



## **Ritual as an Aid to Coping with Loss**

By Paul E. Irion, L.H.D.

When a loved one dies, even after a long illness with time to get used to the idea of approaching death, we find our days chaotic and disorganized. We expect that once the responsibility of providing bedside care is gone, life will be simpler, calmer, more orderly. Instead you cope with a life of gaps: an empty house, an empty bed, empty hours, silence. In the midst of this we look for some stable reference points, some solid rock on which to stand. The answer is ritual.

Why is it that all cultures have surrounded the times of death and sorrow with rituals? Why have people found that rituals help them cope? How does ritual help us when we grieve? Rituals, ancient or new, are ways of expressing our faith and our hope. These matters often difficult to put into words.

Some of our most observed rituals are religious. For those part of a church, synagogue or mosque, the familiar rituals of vigil and wake, funeral, Shiva and kaddish, all put you in touch with your faith community – its beliefs, its traditions, its fellowship.

Rituals in time of death and grief offer at least three ways of coping. First, they guide you in the painful acknowledging that you have to separate from the loved one who has died and can no longer be present in your life. The funeral ritual began the process of closing a chapter of your experience and moving forward.

Second, rituals can help you remember your loved one. Perhaps you have ritualized the taking of flowers to the cemetery on birthdays and anniversaries. Perhaps you have lit a memorial candle at family holiday gatherings for the one who is no longer with you.

The third function of ritual is to strengthen your relationships with the community of the living. Think how rituals have brought family members to your side, showing that you support each other.

Some rituals are traditional, familiar religious rituals. But there can also be personally designed rituals, which may or may not be religious. You, alone or with others, can put respect for your loved one into symbolic action. You may plant a tree or shrub; read a favorite poem, story or hymn on the person's birthday, make a gift to a favorite charity in honor of the deceased on the date of death. These are simply every-day actions, but they can express profound feelings. They can help us cope.

*(Rev. Paul Irion, "Ritual as an Aid to Coping with Loss," Journeys – Hospice Foundation of America Newsletter, Feb 1995, Reprinted with permission from the author.)*

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