

## THE SOCIAL VALUE OF FUNERALS

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**(Note:** This article is excerpted from a scholarly paper presented by Dr. Hoy at the 2010 meeting of the Association for Death Education & Counseling in Kansas City. A recording of the presentation will be available for listening and continuing education credit later this spring at [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org).)

“Funerals are for the living.” This simple declaration has been heard by caregiving professionals and volunteers hundreds—if not thousands—of times. In fact, we have likely said it ourselves.

Most of the time, however, the primary subjects of the funeral are the family members of the deceased. Most funeral directors take their cues from the immediate family during the funeral-arranging process, and frankly, often get “caught in the crossfire” between family wishes and clergy, congregational expectations and social customs!

But death significantly impacts people far beyond the immediate family, often with bereavement experiences that are even more profound than those experienced by some family members. Every one of us has provided counsel to a bereaved business associate, best friend, or romantic partner who was not considered part of the “official” mourning party. Even beyond these relationships, the entire social community of the deceased is affected by death, illustrated by the remark I overheard from the leader of an older men’s Bible study group at the funeral for one of his group members: “This is the third one of our group we’ve buried this year. I’m not sure how many more of these we can take.”

The pioneering work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Robert Hertz in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century considered how the entire community got involved in ritualizing the deaths of its own. What they both concluded, independently of each other, is that funeral rituals have vital social functions beyond the conventionally-accepted roles of helping family members acknowledge death and celebrate life. Instead, funerals provide an important force for social stabilization after a death. Here are five vital social functions served by effective funeral rituals.

**Provide stability and order in the chaos of early grief.** Though the individual deceased has never been dead before, and the immediate family may not have ever been in deep grief before, the community *has* been through the experience of saying farewell—many times. The community’s experience reminds mourners, “We have been here before.” Whether it is the highly prescribed funeral ritual of Roman Catholicism or the beating of a tribal drum on the African continent to notify the entire village of a death, ritual gives order to the chaos.

One of the great fallacies of contemporary, individualistic perspectives on funeral arranging, what I have come to call the “have it your way approach to funerals” is the assumption people who have just suffered a loved one’s death actually *know* what kind of ceremonies will prove best able to help them adapt to the death in the long-term. In the absence of socially-prescribed rituals, we are asking bereaved people to create meaningful tributes during a period in which they are emotionally overwhelmed. I submit that if everything is “up for grabs” in the funeral ceremony, we trade one kind of chaos for another.

**Make real the fact of the death.** Just because a person ceases breathing at a single moment in time does not mean that family and community know that fact in an emotionally-accessible way. The words and behaviors of bereaved people, unfortunately often branded as “denial,” are in fact, the labored first task of mourning, “to accept the reality of the loss” (Worden, 2009). While the death certificate records the exact minute death was pronounced, Hertz (1960,

1907) and van Gennep (1960, 1908) were convinced that the moment of death is not so easily discerned.

Rather, for an intermediate period (called *liminality* in the anthropological literature) the dead and their mourners exist in an in-between world of not exactly *here* but neither really *there*. Funeral rituals help the entire social group “act out” the journey, if you will, from one state to the other, symbolized most often by the processions that are part of funeral rituals in virtually every society. Because this realization of death is not instantaneous, funeral rituals help groups “get used to the idea” that their esteemed member has begun that transition from here to there.

**Consolidate the legacy of the dead.** When a person dies, we tend to find in him or her the character qualities worth imitating, and those qualities become the values talked about in the funeral. In a research study I recently completed of online tributes written about suddenly-deceased young adults (Hoy, 2010), one of the most important ways meaning and sense was made was through celebrating the character qualities worthy of imitation. A few of the words chosen by these tribute-writers included kind, compassionate, brave, respectful, enthusiastic, fun-loving, humorous, positive, warm, polite, peace-loving, and heroic. Effective funeral rituals provide a socially-sanctioned way for mourners to say to one another what perhaps they never found opportunity to tell the deceased how he or she positively impacted life.

Because these character qualities are said aloud in the hearing of a gathered community, they are “recorded for posterity,” much like words uttered in a judicial setting and transcribed by a court reporter. As bereaved people reflect on these words months and even years after the death, it is amazing to hear how these words first uttered during the funeral rituals still echo in the hearts of hurting people.

**Reassure continuation of the society.** The fourth social function afforded by effective funeral rituals helps members of the community reach this simple conclusion: Even though dramatically changed, life as we know it will continue *in spite* of the death of this individual, because life as we know it 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. But if the community member was especially vital to the healthy functioning of the community, the death potentially engenders fear about the community’s continued existence.

One of the psychological benefits to state funerals, for example, is they show how order is brought out of chaos, reminding the community that its continued existence is assured. In modern American history, funeral rituals for President John F. Kennedy provided ritualized “proof” that the state would continue to function in an orderly way, in spite of the young president’s assassination and all the questions it raised. Funerals following the recent assassinations of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007 provide an international perspective on this phenomenon.

**Ignite social change.** Though seemingly the opposite of reaffirming social order and the community’s continued existence, sometimes funeral rituals serve to ignite a passion for sweeping social change. Such was the effect, in part, of highly publicized funerals during the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s. In an excellent new perspective on African-American death customs, George Mason University historian Suzanne E. Smith (2010) creates a stirring account of the funerals that helped galvanize the struggle for civil rights.

In addition to the public funeral for Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the funeral rituals for Medgar Evers in 1963 and Jimmie Lee Jackson in 1965 provided impetus to the growing movement. However, perhaps the published photos of the disfigured, casketed body of 14-year old lynching victim Emmett Till and the harrowing grief of his mother leaning over his casket in 1955 first raised world consciousness about the depth and breadth of the issue. Her

plaintive words, "I want the world to see what they did to my boy" became a part of the rallying cry of a generation.

North Americans highly prize our individualism. One can even argue that an individualistic, "can-do" attitude was a necessary, major force in settling the frontier as our ancestors pushed westward across the United States and Canada. But ironically, rural North Americans who are socially most likely to endorse this individualism also seem quick to set aside their individual preferences for the community good. In March 2010, I had occasion to attend the funeral for a man in our small, rural community, and was joined there by nearly 200 other friends to mourn and support his very small family. I'm told this "turnout" is commonplace here in our recently-adopted community; in the urban community in which I spent the first 20 plus years of my career, only the very young, the famous or the well-connected would have drawn as many people to attend the funeral.

One cannot explain the large attendance by conventional means. He and his family are part of a very small rural church, attended by only 35 people the day before his funeral. The people were not less-busy than their urban neighbors, either. Many are farmers who could desperately have used that sunny spring day for field work with a rapidly-closing window of time to get the corn planted after unseasonably heavy rains and more predicted. And those in attendance who do work in the city made a significant commitment to attend since the funeral was a 50-minute drive down country roads from where most worked.

Rather, perhaps these people have learned that funerals have important social meaning that transcends simply getting the dead buried. They perhaps have captured the ancient notion that when someone dies, it is important to stop what we are doing, turn aside, and note the facts that our hearts are heavy, our support for each other is unwavering, and our loved one's life is worth remembering.

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