The Roles of Rituals

By: Charles A. Corr, PhD

In all of the important turning points in life, humans employ ritual to contribute some degree of ordering or orientation when faced with a life crisis. As Margaret Mead, one of our great cultural anthropologists of the last century, once wrote: “I know of no people for whom the fact of death is not critical, and who have no ritual by which to deal with it.”

Most rituals, as Mead suggests, have a social component. That is, the community is usually involved in ritual activities. We see this in funeral and memorial rituals and in the public commemoration of important dates in our history, such as Memorial Day or the anniversary of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. The social component of ritual is also evident in roadside memorials that are there for passers-by to notice.

However, individuals can also create private rituals when they visit the gravesite of a loved one or light a candle in their homes in memory of a special person. Private rituals can take innumerable forms; they are limited only by the imaginations of the people involved.

Nevertheless, like public rituals, private rituals following a death are intended to mourn a loss and celebrate a life. Donating a toy to a charity on the anniversary of the death of a child, making a monetary gift to an aid organization or establishing a scholarship are well-known ways to keep alive the memory of someone who died.

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Annually, Bridge Home Health & Hospice hosts Light Up a Life, providing a space for the family and friends of our patients, as well as hospice staff and volunteers, to gather and remember those we have lost.

This service is an important part of providing emotional and spiritual support as we cherish lives that are no longer physically with us. We invite you to join us in honor and remembrance in Bowling Green or Findlay with formal invitations to follow.

For those unable to attend, please consider one of the following ways to incorporate the memory of your loved one into your holiday events:

- Wear their favorite color to Thanksgiving dinner
- Reserve an empty chair in their honor
- Take turns telling a story of how your loved one impacted your life
- Make all of their favorite foods for an evening meal and invite family and friends to join you
- Make a donation to a favorite organization or charity
- Create a special ornament to hang upon the tree, or gift to others
- Light a candle in your loved one’s memory

There is no “right” way to celebrate the holiday’s after a loss; however you decide to spend the holidays, do it with purpose, patience and intention.

These ritual activities are often done anonymously because their main concern is not to gain publicity, but to act out a personal commemoration.

Both public and private rituals almost always involve some external action. The gestures, postures and movements that are involved externally are intended to symbolize interior realities, such as attachment, grief and mourning. Ritual activities help to express what we feel inside by enabling us to respond in constructive ways to the events associated with life crises. The repetition that often characterizes ritual activity suggests that performing the activity over and over in certain specified ways expresses the convictions that underlie the ritual and maintain our connections with the faith and trust we seek to uphold.

In short, ritual activities create patterns within which we hope to find some degree of solace. When they fulfill their purposes successfully, ritual activities offer guidance as to how we should or wish to act in relatively unusual (but not always unanticipated) circumstances.

What are the public and/or private ritual activities that you have found helpful in coping with losses in your life and in adapting to the new realities that inevitably follow those losses?

Charles A. Corr, PhD, is a volunteer with Suncoast Hospice and formerly chaired the International Work Group on Health, Dying and Bereavement.

Courtesy of Journeys, Hospice Foundation of America

hospicefoundation.org

Light up a Life

Groups

Living Through Loss
This nine-month series focuses on the issues surrounding the death of a loved one. Presentations are professionally facilitated and include discussion. Registration is not required.

Please call 419.423.5351 or email bridge@bvhealthsystem.org for the full schedule.

Monday, October 16
7 - 8:30 p.m.
“Dispelling the Myths and Misconceptions of Grief”
Blanchard Valley Hospital
Thompson Chapel, BVH

Monday, November 20
7 - 8:30 p.m.
“Facing the Holidays After a Loss”
Blanchard Valley Hospital
Marathon Auditorium

Monday, December 18
7 - 8:30 p.m.
“Will It Be a Blue Christmas?”
Blanchard Valley Hospital
Marathon Auditorium

Your Bereavement Team:

Niki Sidle MSW, LISW-S
Jill Gilgenbach MSW, LSW

bridge@bvhealthsystem.org
bridgehospice.org
419.423.5351

Groups

Memorial Wreath Making
The holidays can be a difficult time of year if you have experienced the loss of a loved one.

Please join us in Findlay or Bowling Green to create a wreath to display in honor of your loved one this holiday season.

Tuesday, November 28
11 a.m. - 7 p.m.
Riverbend Park, Findlay
Bridgeman Lodge
Registration required by November 24

or

Wednesday, November 29
4 - 7 p.m.
Scout Building, BG Park
Bowling Green
Registration required by November 24

Holiday Memories For Kids!
Holidays and special events can often intensify feelings of loss and grief for children. This workshop allows participants to come together with peers to express their feelings and reminisce.

Thursday, November 16
5:30 - 7:30 p.m.
Blanchard Valley Hospital
Marathon Auditorium

Groups are subject to cancellation based on weather and/or lack of registrants.

Please listen to WFIN/WKXA in the event of severe weather

Special Events

The Roles of Ritual cont.

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