

Why Is the Funeral Ritual Important?

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

"When words are inadequate, have a ritual."

Anonymous

Rituals are symbolic activities that help us, together with our families and friends, 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 honor the passing of another year in the life of someone we love. 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. Rich in history and rife with symbolism, the funeral ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the deceased, encourages the expression of grief in a way consistent with the culture's values, provides support to mourners, allows for the 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 meaningful funeral. As a death educator and grief counselor, I am deeply concerned that individuals, families and ultimately society as a whole will suffer if we do not reinvest ourselves in the funeral ritual. This article explores the grief-healing benefits of meaningful funerals-benefits we are losing to the deritualization trend.

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 the "reconciliation needs of mourning"-my twist on what other author's have called the "tasks of mourning." The reconciliation needs of mourning are the six needs that I believe to be the most central to healing in grief. In other words, bereaved people who have these needs met, through their own grief work and through the love and compassion of those around them, 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; we are told that someone we loved has died and, intellectually at least, we understand the fact of the death. Over the course of the following days and weeks, and with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

Meaningful funeral ceremonies can serve as wonderful points of departure for "head understanding" of the death. Intellectually, funerals teach us that someone we loved is now dead, even though up until the funeral we may have denied this fact. When we contact the funeral home, set a time for the service, plan the ceremony, view the body, perhaps even choose clothing and jewelry for the body, we cannot avoid acknowledging that the person has died. When we see the casket being lowered into the ground, we are witness to death's finality.



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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, and healthy funeral ceremonies allow us to do just that.

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. For at least an hour or two-longer for mourners who plan the ceremony or attend the visitation-those attending the funeral are not able to intellectualize or distance themselves from the pain of their grief. To their credit, funerals also provide us with an accepted venue for our painful feelings. They are perhaps the only time and place, in fact, during which we as a society condone such openly 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, for it provides a natural time and place for us to think about the moments we shared-good and bad-with the person who died. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral invites us to focus on our past relationship with that one, single person and to share those memories with others.

At traditional funerals, the eulogy attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the deceased and the characteristics that he or she most prominently displayed. This is helpful to mourners, for it tends to prompt more intimate, individualized memories. Later, after the ceremony itself, many mourners will informally share memories of the person who died. This, too, is meaningful. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able "tell the story"-of the death itself, of our memories of the person who died-the more likely we will be to reconcile our grief. Moreover, the sharing of memories at the funeral affirms the worth we have placed on the person who died, legitimizing our pain. Often, too, the memories others choose to share with us at the funeral are memories that we have not heard before. This teaches us about the dead person's life apart from ours and allows us glimpses into that life that we may cherish forever.

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


Another primary reconciliation need of mourning is the development of a new self-identity. We are all 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, a brother, a husband, a father, a 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 because it provides 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). Others attending the funeral are in effect saying, "We acknowledge your changed identity and we want you to know we still care about you." On the other hand, 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. In addition, having supportive friends and family around us 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 explore these types of questions if we are to become reconciled to our grief. In fact, 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 more fundamental level, the funeral reinforces one central fact of our existence: we will die. Like living, dying is a natural and unavoidable process. (We North Americans tend not to acknowledge this.) Thus 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 a way 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. For the living to go on living as fully and as healthily as possible, this is as it should be.

Mourning Need #6. Receive ongoing support from others.

As we have said, funerals are a public means of expressing our beliefs and feelings about the death of someone loved. In fact, 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, too. Sadly, ours is not a demonstrative society, but at funerals we are "allowed" to embrace, to touch, to comfort. Again, words are inadequate so we nonverbally demonstrate our support. This 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 family members, we attend the funeral if at all possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. By attending the funeral we let everyone else there know that they are not alone in their grief.

About the Author

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T. is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine.

Past recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt is an educational consultant to hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes and a variety of community agencies across North America. Perhaps best known for his model of "companioning" versus treating the bereaved, Alan is committed to helping people mourn well so they can live well and love well.

Also a respected author, Dr. Wolfelt writes the "Children and Grief" column for *Bereavement* magazine. His many bestselling books on grief are listed under *Bookstore* on his Website. He has appeared on, and is a frequent resource for the media. Appearances include *Oprah Winfrey*, *The Larry King Show*, *The NBC Today Show* and *Nick News*.

For additional resources, please visit the Center for Loss & Life Transition website at www.centerforloss.com.

