The Importance of Children's Funerals in the Mourning Process

by

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Introduction

The subject of funerals and mourning is one which many want to deny, just as death is often denied. The event of death is a time of crisis; even when anticipated it confronts both individuals, families and society with questions about the meaning of life, the values and significance of human beings on this earth in this era.

As death takes us beyond our notion of what is meaningful, it is necessary to have a structure, a ritual by which respect for the dead can be shown. Funeral rites throughout the ages have been devised to provide this respect, and also to protect the living from the dead.

The death of one individual, several, or of large groups threatens the survival of the community. As a protection against this threat, several ritualistic patterns have emerged. There are many differing beliefs as to where the dead go, most acknowledging an animating spirit which may either die in the body or live on in some form. With this belief the spirit might return to the country or place where the person died; it might be absorbed into the Absolute, or take a journey of purification, as in the several lives that are necessary to attain the perfect state in Buddhist teaching. The spirit could also exist in a shadowy form, or may stay around the living and intervene for good or ill in their activities. One family I knew insisted that the spirit of their dead teenage girl lived on their home as a welcome and real presence.

It is not only children who fear the "bogey man" of death who might suddenly, without warning, carry them off. These fears are based in the mysticism surrounding death.

There are fascinating accounts in early Australian historical records of the funerals of early settlers and of Aboriginal practices.[1] In 1806 the Sydney Gazette reported how the death of an Aboriginal warrior, Musquito was celebrated.

> "At night the corpse closed in bark, was conveyed by two into Mr. Jamieson's yard, two others carrying a coffin that had been provided. This movement was under the direction of an ancient man, who commanded the bearers to make numerous turns, to walk backwards, and frequently to vary their paces, in order to bewilder the deceased and prevent his return."

The spirit of the dead man was seen to have an existence in the here and now which could threaten the security of the tribe, and it had to be "bewildered" so it would not return. Also the tribe had suffered both the indignity and the loss of one of its members, and so its own solidarity needed to be reasserted. In the same way the loss of a public figure, for example a member of the royal family, could have an effect on the national identity of these countrymen. Film stars and pop singers are often deeply mourned and funeral services are designed to depict their lifestyle.

Method

This study involved sending out 106 questionnaires about the funeral to parents whose children had died from a malignancy in the preceding three years. A carefully worded letter was sent to the parents, expressing sympathy at their loss of their child and then going on to explain how the findings of the enclosed questionnaire could be helpful to other parents. Some were returned unanswered, only one of these with a note to the effect that it was a disturbing request. Several wrote positively, expressing their appreciation at being contacted and their willingness to participate.

Of the 60 families who responded, 33 had lost boys and 27, girls. There was a wide age range from one day to 9 years. The duration of illness, and time spent in hospital varied considerably. Sixteen children died at home and 44 in hospital. However, the duration of time in hospital was less than two days for 15 of these children and less than two weeks for another 15.

Table 1—Religious Affiliation of the Families

	No. of Families
Roman Catholic	20
Church of England	16
Uniting Church	11
Other Christian Churches*	8
Jewish Faith	2
Buddhist	1
No Religion	2
Total	60

* Three of these families were of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Table 2—Places Where Funeral Services were Held

	No. of Families
Church and grave side	20
Church only	17
Crematorium only	8
Crematorium and funeral chapel	5
Grave side only	3
Grave side and funeral chapel	3
Church and crematorium	2
Funeral chapel	1
At Home	1
Total	60

The religious affiliation is shown in Table 1. It may not be typical of today's society, since it is held that

Australians are not frequent church-goers and many make no claim to any religious affiliation. The questionnaire was, however, centred on the funeral practices and like births and marriages, these call forth religious rituals. The places where the funerals took place—church, crematorium, grave side, etc.—are shown in Table 2. Forty-four children were buried and 16 were cremated. In Australia, cremation is chosen by over 50 per cent of people (70 per cent in metropolitan areas).

Children's Attendance at Funerals

Of the 52 families who had other children, 44 allowed their children to attend the funeral. In only eight families were the children excluded, for reasons relating predominantly to their ages. One mother said she did not take her children aged six years and three-and-half years because she preferred to be alone. She felt that their young ages would distress and distract her. One parent commented "children should always be included in the ending of the life of a loved one and any attached ceremonies—otherwise they can't say goodbye and are left trying to hold onto a relationship that no longer exists. I believe that even very young children should be included."

From these responses it can be inferred that the large majority (85 per cent of this sample of parents) took their children to the funeral service. This finding may be influenced by the fact that at the haematology oncology unit at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, we advise that children of all ages can go with their families to the service as long as their parents are comfortable with this. Children should not be forced to go but may later regret not having been given the opportunity, as happened with at least one family who reported that the children "wished they had gone".

Viewing the Dead Person

There are mixed feelings and different religious practices about viewing the dead person. When people died at home, then the dead person was seen easily, without the atmosphere of fear, horror or excitement that is sometimes experienced nowadays. State funerals of important men are often preceded by public viewing. Some religious faiths, such as the Jewish, oppose this viewing, and the adornment of caskets.

Viewing was made possible for all who wished it, and 31 respondents visited the dead person at the funeral parlour. Of these, 25 said that it was helpful, five were not sure and one parent thought it was not helpful.

Nineteen families took their children to view and 17 of these believed that it has been helpful for them. "It helps them to accept it" was one of the unsolicited responses. In ten of the 29 families who did not wish to view, their children had died at home.

Music

Forty-one families included music in their service, many reporting how uplifting it was. Of the 15 services without music, religious practices precluded music in five of these. Several teenagers, before they died, chose music for their own funeral ceremony. Joanne, aged 16, selected tunes from ABBA to be played as people entered the church. She chose her own hymns and requested that "Chariots of Fire" should be played at the end of her service. The 23rd Psalm was mentioned by four families and the "King of Love", the hymn paraphrasing this psalm, by another family. "Amazing Grace" and "All Things Bright and Beautiful" were each recorded by two families. One family referred to the service being "a celebration" and hymns and choruses reflected this. "Though we were sad, devastated about Damien's death, he wanted us to celebrate his cheerfulness, courage and gifts to the world."

Description of the Funeral Services

Six types of funerals will be described; each provides its own significance, respect for the dead and sorrow for the bereaved.

Roman Catholic Services

Within the Roman Catholic Church there has been a move away from the sombre services that were prevalent before 1969. There are now three different styles of funeral rites: the first has the Eucharist or Requiem Mass as the central act, the second is for use at the cemetery chapel and the third is where the principal service is to be held at the home of the deceased.

Maryanne, who died from leukaemia aged 18 years, was the eldest of six children. She was home for one week before she died, knew of her impending death and prepared for her own funeral service, choosing most of the hymns herself. A vigil was held the night before the service. The next day teachers and student friends from the Catholic College who compiled the service led the singing in the large church where the Requiem Mass was held. All except the four-year-old sister attended the service, and mother on reflection regretted this decision. Maryanne's uncle and eldest brother read the Bible passages and her friends read out "Prayers of the Faithful". A cousin took the gifts in procession to the altar. Mother wrote "I was extremely happy with the service. I wanted it to be a joyful occasion as there were so many young people present and it was. Maryanne would have loved it." Following her Catholic beliefs, Maryanne was totally convinced of an after-life. She talked about the people in history she was going to seek out when she got to Heaven. She was not frightened of dying but was reluctant to leave her family so young. Her mother felt that the service was uplifting and at the end of it reported "she could feel Maryanne going to Heaven rising to be with God".

At a Roman Catholic funeral of a seven year old boy, Michael, the service was taped by the Salesian Brothers. While they had traditional hymns sung by his class mates, the service ended with one of Michael's pop songs "Come you little fighter . . . and get back up again".

Two other families in this study who were known to me have had the service taped. One of these also made a book "Memories of Sharon", composed of the writings of those who attended the service. They were given blank pages on arrival at the service and wrote their thoughts and memories of Sharon.

The essential difference between the services for those of Roman Catholic faith and those of the Uniting and Anglican Churches relates to the prayers said by the Roman Catholics for the souls of the deceased. The Eucharist is a form of celebration for the life of the deceased person and prayers for the repose of their soul. In Australia the month of November is dedicated to prayers for the souls of the deceased. All services give honour and respect to the life of the deceased.

Church of England Services

Allan, aged 11 years, died in hospital and was then taken to the funeral parlour, where he was dressed before being taken home. His mother had always promised her son he would come home. He arrived in the casket neatly dressed in his suit, white cricket sox, and his St. Kilda football jumper. He

wore his cross and held a Bible and a "grandfather Smurfy" (he delighted in Smurf dolls). The casket arrived at 2.00 p.m. and was there for the next 24 hours. In accordance with the mother's beliefs, the mirrors were covered with white sheets so that there was no reflection. Many came to see Allan, including a 13-year-old boy who had been having nightmares since his father's sudden death from a heart attack two years previously. He had not seen his father ill, nor dead, but after having viewed his dead friend Allan, and saying "he is so peaceful", I am assured that his nightmares ceased.

A brief service with close family friends was held at the home. Then the coffin moved to the Anglican church and the service proceeded with organ music and a special hymn "Safe in the Arms of Jesus". The church was crowded: he was a popular boy, in the Cubs, in football and cricket teams; all these, and his school, were represented. At the end of the service as the coffin was carried out, they played "I did it my way", a song popularised by Frank Sinatra. He was buried in the local cemetery, the coffin crowded with flowers and a red, white and black football placed on top. His mother threw a handful of earth onto the coffin, then his father, followed by friends. This completed the service.

A different Anglican service was held at the crematorium for an eight-and-a-half year old boy. The cub leaders formed an arch at the doorway of the crematorium chapel, and had a "uniform patrol to salute Jeff as the daïs turned". Father was unable to recall if music was played: "I could not have heard it for the sobbing and my own heart beating". Jeff's parents described themselves as "not a poetic family", so there were no readings during the service. Afterwards they returned home for what could be described as a wake. Father wrote that "we drank a lot of alcohol—the family were closer together than they had been for years."

Uniting Church

In the Uniting Church, inaugurated in 1977, ministers can exercise more initiative and vary the form of the service.

Eight-year-old Rick's funeral was at the grave side and contributions were made by every member of the family and his teachers. The chaplain started: "This is a funeral service, a final goodbye, an opportunity to remember together, and a worship service . . . for we also acknowledge the presence of God . . . Help us to accept our sadness now, and use it, and our memories of Rick . . . He played and laughed and cried and fought and learned what living in a family is all about." This was followed by a short piece written by 11-year-old Lucy on "the good times we shared together". The 21-year-old brother's contribution, a poem from Spike Milligan entitled "On the Ninny Nanny Nong", indicates a young man's humour and perhaps his wish to deny the loss of his young brother. The father said: "Rick you became a marvellous member of our family in spite of the fact that you were at times none too easy to raise." He paraphrased John Donne's famous passage:

> "no man is an island, entire of itself; everyone is part of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Rick knew of the story of a little Japanese girl, Sadako, who had leukaemia and the "thousand paper cranes" that were made for her. Nineteen-year-old David had made many paper cranes which symbolised the spirits of all animals. While the cranes fluttered in the air, 22-year-old Judy recited a poem on immortality.

Finally the congregation was asked to place a flower in the grave and then gather around while Rick's mother concluded with:

> "Rick, you said the main thing was to get a surprise, and so my surprise is to let go these eight red balloons, one for each year of your life. To shed our hurt, and to lift your spirit to a plane where magic, flying carpets, and love for a flower matter, and may your memory bring us all, especially your family, closer together."

The eight balloons floated to the sky and the folded colour paper cranes fluttered down into the earth and mingled with the flowers.

Another innovative funeral was that of Damien, an 11-year-old boy who, when he knew he was dying, requested his father to have him buried on a hill and to have sparklers at his service. He did not want people to be sad at his funeral. The minister, at the end of the thanksgiving service, told the congregation what Damien had requested and then over 100 sparklers were given out and lit. This made a spectacular and moving occasion for all.

Jewish Funerals

A Jewish funeral of an 11-year-old boy, Amos, was held on the day after he died, following Jewish custom which lays down a strict order of procedure. The service was held at the chapel. No music is permitted, and the men are separated from the women by the seating arrangements. It is mandatory for all members of a Jewish family to attend funerals, and the men play a greater part in the formalised prayers. Amos's parents were separated, his father lived overseas, so his mother requested her father to say the Kaddish, the mourners' prayer, that has to be said by an adult male in the presence of at least nine others. This prayer continues to be said for a year following the death of a parent, and for a month following the death of a spouse, child or sibling.

Funerals must be arranged as soon as possible after the death, so the director from the Jewish burial society came to their home to collect Amos. The boy was placed in a shroud and his prayer shawl draped around him. Prior to the burial the body must never be left unattended. The funeral was held the next day. Mourning does not take place until after the burial, thus allowing some time for the work of arranging the funeral and household. A seven day period, the 'Shivah' follows, during which the immediate family, parents, step-parents and siblings, stay in the home and do not perform household duties. This is a proscribed ritualised opportunity for the mourners to grieve. It gives time for their personal grief, space in their lives to relive and release the feelings about the loss of the loved member of their family. During this recognised period of internal mourning, other less closely related family members, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends may sit 'Shivah' and will also provide the food and other necessities for the chief mourners.

Greek Orthodox Service

Christian faiths have the same apostolic roots, but there were basic differences in the East and West traditions which became separated in 1054 A.D. Long before this the Eastern church had become critical of Western innovations.

The service for Louis, a Greek boy, illustrates the Greek Orthodox tradition which holds the belief in an after-life and in Hell. Louis's mother questioned some of the traditions of her faith: she believed in an after-life but not in a Hell. Many years ago in a farm in Greece her grandfather had become very ill. He seemed to be dead, but recovered and told how he had been to a very big place and seen a bright light and people working. His own father was there sitting under a tree smoking his pipe and he said: "Go back, it's not your time".

Services in the Greek Orthodox Church include a vigil, and a traditional church funeral service without music. On the ninth and the 40th days, additional services are held. Louis's mother was troubled by all these preparations and would have preferred something in a more personal style. The service on the 40th day is an important one. It can be held on a day earlier but not a day later, since it is believed that if it is late the spirit of the deceased would not be able to reach for the food. Louis's mother thought that if this is true, then by adhering to the tradition Louis could gain nourishment from the food left out for him.

Mother described how she "dressed her son like a groom". He had on his best blue suit, white shirt and a bow tie. He wore his comfortable sneakers and next to him were his best shoes, his jeans and favourite jumper. Packed into the white-lined coffin was his doona (duvet), his pillow, three of his most loved toys, a packet of cards, packets of chewing gum, and several photographs of his favourite pets. In his suit pockets there was a comb, handkerchief, and his wallet containing 30 Australian dollars. A few more dollars were thrown into the coffin. He was truly well dressed and well prepared for his journey.

Celebrant's Funeral

Di is an attractive lady celebrant in Melbourne who conducts funeral services in a style that could well be emulated. The service may be conducted in the funeral parlour at the cremetorial chapel, at the family home or in a garden. Di is able to assist in a church service if requested. She aims at making the service a spiritual experience that is "totally personally orientated". After a death she will spend well over an hour with the family encouraging all members to become involved: parents, grandparents and especially children. She encourages them to talk, to write and to draw, and then uses the material in her service. All services are tape recorded and as she gives the tape she says "Here is a copy. You may choose not to listen to it ever again, or you may choose to, sometimes".

Di has collected many children's drawings which are brought up and stuck onto the coffin along with posies of hand-picked flowers. There is a familiar pattern to the drawings, the dead child drawn horizontally on the ground and under black earth, the yellow sun in the sky and there are always birds. For older siblings, Di asks them to choose and tape any music that their brother or sister would have liked.

For little babies that have died, she gets the couple to go back to the point of conception and the love they had for each other and their baby at the beginning of its life. She asks them to describe preparations that were made, buying baby clothes, painting the nursery and gathering things for their child. In this way a baby of two days old can be remembered as living for nine months and two days.

Di tells the bereaved families that she is not there to proselytise but to listen, and in some way help them move forward to the future. She may say "I am here to help you have a dignified service for your child, I wish I wasn't here at all, I do not understand your pain, but you can tell me what has happened, and then I will shepherd you through and not add to your distress." She may read poems written by other parents, or children, and finds that these are often creative and beautiful. The mother who lost her five-year-old daughter wrote a poem entitled "The Eternal Child", the last verse being:

> And through my tears I see you, ever green
> My memories by time are undefiled
> Here in my heart, forever is for you
> Eternal memories, Eternal Child.

Discussion

Funeral ceremonies provide ritualised permission to grieve, and when these are unavailable—as following the death of stillborn babies, where mass graves hold up to 20 or more tiny infants—parents express anger and anguish. The death of their expected baby is not even given a personal space. This is a 20th century phenomenon, since with the high infant mortality rates of the past, deaths were accepted more easily, or even ignored.

Funeral rites provide a public and private acknowledgement, and a personal recognition, that the child is now dead and can never be seen or touched again. Occurring within a few days, when shock and disbelief are still present, the funeral emphasises the reality of the death. It also provides a time for mourners to reflect on the value of life, however short, and to acknowledge to the grieving family the importance of their child.

Mourning is seen as the emotional work that is necessary in order to internalise the lost person, the dead child, into one's mind. Bereaved parents speak of the value of photographs, books, and videos made before the child died, or a tape of the funeral. These tangible objects can aid in mourning, as parents sometimes regret the dimming of their memories. After the funeral, by discussion, active thought, the good memories of the child, are retained; the suffering and the bad times are integrated, so that the dead child does not become too idealised at the expense of the living children.

Mourning is a natural process which will vary with each individual and family. This study of children's funerals has attempted to emphasise how these can be rewarding and hopeful occasions, especially when the family has the confidence to choose the service and to participate. Caring professionals, funeral directors and friends have important roles, but first it is necessary to hear, observe, and take heed of the family's wishes. While partly understanding their grief, they should allow the family to experience their own pain; only by so doing can the work of mourning proceed, a healthy resolution occur, and death take its place as part of the circle of life.

Reference

1. Griffin GM, Tobin D. In the Midst of Life. Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1982.

CAMEO ON GRIEF

A Voice from the Past

I was twenty-four when I first heard Ruth Draper in a season of monologues given on the London stage. She had a full theatre as she brought to life people and communities around her until they were as real as herself. I watched spellbound—the tourists in an Italian church; the hostess at a garden party; the lover and the men in her life and, finally, the mother's encounter with her soldier son killed in the War. This was an experience Ruth and her sister had on a bicycle tour of Southern Ireland. A sudden shower took them for shelter to the cottage of a widow who spoke of the War. "My son was killed at Passchendaele and I grieved constantly for him. One day I woke from sleep and he appeared at the foot of my bed looking at me with such sorrow on his face. Then he spoke, 'Give over weeping, mother, or my wounds will never heal.' Then he disappeared and I have never wept for him since then."

— Margaret Torrie
Grayshott
July, 1988