Grief and Grieving --- Rituals and the Church

By

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Introduction

The assignment for this paper was to explore the rituals of grief and grieving. Before I begin please allow me a few words of introduction. First, in between NWATD meetings a powerful change has swept through Murray Hills Christian Church, the congregation I’ve served for 8 years. In those 8 years I have probably done less than 10 funerals, sometimes going an entire year without one. But in the last year lightening has struck and we have had several members diagnosed with cancer and given just months to live. At one point we had 5 members under hospice care. It has been a strange and powerful season filled with death, fear, joy, hope, sadness and grief.

This paper is divided into two major sections. The second one addresses ritual and possibilities for using rituals in regard to the dying or the grieving. The first is the groundwork that I believe is necessary to cover before we can get to ritual. My challenge to you is to hold all of the thoughts from section one in your mind as we consider section two.

First a definition. The dictionary defines grief as, “keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp, painful regret” or, a cause or occasion of keen distress or sorrow.” I would define grief as the emotional, spiritual and physical response to a profound loss. In doing my research I was struck by the opening lines to Dan Moseley’s book in which he quotes “Life after all is fair. Ultimately it breaks everyone’s heart”¹ There is no arguing with that. Eventually all of us will lose everything. We will all grieve about something. That something

doesn’t have to be over the loss of a beloved spouse. In fact our grief doesn’t have to be about
death at all. We can grieve the loss of a marriage, children leaving home, the loss of physical
strength or health, the loss of a pet, the loss of dreams, even the loss of a house in which you’ve
been living.

Ritual

Living in Amarillo, Texas in the mid-80’s meant that there were no businesses open on
Christmas Eve. For that reason, in between the early Christmas Eve service and the late, my
family and I would come home, turn on the TV, open a box of crackers, a roll of sausage, a
package of cheese and snack in front of the television. It was an act born out of necessity.

Imagine my surprise when my children, now in their late 20’s, during a recent
Christmastime visit, insisted on spending time in front of the television eating sausage and
cheese. Despite the fact that we’d just eaten dinner it was important to Chris and Melissa to
repeat a ritual born in their childhood. Such is the nature of ritual.

In her important work on ritual Catherine Bell\(^2\) provides an in-depth historical survey of
the study and analysis of ritual. She reports that at the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century W.
Robertson Smith\(^3\) offered that rituals involve 2 elements. The first is a myth – a belief about
how the world is, or how it operates and an action that represents that myth. If our myth
involves a belief that God is loving and present – then it makes sense for that myth to be
represented by the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

\(^3\) T. O. Beudelmann, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*, University of Chicago Press,
1974.
It was in the mid-20th century that A. R. Radcliffe Brown\textsuperscript{4} offered that there is a third element to ritual – that is community. It was his observation that rituals are most often repeated in community settings and serve to bind together certain groups of people. He added that rituals also serve to shape the identity and the practices of groups of people. Going back again to the Lord’s Supper it is clear that this ritual is not just about myth and action – but certainly is about community; being part of a community and being shaped by the community. Ritual involves an action, most often practiced within a community, that reflects a myth about the way the world is or how it can be. Community + myth + action = ritual.

Bell\textsuperscript{5} offers that rituals are always changing as are communities and myths. Nothing stays the same. What Christians believed even a generation ago has now changed – or is at least worded differently. Communities change as people come and go. For that reason rituals have to change, or they become the “dry, empty rituals” that my generation complained about so loudly during the 1960’s.

Speaking of “dry, empty rituals,” metaphorically it can be said that rituals are meaningful as long as they represent a myth, and as long as they are a part of a community’s life. But once the links between these elements are broken – then the ritual becomes meaningless. In like manner rituals don’t have to include actions repeated over and over. Rather a ritual is a formal, intentional, activity that can be done just once, and is meaningful as long as it represents a link to myth and community.

\textsuperscript{5} Catherine Bell, Op Cit, p 210.
Actually it’s more than that. Megory Anderson, in her book *Sacred Dying*, reports on the work of Tom Driver who believed, “Rituals are primarily instruments designed to change a situation. They are more like washing machines than books. A book may be about washing, but the machine takes in dirty clothes and, if all goes well, transforms them into cleaner ones.” This same thought is echoed by Monza Naff in her book, *Must We Say We Did Not Love? The Need for Divorce Rituals in Our Time* when she writes,

“Most ritual is designed to *move us* in some way. In Church, it may be to move us into closer connection with the Divine, toward some part of our own true nature. It may be to move us to seek forgiveness for hurting another person. In Nature, simple rituals, such as sitting quietly beside a creek or walking along a mountain trail, may connect us to our Mother Earth and/or the all-encompassing Universal Spirit. We may tap into a source of strength we thought was depleted. The ritual of the pre-game tailgate party can serve the purpose of bringing friends together, hyping up the supporter’s energy for the big game. Whether in church, in nature, or at the football game, I believe that ritual is a powerful tool for transitions.”

Going back to my children and Christmastime. The sausage, cheese and cracker tradition of Christmas Eve represented their myth that even for preachers and their families on Christmas Eve --- there could be a quiet time for family. This ritual served the purpose of moving them (and perhaps all of us) back to the time of their childhood, and in creating in the present a time for family in the midst of what is often chaos.

For that reason, in reference to changing and creating rituals, it has to be noted that in order for rituals to be meaningful they have to “move us.” They have to affect our lives, our emotional lives or our relationships. And if rituals do not “move us” then they are eventually changed or discarded. It may well be that the point of ritual may not be to “move” us but to

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ground us – to remind us of our core beliefs – to help us reconnect with God – to help us reconnect with the faith community. Yes, ritual may “ground” as much as it “moves” but I believe that ground is a type of movement – either way the ritual has effect upon our lives.

The question has to be asked when creating new rituals, how do we want to be moved? In creating new rituals the primary question has to be asked, what do we want to be different because of the ritual? This line of thought will be picked up later on.

The Theology of Ritual

An interesting question to ask is, “What is God’s role in ritual?” It is the common Christian belief that certain rituals like baptism and the Lord’s Supper are God-ordained. In other words, these rituals are God’s ideas, indeed God’s gifts in order to provide a way for people to open themselves up to the presence of God.

In Sacred Breath, J. David Muyskens explains, “Closer to you than the air you breathe, God loves you and lives in you and wants you to receive and give the joy of life. You have a great gift. You have the capacity to know, love and trust the one who created the cosmos and gives you your life. Unwrapping this gift you receive an awareness of God.”

Whether or not a ritual, or any certain ritual, is god-ordained can be argued, but it needs to be noted that every religion has ritual. Without ritual religions will not attract many adherents or last long. Ritual is the “glue” that holds together a religious community. From a theological viewpoint it can be said that rituals provide an opportunity for people to open themselves, or

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become aware, of the presence of God. In other words, ritual isn’t so much about God or the activity of God as it is about human awareness and openness.

Rituals, Death and Grieving

That being said there are many rituals surrounding dying and death. During the 1990’s this author served churches in Missouri that had many rituals around death.

- When a person died, immediately food would be taken to the family’s home.
- Quickly a funeral service would be planned – but the funeral was always on the 3rd day following the death.
- The family would also quickly write an obituary about the life of the deceased and get it to the community newspaper so that the news of the death could be spread.
- On the evening preceding the funeral a “visitation” would be held during which time the family would gather in the funeral home, near the open casket of the deceased, and talk informally with all visitors.
- Visitations would often end with a “card reading” in which the staff of the funeral home would seat all present and then read the notes off all of the flowers sent for the funeral.
- On the day of the funeral the Christian Women’s Fellowship would serve a meal to the family of the deceased, or perhaps even to everyone who attended the service.
- At the end of the funeral, all in attendance would be ushered in a line up to, and past the casket, thus forcing everyone to “look death in the face.”
- In the congregation’s I served, there were those who attended the funerals of people they didn’t know – or of families they didn’t know – just to be sure that someone would attend those services. It was a true act of compassion.
- After the funeral the grieving family would be expected to miss worship for one Sunday, but never more than that.
- On the Memorial Day following the death and for every succeeding year the family would visit the grave of the deceased.
It’s possible to be critical of the rituals practiced by people in rural Missouri, but there is no denying that these rituals served to bring together a community in support of a person or of families. These rituals provided a clearly delineated space for the expression of emotion. These rituals provided a space to remember the life of the deceased and to restate the Christian hope of eternal life. In a time of trauma, often filled with confusion, these rituals provided clear instructions about what to do. And there is no denying that these rituals accurately represented the myths held by the community.

And these rituals were effective in moving people. For the family these rituals clearly moved them from one kind of life to the beginning of another. These rituals provided opportunities for people to express love and concern moving them into relationship with each other. Sometimes these rituals provided a way for family relationships to be healed. These rituals provided opportunity for people to express their faith in God in a time and way that often changed them forever. If Anderson and Naff are correct and the point of ritual is to “move us” then these rituals were effective.

But now this writer finds himself far from rural Missouri, in Northwest Oregon in the Portland Metro area in which there are no common rituals surrounding death or grief, even among members of the congregation I serve. Few have funerals, most opt for memorial services if any service at all. Visitations are very rare. There is no Christian Women’s Fellowship to serve a meal. Rather than internment most prefer the disposal of ashes (even at Autzen Stadium), perhaps in the ocean, leaving few graves to be visited. The “open mike” has replaced the funeral homily. Recently when one of our members died, at her request, we had no memorial service, but instead had a memorial tea party. In other words what rituals? Where is the representation of myth?
I recently sat down with the obituary section of the Sunday Oregonian and found that of the 47 obituaries listed, 1/3 mentioned a religious service, 1/3 didn’t mention any funeral or memorial services at all, and 1/3 mentioned an alternative rite that wouldn’t have been seen in year’s past such as, “A memorial gathering will be held in his honor at 5626 NE Alamenda, formerly Friendship Lodge;” or, “A celebration of life will be held at the World Forestry Center.” In other words, what rituals? We live in a place and time when the traditional rituals surrounding death and grief are being largely disregarded – and new practices invented. When I sit down and start making a list of the reasons why the rituals around death and grief are so different between Missouri and Oregon, I come up with an impressively long list;

- Few people have lived as long in the community and thus have fewer roots and fewer relationships.
- At Murray Hills Christian Church there seems to be little willingness to talk about eternal life, I suppose not wanting to be “like the Baptists.”
- Our society seems to be working harder and harder at denying the reality of death – making people less likely to consider rituals around death and more likely to want to “get it over with.”
- People in a rural culture see death more often.
- Cremation and the disposal of ashes is much cheaper than the “full meal deal” funeral.
- In the Pacific Northwest there seems to be more willingness to let people follow an individual path, rather than encouraging people to follow the community norms.
- Religion has far less influence in the Pacific Northwest than in the Midwest. Northwesterners have more reverence for the natural world – which makes them less willing to take up room in a cemetery – and more willing to go outside to experience God’s presence.

But reasons aside, if the point of rituals is to connect us to a large myth and to move us to a new place, perhaps the need is for the development and institution of new rituals, reflecting different myths, connecting people in new ways, and moving people to new places. In fact,
perhaps this lack of ritual isn’t so much a problem as it is an opportunity to give birth to new rituals.

Thinking both theologically and pastorally it seems to me that we need rituals:

- That both honor the life of the deceased as well as restate the Christian hope in eternal life.
- That express a belief in the sacredness of life, dying, death and grief.
- That move people together in mutual love and support both for the time immediately following the death and for some time afterwards.
- That move people in relationship with God who is our source and strength.

In developing new rituals surrounding dying and death Anderson encourages her readers to think creatively to include smells, religious traditions, sights, music and sounds, poetry, specific spaces, as well as sacred texts. Her encouragement is to go far beyond the traditional.

In that light we can see the need for rituals used 1) during the process of dying, 2) for the time before the funeral or memorial service 3) for the actual service 4) for the committal of the body and 5) for the time afterwards.

Rituals for the process of dying.

In her book, Anderson, a hospice chaplain, suggests developing rituals to help the dying let go of their mistakes and accept forgiveness. She suggests developing rituals to help people let go of their lives and enter into death. It her instruction for the clergy to use their intuition to determine on an individual basis.

On November 23, on “This Changing World,” a production of the BBC, Cathy Fitzgerald did a report on the death and grief rituals practiced in Vietnam where an important concern is to die a “good death.” A “good death” in Vietnam, reports Fitzgerald, is one in which a person dies
in bed, without pain, without violence, surrounded by family. That raises the question of what a “good death” would look like in the Pacific Northwest United States. That raises the question of what a “good death” would look like to a Christian in our society. Would a good death include dying surrounded by family and friends? Would it include reconciliation? Would it include dying with hope? Would a good death include achieving closure with loved ones? Would it include confession and forgiveness? Would a good death involve receiving the Lord’s Supper?

What rituals could be developed to help people die a “good death?”

Rituals for the time before the funeral or memorial service

In many ways, this is one of the places where Christian people do their best work. When a death is announced the church springs into action, bringing food, helping to plan the funeral / memorial services, phone calling and visiting to express love and concern. This is when the preacher is most likely to be in contact with the family. What rituals could be developed to help people in this interim period, who are likely dealing with shock and denial (as described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross) and are probably not in a place for long, deep discussions.

Rituals for the Funeral or Memorial Service

In years past I served a congregation which had a written rule that once a casket had entered the church building, that it could never be opened. An open casket, they said, was “undignified.” I once talked with a funeral director who insisted that the casket be open at every
service – and that every person be forced to look into it – so that they would have to “stare death in the face.” I have to wonder who is more correct.

I have long considered that the rituals for the funeral or memorial service needed to achieve 2 goals. The services needed to remember and honor the life of the deceased – and the services needed to restate the Christian hope of eternal life. I still think those goals are important, but I would add that the rituals of the funeral or memorial service need to provide an opportunity for the community to gather and express their personal grief and solidarity with the family of the deceased. I suppose that my Funeral Director friend was correct and our rituals do need to provide persons an opportunity “to stare death in the face” and to struggle with the reality of mortality.

It has to be added that while the traditional rituals of funeral or memorial services are easiest for the clergy to plan and lead, the goals of our rituals can be accomplished in a variety of other ways. The “Memorial Tea Party” that we held for one of our members accomplished the goals of our rituals. I suppose a Memorial Barbeque would be appropriate as would a memorial walk in the park.

Closely related to rituals for an actual service are the rituals surrounding the committal of the body or disposal of the ashes. While we have fairly prescribed rituals for internment of the body, we have few for the disposal of ashes – those seem to be done privately with no ritual at all. What rituals could be developed? Anderson suggests that if someone chooses to dispose of ashes then perhaps the church could develop rituals for placing the person’s name on a plaque on the wall of the church.
And for the time after

This may be the place where we have the greatest opportunity for the development of ritual. In my experience, once the body is in the ground, our rituals are completed, but certainly the work of grief isn’t.

As a part of my research for this paper I interviewed a group of English as a Second Language students from all around the world, and from every religion. As I had them describe their native rituals surrounding death and grief, I was struck by how they all had rituals for the time 40 days after the death, and for the 1-year mark. I was struck by how Muslims from Iran, Jews from the Ukraine and Shinto from Japan all had rituals in which the family would gather at about the 40-day point and again at about a year, which isn’t something that I traditionally do. As I reflect on their rituals, and ours, I was struck by the thought that we’re missing an opportunity for ministry, that there are rituals we could develop for the time after internment or committal, that would be helpful to people in the midst of grief.

When I served in rural Missouri I was struck by how many people used Memorial Day as an opportunity to revisit the graves of loved ones – even though Memorial Day was set aside by Congress as a day to remember those who died while in the military. It would seem that the people in rural Missouri, sensing a need, are appropriating Memorial Day for a wider purpose. Instead of appropriating a national holiday for personal use, why couldn’t the church develop rituals for All Saints Day (November 1) in order to annually remember those who have died? How helpful would it be for clergy to practice the ritual of letter writing in order to recognize the anniversary of a death? Would it be helpful for us to teach congregants how to develop their own rituals for remembering an anniversary?
Teaching the Development of Ritual

The idea belongs to Monza Naff, the daughter of 2 Disciple clergy, and who has a personal connection to Murray Hills Christian Church. Naff, a writer, teacher and counselor, has offered to teach classes for lay people on how to write rituals for the important times in their lives – including death and grief. I refused her offer – because I really don’t think I could get many people to attend a workshop like that, even though it could be very helpful. But as I reflect on Naff’s offer, it seems to me that perhaps the people who would benefit most from a workshop on ritual would be the clergy, who could then use the information to help design rituals as they are needed. It also seems that such a workshop would be fairly easy to design.

Part 1. What is the myth to be expressed? In other words what is the theology to be expressed? What do we believe about death? What do we believe about suffering? What do we believe about grief? What do we believe about salvation and eternal life? What do we believe about bodies in the ground? What do we believe about community? About forgiveness? About our bodies? What do we believe about God and God’s role in the world?

And in our time it may not be good enough for us to give people our answers to the above questions. We may have to develop ways for people to come to their own answers.

Part 2. How do we want to be “moved?” To use Naff’s imagery, rituals are intended to “move us” in some way. What do we want to be the result of our rituals? Closure? An opportunity to express grief? An opportunity to honor a life? An opportunity to worship God? An opportunity for the community expression of grief? Healing? An opportunity for a family to express love for each other? The renewal of faith?
Part 3. What actions can we design that reflects our myth and might “move us” in the way desired? What action gets us to where we want to be? What would be helpful to those who grieve? A family forming a circle around the body of the deceased and offering a prayer? A funeral service with an open casket? Throwing dirt on the casket in the grave? Celebrating “All Saints Day?” Serving communion to someone in the last hours of life? A service for committing ashes to the ocean?

Conclusion

We live in a time and place where there simply are no commonly practiced rituals for death and grief. Yet there is the reality of death and grief and there needs to be the development and practice of rituals to help people as they die and as they grieve. There needs to be ways for them to experience the love of God; to find hope; to experience the love and support of a community; for them to honor a life. We need to develop rituals for these times and we live in a time when we have the freedom to do almost anything we want.

Afterword

I want to express my thanks to the Northwest Association for Theological Discussion for the opportunity to write this paper. It has been fascinating work – especially since it was done in the midst of a congregation experiencing profound grief. I come away from this year of study, thought and writing with a much better grasp of grief, ritual and its role in life and the church. Thanks.
Bibliography


