this interfaith, cross-cultural summary:

Just as we use playful and poetic language to speak about the mystery of God, we use symbols, gestures, and song to point to the unspeakable in human pain and make public what cannot be seen. Rituals express what cannot be captured in words. They make the invisible visible... What makes human rituals so important, in our lives generally, and so

¹⁸ Herbert Anderson. "How Rituals Heal." *Word & World*, Volume 30, Number 1. (Winer 2010). 46.

¹⁹ Martín Prechtel, *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015).10

essential for healing is that ritual is a vehicle for liberating us from narratives that confine and for retelling stories that liberate.²⁰

Creative ceremonies and rituals help us look our losses in the eye and teach us to view them with reverence rather than bitterness. They also help us to gently and lovingly let go of guilt, blame, anger and the disruptive energies within us that may be keeping us from healing and reconstructing our lives. As Daniel describes, "Ritual gives words to the unspeakable and form to the formless. It brings the non-physical into physical form so we can see it, touch it, feel it and process it, creating a bond between Heaven and Earth. It turns pain into power."²¹

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²⁰ Herbert Anderson. "How Rituals Heal." *Word & World*, Volume 30, Number 1. (Winer 2010). 42.

²¹ "Grief Rituals," *Spirituality and Grief*, accessed April 1, 2018, <http://spiritualityandgrief.com/grief-rituals-.html>.

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