

# Six Characteristics of Helpful Ceremonies

Some elements of gathering ceremonies owe their beginnings to the oldest gatherings about which we have written records or artifacts, spanning every inhabited continent and thousands of years. When included in death-related ceremonies, these six common characteristics have historical precedent for helping family and community in adjusting to a loved one's death.

## 1. Significant Symbols

Humans are visual so we depend on "symbols" to help us communicate beyond words. Some of these symbolic elements are used for many different rites of passage-water at a baptism, burning candles at holidays or birthdays, and the earth placed on a casket as it is lowered into the grave. In many cultures, a hearse and a casket are immediately recognized for their purposes. Favorite photographs of memorable places and occasions tell stories the words alone cannot convey. Be sure the memorial ceremonies you create include ample use of symbols-faith symbols, photos, and items from your loved one's favorite hobby or pastime, for example. In many traditions, flowers carry special significance because their message of love and concern is conveyed by their vibrant colors and aroma.

## 2. Ritual Action

From time immemorial, death demands that family and community "get into the action" and do something (or actually many somethings!) In a traditional Hmong funeral, 30, 40, or even 50 funeral helpers get involved in preparation and carrying out of the funeral rituals. Neighbors and fellow parishioners "get into the act" when they lovingly prepare the "casserole caravan" in a community of the American south or Midwest, both providing support to the bereaved and working out their own experience with grief. Traditional Jewish gatherings encourage the entire community of mourners to become engaged in shoveling into the grave and at a traditional Muslim gathering, all the men of the community might take turns carrying the bier or casket to the grave. Bereaved people around the world find value in doing something.

## 3. Gathered People

Bereavement is best resolved in the support of caring people rather than alone. After their 84-year old mother's death, two daughters were discussing with the gathering director whether to arrange a church funeral or a simple graveside service. "Mom has outlived all her friends," one of her daughters explained, noting that with their small, scattered family, not many people would attend. When the gathering director explained that in their mother's Roman Catholic parish, people choose to attend gatherings, the daughters chose to honor their mother's wish for a funeral Mass in her church. And true to the gathering director's prediction, more than 100 parishioners attended, along with many of the people from the senior center where their mom had participated. They felt supported as they realized in a fresh way the impact their mom had on her community. Consider the different groups of people with which your loved one and your family participate as you consider the most appropriate ways to gather people together to pay tribute to his or her life.

## 4. Connection to Heritage

Ceremonies at a loved one's death also provide a measure of predictability in the midst of the chaos of early grief. This phenomenon might explain the choice among many non-religious people to have the Twenty-Third Psalm read and Amazing Grace sung at a gathering service. Much like so-called comfort foods, these older elements of memorial rituals provide comfort in the instability of bereavement. While you will certainly want to include elements in the

memorial ceremonies that are unique to your loved one and your family, don't overlook the use of ancient elements, too, which can create comfort as they link us to our past.

## 5. Healing Touch

Even among cultural groups where personal space is highly prized, those boundaries become more flexible in the face of bereavement. We are more likely to embrace a person in bereavement who we would otherwise offer a handshake. Graciously receive-and offer-embraces to the people who offer their support and to the people who need your support. An arm around the shoulder or a warm handclasp communicates volumes about our concern for others. Humans need the touch of others most acutely in periods of crisis like death and bereavement.

## 6. Transition of the Body

When a loved one dies, we are left with the unmistakable need to move the body from the place of death to a more permanent place. Throughout history and around the world, this transition of the body is accompanied with prayers, songs, and great reverence. Moving the body to the place of final rest is a rite entered into and shared by the entire community. In his book, [Accompany Them with Singing](#), theologian Thomas Long suggests,

"As a practical matter, people will peel away at various points along the way, but we should strive to make it clear that we are not done here until we have handed our loved one over to the earth and to God. In short, we are carrying a loved one to the edge of mystery, and people should be encouraged to stick around to the end, to book passage all the way. If the body is to be buried, go to the grave and stay there until the body is in the ground. If the body is to be burned, go to the crematorium and witness the burning."

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