

Creating Grief Rituals from Scratch

(A Response to COVID-19)

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With physical distancing guidelines put in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic, public funerals across the globe have been minimized, postponed, or canceled. Some families and funeral directors were quick to adapt to the situation by live-streaming services. Social media platforms became a place to gather and post memorials. Emails and smartphones have become a standard forum for offering condolences to the bereaved.

Of course, cyber-funerals or virtual hugs are not the same as physical ones. The inability to honor and carry-out religious and culturally prescribed traditions or simply a loved one's final wishes only magnifies a family's grief. In the news, we've heard the desperate cries of some who are fearful that without a chance to say goodbye or have a *proper* funeral, they will never find closure.


If your family is among all those who were not able to hold a funeral service in the way you would have expected or liked, this burden must only add to the surreal landscape of anxiety, sadness, and loss in which we all now wander. The circumstances surrounding a person's death become the environment through which all grief must pass, so it is certainly understandable why some of us are feeling lost and part of the reason why your grief may feel inconsolable right now.

The Myth of Closure

The facts of missed opportunities and ceremonies denied are real. While it is true that there are no *do-overs*, there remain infinite possibilities for creating meaningful rituals to offer ourselves and loved ones some degree of consolation.

As a grief counselor, I've come to the conclusion that we will miss the physical presence of the people we let into our hearts - forever. Such words like *closure*, *healing*, *resolution*, *recovery*, and *acceptance*, really don't work according to my way of thinking.

Instead, I encourage people to think of grief as "episodic." In other words, (to use the metaphor that many people use to describe their experience of grief) it comes, and it goes, like *waves*. Over time those waves should become less intense; in part because you learn to adjust to life without that special person by your side, but also because you will gain skills and confidence in your ability to navigate your way through those waves of grief. However, let's not forget that on birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions like graduations and weddings, we will experience one or a series of those waves again. In challenging times, like other losses, and in scary times, like personal illness or pandemic, we will grieve their absence again and again.



If you are a believer in the myth of closure, with episodes like these far out into your distant future, you are going to be disappointed in yourself, wondering, “What’s wrong with me, I thought I was over this! What did I do wrong?” In truth, those later waves or ripples are a testament to the fact that we are human and we are alive! I've also settled into an unshakable belief that while bodies die, relationships don't. Connection is not dependent on proximity. I'm also fairly certain we will each find our *new normal*. Somewhere down the meandering river of time, we will realize the challenges of the present moment have become the past, we will find new reasons for joy and purpose and meaning in life, but we are destined to grieve again. And that is how it works.

In the problem, we also find our solution


If it's true that we will grieve again, then, it must also be true that there will also be other opportunities to find consolation. Funeral rituals should never be thought of as *one and done* solutions to the problem of death and grief. Instead, we can observe that funeral services that follow soon after death are merely one of the first opportunities to remember, honor, and console, not the last. These days there is a quote by Ronald Grimes that I seem to often be repeating. He suggested, "**Our definition of death rites must be large enough to include not only ritualized preparations for death and rites performed near the time of death but also ritual activities that follow long after the occasion of a person's death.**"ⁱ His insight comes from studying ritual customs throughout history and cross-culturally. In some parts of the world, different mourning rituals are prescribed at varied and regular intervals for months (and in some cases years) later. These later rituals provided people with the opportunity to re-connect with relatives and loved ones, both the living and the dead. They provide moments to remember and honor those who have died. They provide us with the opportunity to attend to the thoughts and feelings

that arise during one of those later waves or ripples of grief. They offer us a chance to take stock of how we are doing at that particular moment in time. Finally, these rituals also provide comfort because they re-connect us to our core beliefs.

While we always want to avoid trampling the sacred rites and traditions of other cultures, we can observe how they've found solace at times beyond the days and weeks immediately after death, and then set about finding creative ways to access some support for ourselves.

We are ritual creators, whether we are aware of it or not. Secular or religious, simple or complex, rituals are the oil that lubricates important moments in our individual and collective lives. In the decade before the First World War and the last time we faced a world-wide pandemic, anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep wrote, *The Rites of Passage*. In it, he describes a useful framework of three inter-related categories of rituals that help us move through significant life events. The first he calls, **rituals of separation**, that mark the end of one phase of life, for example, a funeral. The second he calls, **rituals of transition**, intended to sustain us while we are in the gap between what life was like and what it eventually will become. In our case, let's call this in-between time the *mourning period*. The third he calls, **rituals of reincorporation**, that are more often celebrations of the beginning of the next phase of life, whenever or whatever that may be.ⁱⁱ

Perhaps the reason some people feel they are *stuck*, or can't get *closure* is not that they couldn't have a funeral, but because they are left frustrated by a culture that has mostly abandoned most, if not all, of the later mourning rituals designed to support the bereaved as they struggle to adjust to a life without the person who died. To be honest, most people don't hang-in-there with the bereaved long enough to celebrate the rebuilding of their shattered lives. If there is any truth to this critique, I also need to add



that I believe there is still hope. If we understand the different elements of rituals and how they work, then we can create meaningful grief rituals for ourselves.

Creating rituals from scratch

I'm willing to admit I've never made a cake from scratch. I'm perfectly content with the boxed kind; just add water, a couple of eggs, some oil, mix it together and put it in the oven. Simple enough. If I stick to the directions and the recipe, the result is palatable enough for my tastes. For beginner bakers and ritual makers, the boxed kind is probably going to be good enough. But for those who find the pre-packaged kind distasteful, I'd like to offer a sort of recipe for mixing-up a batch of your own. It takes a measurable amount of intentionality, a smidge of creativity, a few drops of playfulness, and a little bit of trial and error. For those who put in the effort, the rewards of creating your own rituals from scratch will be great.

One thing all rituals have in common is some combination of **structure** and **flexibility**. Some rituals will lean more toward one side of this continuum or the other. With a little preparation you will be able to design your own rituals without thinking so much about *what you are doing* or *how it should be done*. The resulting freedom allows participants to enter into the moment more fully and have a more meaningful experience.

Take a look at the ritual creation worksheet, consider if you need input or the involvement of others to create your grief ritual, and then return to this article to consider your next steps.

Separation, transition, reincorporation

The first thing you need to do is return to Van Genep's idea that one type of ritual does not fit all situations; they each serve a different purpose. Consider what you want to achieve, what's your goal? Do you want to find a way to say goodbye to a

person, a place, a thing, a way of life? Then you are talking about rituals of separation. If you are just looking for some way to still the chaos, to find shelter, ask direction, or help, then maybe you need to think in terms of rituals of transition. Finally, if you need validation for a job well done or simply a pat-on-the-back, then you want to create a ritual of reincorporation.

Intention


Rituals can offer consolation and they can help us feel a sense of connection or control. They also create emotional space for change to occur. You will want to ask the question, "What is my intention? What do I want to gain from engaging in this ritual?"

Focus

Your next question is, "Who is the primary focus of this ritual?" Grief rituals might focus on, 1. remembering or honoring the deceased, 2. supporting or consoling the bereaved, and 3. providing a larger group the opportunity to express their values or concerns. Historically, and cross-culturally there are many examples of rituals that focus specifically on aiding the deceased's transition into the next life. Some rituals, like a memorial service held at some later date, focus on bereaved. Other rituals, like public holidays, focus on affirming a broader sense of community. Many rituals will involve aspects of all three.

Natural Elements

Archeologists have evidence that *Neanderthals* and our *Homo Sapiens* ancestors have been enacting grief rituals since at least the time we left the savanna and started sheltering in caves. However, somewhere around the time we moved out of log cabins into steel and glass towers, we've gradually been losing our appreciation of rituals and connection with the natural world. We come from the Earth; we will all return to it someday. Ask questions like these, "Will I need water to wash or refresh?" "Do I need fire to burn or purify



something?" "Will I require the wind to carry something away?" "Maybe I need to combine more than one natural element like clay and water to sculpt something?" "What natural elements will I need for this ritual?"

Creative Elements

Another essential consideration for designing rituals is, "What are the senses that I want to engage; touch, taste, smell, sight?" The answer to that question will help you make other decisions about what creative elements to incorporate. If you use music, will it be live music or recorded? Movement and gesture may involve sitting, bowing, kneeling, dancing, processing, stomping, rending, smashing. "What words need to be said, if any? Who or how should those words be expressed? What technology will we need to amplify, record, or share this experience?"

Outline and Evaluation

Once you have gotten a sense of what you want to do and how you want to do it, you will benefit from making a general outline. "What will be the timeframe?" "Who will be the participants and what roles will they play?" What objects or preparation will you need to do in advance?" "How much will it cost?" "Are there any physical or emotional safety concerns that need to be addressed?"

Having been involved with creating ritual for individuals, families, and large groups, I've learned another fundamental lesson about them; something always goes wrong! Maybe the sound system wasn't delivered in time or the weather didn't cooperate. Sometimes one of the participants doesn't prepare or show up. What looked great on paper doesn't

turn out the way you thought. Outlines are great, but sometimes you have to trust the spirit, go with the flow and just accept the fact that nothing is perfect. Remember, you can always try again. After all your thoughtfulness and preparation is finished, you must be willing to just enter into the moment and allow the magic of the ritual to unfold.

The following are a few ideas to get your creative juices flowing. Good luck as you start to create your own grief rituals.

- Create a home shrine or "Shelf of Memories." Add photos and other objects. Visit your shrine each day to light a candle, say a prayer, read a favorite poem.
- Go outside each day, move your body, engage all your senses, and reflect on the cycle of life.
- Create something. Display it and share it with loved ones, e.g., a poem, a t-shirt quilt, memorial garden, or a memory box.
- Interview family members, record stories before it is too late! Share it with others.
- Gather favorite family recipes. Cook the dishes and share the meal. Feast on the memories that accompany them.

Still not confident enough to create your own grief rituals? For sample rituals or help in planning your grief rituals contact thomdennis@hotmail.com

Or visit the resources page at <http://www.griefriver.com/resources.html>

ⁱ Grimes, R. *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing the Rites of Passages*, (2000) University of California Press, Berkley, California, p. 254.

ⁱⁱ Van Gennep, A. *The Rites of Passage*, Translated by Bizendom, M. B. and Caffee, G. L. (1960) The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.