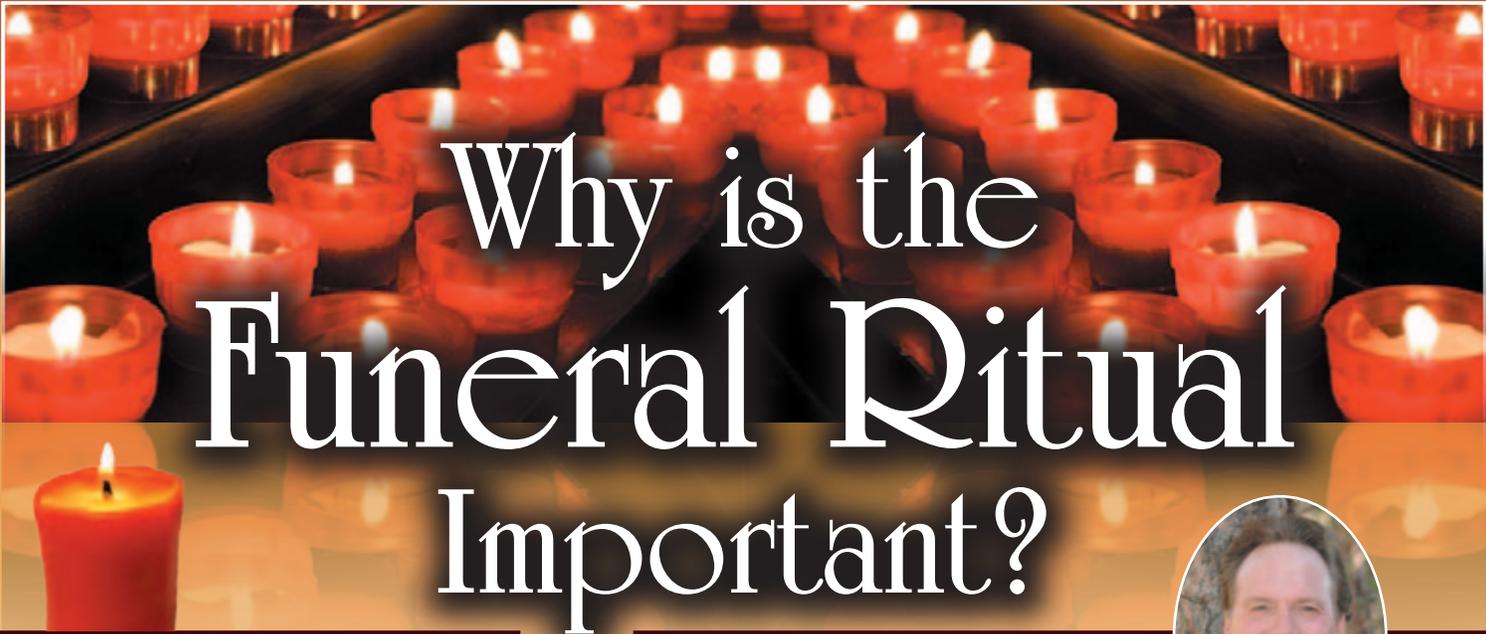


Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

Winter 2015



Why is the Funeral Ritual Important?

“When words are inadequate, have a ritual.”

~ Anonymous



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Rituals are symbolic activities that help us express our deepest thoughts and feelings about life's most important events. Baptism celebrates the birth of a child and that child's acceptance into the church family. Birthday parties honour the passing of another year in a loved one's life. Weddings publicly affirm the private love shared by two people.

The funeral ritual, too, is a public, traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone loved. The funeral ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the deceased, encourages expression of grief, provides support to mourners, allows for embracing of faith and beliefs about life and death, and offers continuity and hope for the living.

Unfortunately, our mourning-avoiding culture has to a large extent forgotten these crucial purposes of the funeral. This article explores the grief-healing benefits of meaningful funerals.

I have discovered that a helpful way to teach about the purposes of

authentic funeral ceremonies is to frame them up in the context of “reconciliation needs of mourning” – my twist on what other authors have called “tasks of mourning.” These reconciliation needs of mourning are six needs I believe to be central to healing in grief. Bereaved people who have these needs met are most often able to reconcile their grief and go on to find continued meaning in life and living.

How the authentic funeral helps meet the six reconciliation needs of mourning:

Mourning Need #1: Acknowledge the reality of the death.

When someone loved dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and the finality of the death if we are to move forward with our grief. Typically, we embrace this reality in two phases. First we acknowledge the death with our minds. Intellectually we understand the fact of the death. Over the course of the following days and weeks we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

A meaningful funeral serves as a wonderful point of departure for “head understanding” of the death. When we contact the funeral home, plan the ceremony, view the body, we cannot avoid acknowledging that the person has died. When we see the casket being lowered into the ground, we witness death’s finality.

Mourning Need #2: Move toward the pain of the loss.

As our acknowledgment of the death progresses from what I call “head understanding” to “heart understanding,” we begin to embrace the pain of the loss – another need the bereaved must have met if they are to heal. Healthy grief means expressing our painful thoughts and feelings. People tend to cry, even sob and wail, at funerals because funerals force us to concentrate on the fact of the death and our feelings, often excruciatingly painful, about that death. Those in attendance are not able to distance themselves from the pain of grief. Funerals are perhaps the only time and place society condones this outward expression of our sadness.

Mourning Need #3: Remember the person who died.

To heal in grief, we must shift our relationship with the person who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. The authentic funeral encourages us to begin this shift; it provides a natural time and place for us to think about the moments we shared – good and bad – with the person who died.

The eulogy attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the deceased and his or her most prominent characteristics. After the ceremony, many mourners informally share memories of the person who died. The more we are able to “tell the story” – of the death itself; of memories of our loved one – the more likely we will be to reconcile our grief. Moreover, sharing memories at the funeral affirms the worth we have placed on the person who died, legitimizing our pain. We might not have heard before the memories others choose to share. We are provided glimpses into that life that we may cherish forever.

Mourning Need #4: Develop a new self-identity.

Another primary reconciliation need of mourning is development of a new self-identity. We are social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Alan Wolfelt, but a son, brother, husband, father, friend. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity as defined in those ways changes.

The funeral helps us begin this difficult process of developing a new self-identity by providing a social venue for public acknowledgment of our new roles. If you are a parent of a child and that child dies, the funeral marks the beginning of your life as a *former* parent (in the physical sense; you will always have that relationship through memory). Those attending the funeral are in effect saying, “We acknowledge your changed identity; we want you to know we still care about you.” In situations where there is no funeral, the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed and often that person is socially abandoned. Having supportive friends and family at the time of

the funeral helps us realize we literally still exist. This self-identity issue is illustrated by a comment the bereaved often make: “When he died, I felt like a part of me died, too.”

Mourning Need #5: Search for meaning.

When someone loved dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? Why does it have to hurt so much? What happens after death? To heal in grief, we must first ask these “why” questions to decide why we should go on living before we can ask ourselves how we will go on living. This does not mean we must find definitive answers, only that we need the opportunity to think (and feel) things through.

On a fundamental level, the funeral reinforces one central fact of our existence: we will die. Dying is a natural, unavoidable process. (We North Americans tend not to acknowledge this.) The funeral helps us search for meaning in the life and death of the person who died as well as in our own lives and impending deaths. Each funeral we attend serves as a sort of dress rehearsal for our own.

Funerals are ways in which we as individuals and as a community convey our beliefs and values about life and death. The very fact of a funeral demonstrates that death is important to us. To go on living as fully and healthily as possible, this is as it should be.

Mourning Need #6: Receive ongoing support from others.

Funerals are the public venue for offering support to others and being supported in grief, both at the time of the funeral and into the future. Funerals make a social statement that says, “Come support me.” Whether they realize it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, “Don’t come support me.”

Funerals let us physically demonstrate our support. Sadly, ours is not a demonstrative society, but at funerals we are “allowed” to embrace, to touch, to comfort. Words are inadequate so we non-verbally demonstrate our support. Physical show of support is one of the most important healing aspects of meaningful funeral ceremonies.

Finally, and most simply, funerals serve as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or his/her family members, we attend the funeral if at all possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. Our attendance lets everyone else there know that they are not alone in their grief.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents many grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his newest publications are the books *The Depression of Grief and Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens about Death*. For more information, write or call the Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit www.centerforloss.com.

The Messiah Complex

“If I don’t do it, it won’t be done right.”

“If I give up control, I lose my power.”

“If I’m the decider/rescuer/protector,
I am indispensable.”



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

Do these descriptions apply to people you know? Are there shades of ourselves in these confessions? When asked how we are when we are in the depths of despondency, do we glibly respond, “Fine.” Do everyone else’s needs take priority over ours? Is our mantra, “We are givers; not takers.”

Such reactions are labelled by social scientists as “The Messiah Complex.” When we mistakenly believe that we alone must always be in charge (then feel overwhelmed by all the things we agreed to do), don’t we assume the Mantle of Divinity? Everyone else’s needs then take precedence over ours. Secretly we may perceive of those who seek assistance as “weak-willed.”

We are unable to separate our personal lives from our high-pressured, demanding professions. We must work extremely hard during the day. It becomes necessary to bring home our unfinished business at night. We may even look forward to weekends for the opportunity to achieve those myriad details that may never get completed. Our physical health is compromised.

Vacations provide a change of scenery but not relief for those of us who keep checking back at the “shop” with repeated telephone calls and emails. We may “brag” that we haven’t taken planned leaves of absence for years because we are needed every moment. We fall in the Messiah Trap when we are indifferent to our needs and fail to take inventory of our own lives.

Family Values

We lecture to our clients about the importance of family ideals and standards. Yet, we return to our homes and withdraw from our spouse and children, losing significant and meaningful contact. Our most important and lasting relationships suffer and may even break apart. So easy to preach in our professional roles. So difficult to practice these values at home.

Being caught in the Messiah Trap, our physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual conditions are endangered. We can’t recall the last time we felt well.

Unhealthy Diets

Always in a rush, we eat at odd hours, often “on the run.” Fortunately there are fast food restaurants nearby. Unfortunately,

the unwholesome foods come with a surplus of sugar and fat and chemicals, with few whole grains and veggies. The third cup of coffee helps to temporarily relieve our fatigue. Stress-related problems are exacerbated by our improper eating habits.

Exercise

Bodies in motion stay in motion. However, bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. We have to move! Muscles must be stretched; otherwise, they become stiff and sore and aching.

Joining a gym doesn’t count if we don’t actually go to the gym. And having an unused exercise bike in the attic offers no benefits either.

Exercise helps to reduce tension by stimulating the release of endorphins, the body’s natural opiate in combating fatigue and other forms of physical and mental pressures.

Restful Sleep

There aren’t enough hours in the day to accomplish our insurmountable activities. The result – sleep deprivation. It is impossible to maintain a regular sleep pattern where our Circadian patterns and wake cycles are not synchronized. Not only don’t we go to bed and wake up at the same time during our workweeks, but also on holidays and vacations.

We are lulled into daily diets of morning stimulants, daytime tranquilizers and nighttime pills. Occasional sleeplessness morphs into insomnia (at least three months of poor sleep). Every aspect of day-to-day living is affected with problems at home and at work, and in our relationships with others: Emotional moods, mental alertness and energy levels are stretched and imperilled.

Those of us caught in the Messiah Trap are physically depleted and mentally diminished, and need a wake-up call. Will we now pause and evaluate our debilitating activities to achieve a more proper balance – to help ourselves as we help others?

Heed the words of the eminent Rabbi Hillel who lived in the latter part of the first pre-Christian century and in the beginning of the first century.

“If I am not for myself, who is?” He recognized the prominence

of self-help and self-care. Only then did he add: "If I am only for myself, what kind of person am I?"

Caring for neighbours was the highest form of spiritual loving kindness. We must perform God's moral laws on Earth. The caveat is the beginning, "If I am not for myself, who is?" As we share our gifts with others, at the same time we must never fail to acknowledge and respect our own personal health as well.

His final words, "If not now, when?"

Don't stall or linger or postpone.

The wake-up call.

"NOW!"

For a modern approach, we need only look to one of America's best-known pastors, Rick Warren, the author of the bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life*. He shares his innermost feelings after his beloved son committed suicide. "I didn't want to exercise. The church would bring us all kinds of great food – far more than I could eat." He gained more than 24 pounds.

Pastor Warren realized, "You can't love if you don't have the energy to love. If you go home every night and lie on the couch because you're exhausted, and your blood pressure is too high, well, how can you make a difference?" His concept of health care is not only to help the sick get well, but also to help the well not to get sick.

Reflections of Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who is?"

It will take time to break loose from the Messiah Trap. It will take courage to honestly reflect upon our legitimate needs and share our concerns with those "safe people" who will listen with empathy and understanding. It will take strength to begin to set new boundaries. It will take boldness to employ the word "me" so that we don't surrender unconditionally to everyone's demands. In the pastor's words: "We must be healthy to do good."

This was one of the easiest articles I have ever written. Much is drawn from my own unrealistic expectations taking precedence over my own needs and those of my family. In retrospect, I did not have to spend so many days and evenings with endless activities. I could have politely declined or relegated these responsibilities to others. By masquerading as Superman, I failed to take better care of myself. I finally had to come to the painful conclusion that I am but a finite Clark Kent.

I am still alive and breathing. It's not too late. I am writing this article not only for you but for myself. Notice, I use the word "we" rather than "you" in the discussion of the Messiah Trap.

Fortunately there was a poem written in 1959 by Saxon White Kessinger. Unfortunately, it did not come to my attention until recently. When I need a reawakening, I read and reread this poem. Hope you will also find it applicable for you as well.

There's No Indispensable Man or Woman

Sometime when you're feeling important,
Sometime when your ego's in bloom,
Sometime when you take it for granted
You're the best qualified in the room,
Sometime when you feel that your going
would leave an unfillable hole,
Just follow this simple instruction
And see how it humbles your soul.
Take a bucket and fill it with water,
Put your hand in it, up to the wrist,
Pull it out, and the hole that's remaining
Is a measure of how much you'll be missed.
You may splash all you please when you enter
You can stir up the water galore,
But stop, and you'll find in a minute,
That it looks quite the same as before.
The moral in this quaint example
Is to do the best you can.
Be proud of yourself, but remember,
There's no indispensable man (or woman).

About the Author

Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours "his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person and grief counselling." His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.



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