Rituals Interview Paper

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Abstract

This is an analysis of the rituals surrounding the death and funerals of George Paselk the 87 year old father of the author. A favorable analysis was made in comparing his experiences with the recommendations of Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. of the Center for Loss & Life Transition and his six reconciliation needs of mourning. The six needs of mourning are the acknowledgement of death, to move toward the pain of the loss, to remember the person who died, to develop a new self-identity, to search for meaning and to receive ongoing support from others.
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I interviewed my father George about his memories involving death, funerals and feelings. He is 87 years old, very talkative and of sound mind. Although death is not his favorite subject, it is not something he shies away from and it would certainly not upset him to reminisce.

In his lifetime he spent many years in the military both in World War II and then he reenlisted years latter into the Army Air Core. By his own account, he was blessed to never hold a gun pointed at someone and therefore had no war related death stories. In his life, he has been an instructor, banker and cost analysis. He retired early when he was 55 because of my mother’s diagnosis of breast cancer. They knew that tomorrow may not come and at that point had five years of traveling and grand-parenting before her death. I chose my father because of his openness and my interest to continue to learn more about him and my family.

A Descriptive Summary of the Changes in Rituals

The first death my father experienced was when he was 10 years old. It was his dear grandfather in 1935. He recalls the casket in the parlor of his grandmother’s house, prayer, a eulogy and food served afterwards. Everyone looked inside the casket, but the children were not included in the adult world of conversation. He does not recall anyone talking to him or his cousins about death or any other topic related to the funeral. However, to this day he does not like flowers. The next funeral he attended was again at his paternal grandmother’s house. His Uncle Walt had died in a plane crash when dad was 13 years old. This time the casket was closed, but the ritual was the same. Even though Walt lost his life at such a young age, the general feeling of the family was the same. Death is part of life. It is inevitable and nothing to fear. His family was Christian.

Because of his traveling military life, there is a large break in funeral attendance. By the time his mother-in-law dies in 1959, funerals have moved to the funeral home but other than that
it is the same. There is a sharing with family, a eulogy, a casket and food. The next funeral he attends is in the 1970’s where one after another he loses his father and eventually all his siblings and mother. These are all people of his generation. These funerals are similar. They take place in a funeral home with an open casket, eulogy and food served afterwards. Eventually, two are less formal memorial services geared to a longer time of talking and sharing feelings about the deceased with the body having been cremated. This included my mother who had requested that she did not want people staring at her and so was cremated.

Although he does not attend distant family funerals of his cousins, he comments how he is the last cousin left. He is alone in some respects. He is the last brother and the last cousin. At some point he starts to shy away from making friends with elderly people. He is tired of funerals and loss.

An Analysis of His Rituals

According to Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD of the Center for Loss & Life Transition there are six reconciliation needs of mourning. These six needs are met in a traditional funeral. The ritual funeral is public and gives opportunity to express our beliefs and gives affirmation of the life of the deceased. We grieve together and find hope for the living. It gives reality to death. It marks and gives honor to the event in a special way that is the same as a wedding, birth of a baby or birthday (Wolfelt, 2007).

Mourning need #1 is the acknowledgement of death (Wolfelt, 2007). My father’s family accomplished this by planning all the details of the funeral. Questions must be answered. Casket, cremation, speakers, music and food are the details that must be accomplished. The funeral makes these things necessary. Up until this point, one can still emotionally deny the truth of death. Even with all the planning, we have all heard people repeating, “I just can’t believe it.”
Mourning need #2 is to move toward the pain of the loss (Wolfelt, 2007). My family moved from head understanding to heart understanding by providing a time to concentrate on death and our related feelings. They could not distance themselves from the pain while planning and attending the funeral. Society in general completely condones open expressions of sadness during this ritual.

Mourning need #3 is to remember the person who died (Wolfelt, 2007). It is a healthy grieving process to start the process of remembering the person who died and is not a physical presence anymore. The eulogy and the personal time after their funerals allowed this to happen. It encouraged it to happen because that is the purpose of their gathering.

Mourning need #4 develops a new self-identity (Wolfelt, 2007). Again, just the fact that they had a funeral gives the public acknowledgment that George’s grandmother was no longer a wife and that George was no longer Adolph’s grandson. Self identify is changing and the other’s in the family are there to acknowledge that you still exist in your new identity.

Mourning need #5 is the search for meaning (Wolfelt, 2007). We wonder many things at someone’s death. Why now or with so much pain and is there an afterlife? Although the funerals did not answer the question why, they provided the dress rehearsal for our own death. We will all die, and that is the beginning of answering the question why. Dr. Wolfelt talks about the need to contemplate these questions in order to go on ourselves. The funeral strengthens the fact that we will die. It is unavoidable. I had thought that the death itself would reinforce this, but it is the funeral that forces us to take the time to contemplate it. At every funeral he attended, something was said that helped this process.

Mourning need #6 is to receive ongoing support from others (Wolfelt, 2007). My father’s family supported each other by attending the funerals. According to Dr. Wolfelt (2007),
the act of having a funeral invites support whether they realize it or not. Those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, "Don't come support me.” In contrast, having a funeral gives an ongoing invitation to continue to support them.

**George’s Recommendations during Bereavement Period**

George is an accepting man from a generation that was not taught how to express feelings. He has a hard time understanding my questions and cannot articulate many feelings. Finally, he was able to boil these funerals and death experiences down to the statement that it “feels good to do the right thing” (Paselk, George, personal communication, May 25, 2012). Although it is not a ritual, he is thankful for the down to earth upbringing he had. He was taught by example that death is part of life. That fact is indeed comforting. My father said, that when he dies, “the funeral should be about the living and how they would like to handle things because, he won’t care, he won’t be there” (Paselk, George, personal communication, May 25, 2012).

**Conclusion/Summary**

The funeral experiences of my father span over 70 years starting in 1935. These funerals are times of family togetherness, reminiscing about the past and the person he has lost. Time is given to thinking about all the things surrounding a death. This included sharing the pain of the loss and pondering his new identity, especially when his wife passed. His family taught him that death is part of life. These funerals are what Dr Wolfet (2007) states he needed to meet the needs of every mourner. Having a respectful, loving funeral is doing the right thing.
References
