The Role of Ceremonies in Bereavement

From earliest history, people have used ceremonies to acknowledge death. Even with broad diversity in specifics, many common factors are shared across generations and cultural groups.

Why does this human need for gathering seem so universal? Sociologists, anthropologists and counselors generally believe that humans have a deep need to find our psychological moorings after a death in the family, clan or community. Gathering with others helps manage our experience with death and begin the process of adapting to the loss. Perhaps that is why there is virtually unanimous support for gatherings among leading clinical scholars, the respected specialists who have dedicated their lives to counseling the bereaved, studying how bereavement affects people, and teaching others how to care effectively.
The ceremonies we observe when a loved one dies accomplish several important purposes, not only for the immediate family but for the entire community of friends and associates. Here are some of those important reasons for creating and using meaningful ceremonies.

Ceremonies provide stability and order in the chaos of early grief.

Even though grief is likely an unfamiliar landscape for individuals and families, the social community has been through the experience of saying farewell many times. Whether the highly prescribed funeral ritual of Roman Catholicism, the beating of a tribal drum on the African continent to notify the entire village of a death, or some other community behavior, ritual gives order to the chaos.

While many decisions rest with the immediate family, an overly individualistic approach to gathering arrangements can create as much chaos as it resolves. People who have just suffered a loved one's death don't generally know what kind of ceremonies will prove best able to help them adapt to the death. In the absence of socially-prescribed rituals, bereaved people are left to create meaningful tributes during a period in which they are emotionally overwhelmed.

Ceremonies help confirm the reality of the death.

Most clinical scholars in the field of bereavement point out the "reality" function of gathering ceremonies. Even though the death certificate records a precise moment of death does not mean everyone accepts that fact emotionally. For most of us, a loved one's death is much more of a process-requiring hours, days, and even weeks to fully believe the reality. Because this realization of death is not instantaneous, gathering rituals help people gradually accept that their loved one has made the transition from here to there.

Ceremonies help us validate the legacy of our loved ones.

When a person dies, we tend to highlight the character qualities and values worth imitating. We choose words that describe the attitudes and behaviors of the person who died, describing her as kind, compassionate, brave, respectful, enthusiastic, generous, fun-loving, faithful, warm, peace-loving, and heroic. Effective ceremonies provide a socially-sanctioned way for mourners to say to one another what perhaps they never found opportunity to share with the deceased: how his or her life actually impacted the lives of those who are left.

Additionally, there is value to saying these words aloud in the gathering. Whether they are expressed in the eulogy, the minister's words, a life tribute video, or the shared memories of

people who attend, these words are "recorded for posterity." As bereaved people reflect on these words months and even years after the death, it is amazing to hear how these qualities first uttered during the gathering rituals still echo in the hearts of hurting people.

Ceremonies reassure continuation of the society.

If you have ever watched a state funeral, you recognize the orderliness of the service. But the memorial ceremonies of people who are not political leaders have the same function. They remind us that even though dramatically changed, life will continue in spite of the death of this individual, because life is bigger than an individual. One of the community's important tasks in the face of death is to stand at the emotional "fork in the road" for bereaved people and lovingly point the way through the experience. Gatherings help calm our anxiety.

Ceremonies remind us of what still needs to be done.

Ceremonies can help ignite a passion for needed change. Sometimes death comes after great injustice and the gathering ceremony helps galvanize the effort to create change as witnessed in the funeral for Dr. Martin Luther King. With family permission, leaders have addressed the importance of suicide prevention at the gathering ceremonies for teens who have died by suicide. And attendance at the gathering for a young mother killed by a drunk driver reminds many people of the dangers of driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs.

Whether the ceremony incites a generation to action or not, gathering ceremonies remind us of the precious, limited amount of time we all possess. Nothing provides as stark a reminder of the frailty of life and the finite nature of time as much as seeing a friend's casket being carried from church to hearse to grave. The ancient wisdom writer had it right when he wrote, "I would rather go to a funeral than a feast, because funerals remind us of the destiny we all share" (Ecclesiastes 7:2).

The ceremonies of bereavement remind us that our own pain of loss is shared by the community. Funerals, memorials services, and the other observances we share in the face of death possess important social meaning that transcends simply getting the dead buried or cremated. These ceremonies remind us all of the ancient notion that when someone dies, it is important to stop what we are doing, turn aside, and note the fact that our hearts are heavy, our support for each other is unwavering, and our loved one's life is worth remembering.

William G. Hoy, DMin, FT is the director of Texas-based Grief Connect, a center for bereavement education. As an educator, author and counselor, he has walked alongside grieving people for more than 25 years. In addition to presenting more than 70 invited lectures each year to groups of caregiving professionals across the United States and Canada, Dr. Hoy teaches in the Medical Humanities Program, College of Arts and Sciences at Baylor University.