

Chapter 2

Beyond here there be dragons

In contemporary America, funeral rites and memorial services, now often rebranded as “Celebrations of Life,” focus primarily on the person who died. Beyond the meal that follows the burial or the scattering of ashes, there is a recognizable absence of mourning rituals designed specifically to support the loved ones left behind.ⁱ More recently another anthropologist, Ronald Grimes, 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.”ⁱⁱ

Historically, those “ritual activities that follow long after death,” would have been part of a formal mourning period that typically lasted a year or more. However, in western cultures, attitudes toward death, dying, and bereavement began to shift after World War I, and many mourning customs started to diminish or disappeared entirely.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today, mourners are advised that “The best thing to do is keep busy,” and thereby avoid those distressing and unpredictable waves of emotions. After a three-day bereavement leave, we are all expected to get right back to work. Supervisors and coworkers will offer obligatory expressions of sympathy for the loss but the bereaved are expected to maintain their composure in public and quickly return to functioning at pre-loss levels.

Most people in our culture simply do not know what to say; either they mumble through a few awkward words of consolation or offer you some tired old cliché. Others are afraid they might say the wrong thing, so they choose to error on the side of saying nothing at all!

Well meaning friends and neighbors promise their ongoing support; “If you need anything, just call...” but they quickly return to their own concerns and forget that grief continues for a protracted period of time.

In the absence of rituals and people to support the bereaved through this difficult life transition they are, like refugees, set adrift upon the troubled waters of grief.

To complicate matters even more, there is nothing telling us how long the mourning period should last. If it was officially over in six, twelve, or eighteen months then there might be some sort of ritual of reincorporation at the end, a ceremonial announcement that the mourning period is officially over and the bereaved person has returned to share their insights and stories of survival.

Today, grief educators are reluctant to talk about loss in terms of universal stages or timeframes and instead emphasize that the bereaved should be allowed to define their own personal grief journey.^{iv} The unintended consequence of this means that they are often left with few culturally defined indicators that help to facilitate movement through the life transition that inevitably follows a loss.

The people who come to see me for grief counseling say they feel lost and just don't know where to turn. The world as they know it has come to an end. Because society offers no clear direction, they come seeking a map of sorts that will guide them through their grief. I know some are hoping that I will give them a shortcut to help them, "get through this as quickly as possible!" The truth is that there aren't any shortcuts, nor is there one right way to go about it. The truth, even for seasoned travelers, is that these waters of grief are for each of us uncharted territory. The hard truth, as Mondri Williams suggests, is we don't know what the future looks like or how long it's going to take. We all have to chart our own way and every possible course we might choose will lead to a different future.

I fear that these truths I've spoken so far may lead the faint of heart to give up, abandon ship, or worse, refuse to ever leave the safety of the harbor. For the majority, for good or ill, there is no choice; that ship has long before been set to sail. I've heard that cartographers of old used to write at the edges of maps, "Beyond here there be dragons," leaving the reluctant mariner with the all-important question, "Dragons perhaps, but are they friendly?"

i Minority religious and ethnic groups seem to do a better job at holding onto their rituals, perhaps in part out of a need to maintain their identity within the dominant culture. Notably, the Jewish traditions of sitting Shiva, saying Kaddish, and the Dedication or unveiling of the Stone, are good examples of rituals of transition. Another example is *Dia de Los Muertos*, (the Day of the Dead) an annual festive tradition in Mexico that is growing in popularity in the United States.

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

iii Schillace, B., (2016) *Pegasus Books LLC, New York*, pp. 124-125.

iv Doka, K. J. and Tucci, A. S. editors, *Beyond Kübler-Ross: New Perspectives of Death, Dying and Grief*, (2011) Hospice Foundation of America, Washington D. C.