

## ***Making Special Rituals by Harold Ivan Smith***

*I have long appreciated the Fram Auto Filter ad: “You can pay me now OR you can pay me later.” The wisdom in that ad is equally valuable in dealing with loss and bereavement.*

*The funeral rituals moved me for the Queen Mother. No five minute “generic” service that could have been done for anyone, instead a highly crafted ritual extravaganza which celebrated Elizabeth’s relationship with her family, with her country, and with her God.*

### *We need rituals*

*Unfortunately, some have missed the opportunity to do appropriate rituals immediately after the loss. In a sense, however, it is never too late to ritual a loss. Terese Rando says that “Rituals give form, structure, and meaning to our feelings. They are unique opportunities for communication, ventilation, and appropriate acting out.” Nothing in the definition implies a time limit.*

*Rabbi Michael Zedek has identified four purposes of rituals.*

- *To help us acknowledge what has happened.*
- *To help us know what we are when something has happened.*
- *To help us proceed when something has happened.*
- *To help us act our way into right thinking.*

*Three millennia ago Jewish exiles asked, “How do we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137: 4). Today, loss, particularly grief, makes us, too, feel like exiles—exiles from the familiar, from the secure. How do we “ritual” thoroughly in a culture impatient for us to move on?*

*Rabbi Zedek’s use of the plural, “to help us” is significant. In a me-centric culture, while you are reading this article, someone will snarl, “When I die just take me out and dump me . . .” or conclude “We do not want any rituals. She was old. Who would come?”*

*I would add a fifth reality for rituals.*

- *To help us know we are not alone. Rituals provide venues for others to respond to and share feelings.*

*Many reading the article are long past “the ritual opportunity”. That’s what Meredith thought as she coordinated arrangements for the Grief Gathering I led in her church. Meredith had not planned to participate in the sessions since she disenfranchised her feelings, “my loss happened so long ago”.*

*Meredith had a handicapped brother. In those days, it was something of a stigma. Meredith's mother's life was organized around David's care. When David had to be hospitalized with pneumonia, Meredith looked after the other children. Then one day her mother came home and announced, "Your brother died. I am going to bed. Take care of the children."*

*Meredith became Mom, Jr. Her mother walked into her bedroom, shut the door, and emotionally disappeared for six months. Since her mother was an atheist, no rituals were held. I am not sure what I said in opening that grief gathering but something captured Meredith's unresolved grief for her brother. At the end of the six weeks, she requested a ritual for her brother. Fortunately, she belonged to a church that has a rich tradition of "making special". In some congregations she might have been told, "For heaven's sake, your brother died fifty years ago!" On a Wednesday night, friends gathered in the chapel for a ritual for David and for Meredith.*

#### Something old; something new

*You know the guidance, "Something old, something new; something borrowed, something blue". As I have researched ritual observance, I have concluded those four guidelines are applicable in planning funeral and memorial celebrations.*

#### Something old

*As I conducted my mother's funeral—although she was not Episcopal—I used words from The Book of Common Prayer. I took comfort that millions of sons grieving mothers had heard these time-tested words. Recently, as I watched the Queen Mum's funeral, I recognized the words. Queen Elizabeth II and I both had heard something "old" at our mother's funerals.*

*Unfortunately, we ritual in a culture that has elements that have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. Tragically, generic rituals never name or honor the deceased. I was in one mega-church recently where the senior minister does seven minute funerals. In an age of "one minute" management, I suppose the one-minute funeral is inevitable.*

*However, in reading Dennis Robert's Report from Ground Zero, I was moved by the use of old liturgical and fire department traditions in these funerals and memorial services for September 11th victims—even when there was very little "body" in the casket. While some firemen kept digging, other firemen found emotional grace in the familiarity of rituals.*

*Families and friends expected something old to comfort them just as other fire families had been comforted for generations. Firemen sat in that service knowing "someday" this is what my funeral ritual will sound and look like.*

#### Something new

*A funeral ritual is a ceremony for a particular person. In the Appalachian folksongs, Will the Circle Be Unbroken, the lyrics sing, "Undertaker, undertaker. Please drive slowly, for this passenger that you're carryin' is my mother." Not just any mother—my mother.*

*Too many settle for rote generic "by the book" funeral rituals. I wanted, in the words of the University of Washington anthropologist, Ellen Dissanayake, to "make special" for my mother. Did you ever respond to someone who wanted to do something for you, "Oh, don't go to any*

trouble on my part?" Fortunate are those who hear, "Oh, it's no trouble." Increasingly, these days we hear, "Okay, I won't."

Dissanayake urges us to take advantage of every opportunity to make special. Take the ordinary and "make special". Be intentional. Be ritual. My mother's favorite gospel song was *And When the Battle's Over We Shall Wear a Crown, in the New Jerusalem*. She had a great belief that God had invited her to spend eternity with him. So, we symbolized that belief by placing a gold crown on the pink-rosed casket spray.

As I concluded the homily, I called attention to the crown. All her life, my mother sang that song—confident in her faith that in some distant moment, she would wear a crown. Stepping to the casket, I lifted the crown: "Mom, this isn't much of a crown. It's just a symbol. I am confident that today you are wearing the crown you sang about." Then I laid the crown over her folded hands.

When I asked the director to remove the floral spray from the casket, people shifted nervously. What was going on? The spray always stayed on the casket. I

polished the lower lid of the casket. Then I faced the mourners. "You know my mother was quite a handshaker. She should have been a politician. So, as you come by the casket before you leave, place your hand on the casket and leave your fingerprints so Momma will know you were here." Heads turned and eyes asked, "Did I hear correctly?"

As the organist played, we followed the old tradition of walking by the open casket. Some lightly touch the casket as if it were "hot". Ralph Ferren, my mother's Sunday school teacher for a number of years, tears streaming down his face, placed both hands on the casket. My Aunt Ellen lovingly stroked the casket, "I'll see you soon, Mary." With the first notes of *Onward Christian Soldiers*, the director closed the casket and the bearers took their places and we proceeded to the hearse.

"You know," the director said as we drove toward the cemetery, "I've seen lots of things but I've never thought to ask people to leave their fingerprints on the casket. Would you mind if I suggest that to families?"

That ritual innovation of placing hands on the casket cost nothing. But the comfort it brought us may, in turn, through the funeral director's recommendation, bring comfort to others. Something you create may become the next innovation and comfort gift to a family. Your creativity could give another individual or family permission to "make special".

Sometimes, we need to "stretch" an old tradition. In part of Kentucky, bearing a casket is "men's work". My brother did a double-take when I suggested that we have some female pallbearers. He had never seen such a thing (I had only once at the funeral of Cardinal Bernardin in Chicago).

As I concluded the funeral, I told the griever, "Now keep your eyes open." Many were stunned and pleased to see the grandsons and granddaughters carry their "Mam-Maw" to the waiting hearse. Again we took the old and tweaked it.

### Something borrowed

*Innovation is a big theme in weddings; innovation should be borrowed freely in funeral rituals. I attended the funeral for John William Perry, a New York City policeman who died in the World Trade Center. As soon as I heard the first notes of the bagpiper's Amazing Grace, I thought, when I die, I want a bagpiper!*

*My friend, Dot Culver, was a Purdue Boilermaker. For ninety of her ninety-three years. She lived within blocks of the campus and was an enthusiastic alumnus. As I talked with her daughter, Nancy, about the funeral and committal, she told me that she really wanted the Purdue Fight Song for the recessional.*

*"But?" I questioned, noticing the hesitation in her voice. "Well, it's probably not appropriate for a church funeral."*

*"Sure it is," I said.*

*So, Nancy "borrowed" the fight song. At the end of a wonderful celebration of the life and faith of Dorothy Culver, the organist broke into a spirited playing of The Purdue Fight Song! A Boilermaker was going home.*

### Something blue

*At an increasing number of funerals, planners try to avoid anything that might make someone cry. Indeed, many funerals are labeled "celebrations". Well, some grievors need funerals. Some ritual elements might not only cause someone to cry but cause lots of people to cry.*

*Do it now! It is never too late to have a ritual. In working with grievors, I have learned that many have only snippets of memory of the rituals of their loved one.*

*I applaud the efforts of funeral directors to install state-of-the-art video equipment in their chapels so that individuals can have video memories to boot-up, refresh, or replace, their memories. I wish we had videotaped my mother's funeral. I was so busy doing the ritual that, in a sense, I missed out on my mother's funeral.*

*Many are so emotionally distressed that they remember nothing. That is why we do re-rituals at Saint Luke's. We close each six-week group with a "Naming of the Name" service that lasts about 30 minutes. It is designed to give opportunity, repeatedly, to say the name of the loved one.*

*Anniversaries offer excellent opportunities to re-ritual. Recently, I counseled a family that had never purchased a marker for their mother's grave. I counseled them to make it a grand meaningful gathering of the clan. The ritual you create could be a great model for another. Do yourself a favor: ritual or re-ritual. Make special.*

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