Sacred Ceremonies, Sacred Space: The Role of Rituals and Memorials in Grief and Loss

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IMPROVING CARE FOR VETERANS

FACING ILLNESS AND DEATH

PART OF THE LIVING WITH GRIEF® SERIES

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Foreword by Chuck Hagel, U.S. Secretary of Defense
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Long before humans could write, our nomadic ancestors would return year after year to the same places to bury and mourn their dead. The ritualistic ways that the dead were buried and the careful place of treasured objects bear mute testimony both to sacredness of the space as well as the ceremony. Their motives have been questioned. Were they honoring their dead? Did they believe that by such careful ritual they would assure their kinsmen and kinswomen successfully journeyed to the other side? Were such rituals meant to placate the dead, to discourage them from returning to trouble the living?

In the end, it does not really matter. Before written history, humans understood the need for memorials and cemeteries—for sacred space and sacred ceremonies.

This lesson too was understood by the military from time immortal. While Plutarch’s comment that Spartan mothers told their sons to either return with their shield or on it suggests early rituals, most contemporary rituals that surround military deaths have their origins in the nineteenth century. For example, draping the American flag over the casket of a deceased veteran began with the custom of carrying the dead from the battlefield on flags or draping flags over the bodies of the deceased. The American custom of playing Taps at military funerals began during the Civil War. The 21-gun salute was the result of an agreement between the United States and Britain in 1875 to standardize what had been a more idiosyncratic process; the US would often fire a volley for each of the then 21 states in the country. Some military funeral rituals reach even further back into antiquity. In ancient times, a soldier’s horse
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might be sacrificed to accompany the fallen soldier in the next world. Hence the riderless horse would be part of the funeral procession symbolizing that the soldier would no longer ride on this side of life. In the US today, veterans are entitled to military honors that include the presentation of a folded flag and playing of Taps as well as the presence of uniformed military personnel.

War memorials also have a history. While originally memorials such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris or London's Nelson's Column were built to commemorate victories, it soon became common to develop memorials that noted the sacrifice that war demanded. During the Civil War, for example, many towns dedicated memorials to commemorate their local loss. After World War I, there was some controversy over the development of “living memorials” such as Soldier Field, the home of the Chicago Bears, or Veterans Stadium, a multipurpose stadium in Philadelphia. In these cases, civic auditoriums, parks, libraries, or other community structures were built to serve the community while honoring the military. Far more controversial was a movement that emerged in France following the First World War where “pacifist” memorials were erected to the widows and orphans devastated by the losses of war. French soldiers were ordered to turn their heads when marching past such memorials.

Veterans cemeteries also date back to the Civil War. Prior to that, soldiers were often buried at the site of the battle, transported back home to be buried by the family, or interred at the military post. Given the high death toll of the Civil War, Congress created national cemeteries to honor those who had sacrificed their lives for the Union.

Sacred space and sacred ceremonies have long been part of the ways that we have dealt both with death in general and military deaths in particular. This chapter explores the ways that such sacred ceremonies and space can facilitate the grief of survivors, suggesting ways that such value may be enhanced when a veteran dies.

The Therapeutic Value of Funerals

Funeral rituals are a cultural universal since they offer so many therapeutic benefits (Rando, 1984). They are rites of passage that offer a ritualized marking of a change of status. In this case, funerals mark the transition between life and death. As such, they offer a symbolic vehicle that marks the death and allows the final disposition of remains.

Some of the benefits of funerals are psychological. First, funerals confirm the reality of death. One of the initial reactions to grief is often shock and disbelief.
This is especially true when a death is sudden, unexpected, and traumatic. Presence at a funeral, viewing the body, and hearing the condolences of others offer a constant reminder of the reality of the loss.

A second psychological benefit is that the funeral allows survivors to share memories and process feelings and reactions. In the community of family and friends, survivors have opportunities for emotional release and ventilation. This is critical in a number of ways. The funeral remains a vehicle where emotions can be openly expressed, allowing a catharsis. In addition, mourners can reminisce and share memories. The sharing of memories provides occasion to shape an image of the deceased as stories are remembered and discussed among the community. Both the expression of emotions and the recollection of memories are essential elements of the grieving process as they allow survivors to process the pain of the loss and forge an ongoing relationship with the deceased based on memory (Worden, 2008).

A final psychological benefit of the funeral is that the funeral allows the survivors to “do something” at an otherwise disorganized time. Participation in ritual allows symbolic mastery of the death. This can especially valuable in cases where the death was sudden or unexpected (Doka, 1984).

In addition to these psychological benefits, there are social benefits as well. One of the major benefits is that funerals offer an opportunity for the community to gather and offer support. This is critical in so many ways. It reaffirms that the community grieves together. This is especially important as the presence of caring others reaffirms that mourners are not alone as they cope with their grief.

Moreover, in the gathering of the funeral, there is sharing of stories, memories, and reminiscences. This sharing allows the mourners to make sense of the deceased’s life, offering a sense that this life had value and meaning. This too is an essential aspect of the mourning process.

There is an additional social benefit as well. Often in the period of illness prior to the death, those in the intimate circle have been absorbed in caregiving, and may have been socially isolated. The funeral then serves to reintegrate them in their social circle by reaffirming ties, reestablishing social relationships, and publically reiterating the change in the mourners’ status.

Funerals are spiritually significant. They offer an opportunity to provide a spiritual or philosophical interpretation of the death, contributing to meaning making. Funerals essentially provide a way to reflect on the meaning
of this death within the community’s philosophical or spiritual framework. The funeral itself, through familiar rituals, provides a sense of comfort and continuity even in times of insecurity and unknown change. It evokes the image of larger community that transcends the present and the promise of a continuing bond, however that might be interpreted within a given spirituality or philosophy. For members of a faith community, the funeral energizes that community to minister to the mourner.

Some of these benefits accrue to the group as a whole. Funerals allow the community to gather together showing both solidarity and support to the other mourners, and offer the promise that even with this death, the community survives. It allows the community to share memories and reminiscences. Finally, funerals help reconstruct both the meaning of the death and the nature of the continuing bond to the community as a whole.

**Enhancing the Value of Funeral Rituals**

While funeral rituals can be exceedingly therapeutic, there is much that can be done to even enhance the salutary significance of the rite. Early evidence has emphasized the value of planning and participating in funeral ceremonies (Doka, 1984). There are numerous opportunities and ways that this can be done. Family members can serve as pallbearers, readers, and eulogists. Depending on the religious service, such as in liturgical churches such as Anglican, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic, there may be other possibilities to participate. Adolescents may be employed as crucifers, acolytes, or altar boys. Even younger children can participate, perhaps handing out programs.

There is also a wide range of ways to personalize the funeral. Memory boards, photograph displays, and media presentations can highlight the life of the deceased, reaffirming the meaning and significance of life. Eulogies, personally selected music, and readers also enhance the individual quality of the rite.

Planning and participation can be especially therapeutic for instrumental grievers. Instrumental grievers are those who experience and express grief in more cognitive and physical ways (Doka and Martin, 2010). Since instrumental grievers often act on their grief, participation in both planning and conducting the funeral ritual can be very helpful. The style of grieving that an individual adapts is dependent on a variety of factors such as gender expectations, cultural norms, individual temperament, and socialization experiences. Persons who
have experienced military culture may be more inclined to respond to grief in an instrumental way.

It is important to recognize two aspects of contemporary funerals. The first is that most individuals have multiple identities. That means that people generally only know one aspect of the deceased’s life, as co-worker, family member, or neighbor. The funeral then may be the first time they see other facets of the deceased’s life. Having multiple eulogists who can address these different aspects of a person can facilitate this process. In addition, it may be valuable to explain reasons that given readings or music are employed as only some of the participants may really understand the significance.

A number of years ago, a friend died in middle age after a debilitating disease. Prior to the illness, he was an engineer. However, his avocation was playing bluegrass music in a local band. They regularly played an open-air gig, provided the weather cooperated. Because their concert was always dependent on the weather, they began each set with a bluegrass rendition of *We’ll Sing in the Sunshine*. When he learned of his diagnosis, he told his wife, “We learned to sing in the sunshine, now we will have to learn to sing in the rain.” *Singing in the Rain* was the closing “hymn” of his funeral service. Yet the story needed to be told as only part of the audience would have appreciated the significance of the song.

A second factor relates to the diversity of cultural and spiritual backgrounds among participants in the funeral ritual. Few participants are likely to share the same cultural and spiritual roots, so there may be a need for cultural and spiritual translation, explaining what is occurring to those of different cultural or spiritual traditions.

The presence of military honors incorporated into the funeral service can be very therapeutic. Military honors are the right of every veteran honorably discharged from service. Military honors enhance the funeral ritual. These honors include the participation of two or more uniformed military personnel, the playing of *Taps*, and the folding and presentation of a burial flag. These honors reaffirm the service of the veteran, adding to a sense that the veteran’s life had significance and meaning.

**Sacred Space**

The veteran also has the right to be buried in a veteran’s cemetery. This too can reaffirm the meaning of the veteran’s life in a number of ways. First, the presence of the veteran’s remains in a space where other veterans are interred...
affirms that the veteran was a part of a larger enterprise, and is a reminder of the shared sacrifice. Second, it confirms the national gratitude for and recognition of service. Third, veterans cemeteries are often settings for other rituals marking, for example, Veterans and Memorial Day. These additional rites add significance and mark natural surges within the grief process.

Even if the family does not choose to bury the veteran in a veteran ceremony it is still important to have some sacred space to remember the deceased. One of the great values of cemeteries or memorial parks is that they allow families opportunities to visit a site on appropriate days and to conduct their own rituals; leaving flowers, for example, on special times such as holidays, birthdays, or meaningful anniversaries. Veterans memorials can serve as alternate or complementary locations for such ceremonies.

**The Value of Therapeutic Ritual**

While funeral rituals can be highly therapeutic, they are, by nature, limited; the funeral takes place in the immediate aftermath of the death. Grief, however, is an ongoing process. The presence of other rituals throughout the grieving process, whether anniversary services or masses, patriotic rituals, or private family rituals, can mark other points in the journey of grief.

Therapeutic rituals can also be utilized. Therapeutic rituals are rituals that are incorporated within the therapeutic or counseling process. Such rituals focus on specific therapeutic goals and reaffirm specific therapeutic messages (Doka and Martin, 2010). Such rituals may be performed by individuals or larger groups such as the intimate network of survivors. They can be a bridge to an individual's culture or spirituality by incorporating elements of that culture, faith, or philosophy into the rite.

Therapeutic rituals have a specific message. One such message may be one of continuity. *Rituals of continuity* reaffirm a continuing bond with the deceased, recognition that the relationship is retained even in death. In many ways, these are relatively common rituals that may be undertaken in a wide variety of settings. Participation in an anniversary ritual, toasting a deceased individual on a birthday, or lighting a candle are all examples of such a ritual. Veterans and Memorial Day both provide a public ritual where the value of service and sacrifice and the continuing bond are nationally affirmed.

*Rituals of transition* are designed to indicate movement within the process of grief. In one such ritual, a young adolescent idolized his deceased grandfather, a
Vietnam veteran. He even kept his grandfather's photograph on his night table. His grandmother began to date again, about 18 months after his grandfather's death. At first the boy was resistant and resentful of both his grandmother and her new beau. With some encouragement from his own parents and assistance from his school counselor, he became more accepting of the relationship. After his grandmother's remarriage, he asked for a photograph of his new grandfather. He placed it in a frame that held two photographs, one for each grandfather, signifying his acceptance of this new relationship in his life.

**Rituals of reconciliation** allow mourners to finish business. Such rituals can permit the mourner to give or to receive forgiveness. Often the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, offers a space for such rituals. In one, an unknown medic left a note attached to a name on the wall. “I want you to know, I did everything possible to save you. You’re here. It was not enough. I'm sorry.”

**Rituals of affirmation** complement rituals of reconciliation. Here the message is to affirm the deceased. A ritual of affirmation fundamentally thanks the deceased for their contributions. In one such ritual, an elderly wife of a veteran ceremoniously passed on to her adult children the medals their deceased father had won for service in the Korean War. To her it was important to have a ritual where she could explain the significance of her husband’s service to her children, honoring his memory and affirming the meaningfulness of his life.

In creating therapeutic rituals, a few principles should be employed. First, the ritual should emerge from the narrative. Each ritual has to be individually constructed, arising from the client’s individual story. There is no template for any therapeutic ritual. Second, the ritual should include tangible objects that also have symbolic significance. Rituals revolve around objects; they offer a focal point for the rite. The medals, photograph, or letter remind participants of the qualities and message they wish to confer in the ceremony.

Rituals also have to be planned and processed, and the planning needs to be both therapeutic and practical. From a therapeutic context, the counselor should ask questions clarifying the message of the ritual and affirming the significance of the acts and objects that will comprise the rite. The client may wish to consider if this is a private or public ceremony as well as if there may be others who will participate or witness the event. There may need to be practical issues that have to be considered. For example, in the ritual of affirmation described earlier, the mother was asking her sons and their families to be part
of this ritual. This led to other questions such as the timing of the ritual, as well as details as to whether she would serve a meal to the family, what the menu would be, and what accommodation would be made for a granddaughter coming from a distance.

The counselor also needs to process the ritual with the client following the experience. How did the client react during the rite? Did the ritual accomplish the client's goals and expectations? What worked well? What might have been done differently? Are there other things the client needs to do?

Finally, in preparing a ritual, there are lessons to be learned from faith communities. Rituals all take on a special character when they are encased in the primal elements of fire (candles), wind (music or chimes), water, and soil (flowers).

As this chapter began, it was noted that rituals began far back in antiquity. Long before writing, long before the domestication of plants and animals, long before the emergence of settled communities, our ancient ancestors acknowledged the power and importance of ritual. It is a lesson that should never be lost or forgotten.

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