

The Role of Ceremonies in Bereavement

From the 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? Gathering with others helps manage our experience with death and begin the process of adapting to the loss. 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.

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 goodbye many times.

While many decisions rest with the immediate family, people who have just suffered a loved one's death are left to create meaningful tributes during a period in which they are emotionally overwhelmed. Funeral directors help fill that gap.

Ceremonies help confirm the reality of the death.

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, funeral 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, 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 funeral. 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 funeral rituals still echo in the hearts of hurting people.

Ceremonies reassure continuation of the society.

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. Funerals help calm our anxiety.

Ceremonies remind us of what still needs to be done.

Funeral ceremonies remind us of the precious, limited amount of time we all possess.

The ceremonies of bereavement remind us that our own pain of loss is shared by the community. Funerals, memorial 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 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.