The Personalization of Postmodern Post-mortem Rituals

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Abstract This article lays out the roots of the wish for personalized post-mortem rituals (funerals, memorial services, etc.) in postmodern culture and explains why many twentieth-century American, white Protestant funerals had become strikingly impersonal. It discusses the way in which the desire for personalized ritual is linked in American minds with the desire for "celebrative" ritual with an upbeat emotional tone. It describes ways to personalize traditional or nontraditional rituals and explores how personalization may make the rituals more able to meet some of the most important needs of grieving people.

Why the trend towards personalization

The desire for more personalized post-mortem ritual is an outcome of a number of broad, interconnected trends in contemporary Western societies: increasing pluralism and secularism, the decline of tradition-bearing communities, the decreasing authority of traditional meta-narratives, the public/private split and the relegation of questions of meaning to the private sphere, and the growing values of individualism and consumer entitlement to choice. These trends are summed up by the term "postmodern." In postmodern culture, people typically say that they are "spiritual but not religious." They tend to be suspicious of communal ritual as restrictive and anti-individualist. They question or reject inherited ritual patterns even for those events for which they do feel some need for communal ritual, such as major life-cycle transitions. *American Funeral Director* magazine found in its 2004 customer survey that 71

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percent do not want a traditional funeral (whatever the respondents thought that to mean), and the National Funeral Directors Association reports that 62 percent of boomers want "personalized" funerals (Cullen, 2006, p. 20). American boomers may be self-centered due to a lifetime of being the focus of advertizing, but similar reactions to funeral ritual are found in other postmodern societies. A Dutch liturgiologist described contemporary Roman Catholic funerals in the Netherlands as emphasizing the individuality of the deceased: "the funeral is the last opportunity to publicly present someone's characteristic personality" (van Tongeren, 2004, p. 127). In the United States, this trend was first noticed by the funeral industry in the mid 1970's, in (surprise!) California. An industry trade article in 1974 noted, "Those who choose these do-it-yourself ceremonies seek what they consider a more personal approach, one, they believe, that gives greater meaning to funerals" (Laderman, 2003, p. 146).

This equation of "meaningful" with "personal" is a giveaway of postmodern culture. When people are not embedded in a tradition-bearing community, the rituals of such a community do not seem to speak to their personal experience, the private world that is the locus of meaning-making. A ritual is likely to be meaningful to the extent that it is personally constructed or tailored to one's own experience. Funeral directors see another understanding of what makes for meaningfulness in recent immigrants who are still embedded in traditional communities: "The more the community is involved and the more the family is involved in this event…the more meaningful [it becomes]," observed a funeral director of such groups (Laderman, 2003, p. 165).

Those of us who are assimilated to postmodern culture are not so embedded in community, even if we are committed, practicing members of a religious congregation. When in the postmodern West a churchgoing, believing Christian dies, the community gathered for her

funeral is usually not an entirely Christian community, and often not a majority-Christian community. The only thing that unites that group at her funeral is their connection to her or to her next-of-kin. “At the funeral, an incidental community forms because of and around the deceased as an individual” (van Tongeren, 2004, p. 129). This is a concrete way in which pluralism drives the focus of the funeral on the personality of the deceased.

Impersonal Christian funerals

In the decades just before many Americans began searching for more personalized (“meaningful”) post-mortem rituals, funerals in many largely white, Protestant denominations had become radically *less* personal. Seminarians and pastors were advised to mention the deceased as little as possible, especially in the sermon (if any). There were two reasons for this avoidance.

The first was a reaction against the widespread practice of overblown eulogies, portraits of the deceased that made him out to be a paragon of admirable qualities, no matter what he was actually like. Such eulogies had begun to appear in European Protestant funeral sermons as early as the seventeenth century, intertwined with the preaching on biblical themes related to death and resurrection (Westerfield Tucker, 1996, p. 205). Indeed, the eulogies may have been an effort to re-personalize funerals that had jettisoned the Roman Catholic prayers for the dead. By the mid-twentieth century, many Protestant pastors saw the eulogy practice as problematic, both because of its frequent dishonesty and because it obscured the grace of God by implying that the deceased had earned her way into heaven (“works-righteousness”). James Lowery wrote that in the mid 1960s when he graduated from seminary, the “prevailing wisdom” among teachers of Presbyterian worship was that there should be no preaching at funerals, lest the preacher be

tempted “to lapse into a eulogy where the focus would be on the deceased rather than on God” (1999, p. 39).

The second reason for avoiding mention of the deceased in mid-twentieth century white Protestant funerals was to avoid stirring up grief. Since the bereaved were supposed to keep from “breaking down” into tears (even silent tears, not to mention wailing or keening!) in public, the funeral industry and many churches “protected” them from things which would trigger a loss of emotional control: plain words like “died” or “coffin,” the deathly appearance of an unaltered corpse, moments of finality such as the closing of the coffin, and vivid descriptions of the one who died. In 1966 Paul Irion wrote:

> Many pastors make a studied effort to impersonalize the funeral under the mistaken notion that pain is lessened for the mourners by approaching the funeral with total objectivity. Ministers will describe their efforts to reduce personal references to the deceased, to minimize any mention of association with the deceased, in order to avoid emotion in the mourner…. [I]t is quite possible [from the results of a survey Irion just referred to] that many funeral services literally make no mention of the person who died nor of the relationships that have been sustained with the deceased. (p. 50)

The generic, fill-in-the-blank funerals that resulted from both these motivations were especially alienating to the postmodern sensibility that was beginning to take shape later in the twentieth century, which found the meaningful almost exclusively in the personal, the individualized. The move of many Protestant funerals from the church to the funeral home increased their generic feel through a bland and impersonal setting.

One caveat is important here, though, on assessing the personalization level of post-mortem rituals. When we look at twentieth century WASP funerals, or at Eastern Orthodox funerals or pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic funerals, the in-church (or in-funeral home) rite may be quite similar for all; at least the verbal transcript might be exactly the same except for a mention of the deceased’s name. It’s important to remember, though, that the funeral is only one

piece of a *ritual process*, and other elements of that process may in many cases provide for more personal touches. In 1960's America, the less formal rituals of the gathering where the open or closed casket is displayed prior to the funeral (the wake, vigil, viewing or visitation), the meal after the funeral, and later visits to the grave on significant dates all potentially provided opportunities for story-sharing and other personalized expressions of grief. Contemporary Eastern Orthodox in-church funeral services remain very formal and uniform, but a sort of informal "memorial service" of story-sharing often happens during the elaborate post-funeral meals (Bennett and Foley, 1997, p. 34). These various elements of the ritual process, however, are endangered by the complexity of overlapping or non-interacting communities in our lives. When an individual lived in an organic community where everyone who knew her knew each other and would continue to be in contact with each other, there were many informal opportunities for memory-sharing and corporate griefwork. When an "occasional community" of those who knew her or her next-of-kin gathers for only one ritual event (whether that be the funeral/memorial service or the viewing), that ups the ante on the personalization of that event.

"I don't want a funeral—have a party in my honor."

This is not an uncommon sentiment to hear from Americans. It combines two desires which are logically separable but often associated in the contemporary American approach to post-mortem ritual; both desires are reflected in the widespread practice of referring to a memorial service or funeral as "a celebration of N's life." First is the desire for something more personalized than the traditional funeral; second is the desire for something more upbeat. How should we understand this wish for a cheerful post-mortem ritual?

Many people have had bad experience with what they would think of as "traditional" funerals, funerals in places of worship or funeral homes which were purely depressing, and left them feeling worse than they felt when they arrived. Some of this may be the unavoidable result of coming face-to-face with death, but it is also true that many funerals are more unrelentingly depressing than they need to be or should be. Perhaps the funerals these people attended were too generic or formal, impersonal in a way that made them feel meaningless. The ritual did not speak directly of or to the particular loss the mourners were experiencing, so it felt irrelevant. If I come to a ritual with strong feelings and difficult questions about a particular death and the ritual neither houses the true feelings nor honors the questions nor names the uniqueness of my loss, I am likely to leave feeling empty and depressed.

If the funerals these people have attended were religious, presumably they tried to present some transcendent hope, a hope in the trustworthy nature of God and/or in a life beyond death. Yet many religious funerals—at least many Christian ones—fail at holding out hope. The hope may be stated, but it is not conveyed with communal affirmation or with the power of music or with deeply grounded ritual action. The funeral is held in the daytime on a weekday, so there are just immediate mourners there. There is poorly done music, or recorded music, or no music at all. The small congregation participates actively only by reading the 23rd psalm. The whole service takes 15 or 20 minutes, most of which is taken up by one pastor reading from a book. How could this not be depressing?

We should not underestimate the ability of strong, simple, beautiful ritual symbols to speak even to those who are not familiar with them. When the registrar at Trinity Lutheran Seminary died of cancer, the worship professor arranged for several of her friends to spread the pall on the casket near the beginning of the service. He told them to think of how military

servicemen fold the flag that covered a casket, and to do the unfolding and spreading of the pall with the same quality of careful attention, but with the warm tenderness of their friendship rather than with strict military precision. I later spoke to a woman who had attended the funeral, for whom the use of the baptismal pall was an unfamiliar symbol; when she described the funeral to me, she spent several minutes describing how moving and beautiful it was to watch this woman's friends spreading the pall on her casket. Ritual symbols do not require resources many of us do not have in order to be powerfully effective; unfortunately, many Christian funerals have felt empty in part for lack of such deeply meant and felt ritual action.

While many traditional funerals have been unnecessarily depressing and empty, it's certainly true that part of what lies behind the resistance to the traditional funeral and the move towards celebrative memorial services is cultural death denial and grief avoidance. A traditional funeral, in words, music and especially through the physical presence of the dead body, confronts people with the reality of death. Recently I asked two young (under 21) men at my workplace what their experience of funerals was. Each had been to two funerals, and each said separately in identical words that the funerals were "depressing," commenting, "I wish it had been more of a celebration of her life." It's very difficult to tell how much this was the fault of the funerals, and how much this was just young men's reaction to coming into close contact with death and acute bereavement. In one case, the funeral was of a middle-aged woman who died in a car accident; it's not clear that anything could have been done ritually several days after such a death that would have felt to this teenaged neighbor like a celebration of her life.

Personalized ritual and what grievers need when

Personalization of death rituals runs the gamut from including the deceased's favorite hymn in a set traditional funeral rite to designing an entire event to reflect the personality of the deceased and the needs of these mourners. Do personalized rituals help the grieving? Certainly for those for whom meaningful=personalized, some personal crafting of the ritual is critical to its effectiveness.

Yet, don't the grieving actually need traditional ritual forms? Don't the traditional ritual forms provide comforting familiarity, a message of cross-generational stability, and a witness to the fact that bereavement is common to humanity, all of which are helpful to the anxious, disoriented and isolated mourners? Yes, but. Traditional ritual actions, words, music and symbols *can* provide a sense of stability when we most need it. Jeanne Daly McIntee (1998) says that "the structure of a tradition gives the comfort of familiarity in a time of great upheaval and disruption"—but she recognizes that this is true only for those for whom these ritual forms *are* familiar (p. 35). As Ewan Kelly (2008) notes, "for many non-religious people a traditional, prescribed religious funeral may add to, instead of lessening, their feelings of disorientation and lack of control" (p. 41). It is always important, though, to find out whether there are post-mortem ritual actions or symbols which are familiar to these mourners and which might bring a sense of comforting connection with other mourners over time. Examples might be a particular ethnic "funeral hymn" (African American "Precious Lord," Norwegian "Behold a Host," etc.), the 23rd psalm, or "Amazing Grace" (they might have heard it played on bagpipes at police funerals on television—not to mention at Spock's funeral in the movie "Star Trek II"!).

Before you even get to the ritual, the process of co-planning the ritual with the bereaved already begins to meet a need. Whether you are letting them choose elements within a traditional

service or co-constructing an entire ritual, you are empowering them in a way which helps to offset their vulnerability and lack of control in an upended world. One bereaved father reported to Ewan Kelly (2008) that it helps "having something that you can influence in the situation where you are completely unable to influence events because it has been taken from you" (p. 93). The empathy with which you elicit and receive their feelings, memories, and ideas for the ritual is itself comforting and stabilizing.

If mourners can choose to do something within the ritual that will be meaningful to them (whether a traditional role such as lector, eulogizer or pallbearer, or some action the mourners devise), that ritual action can be empowering as well. It can also help satisfy the need of a bereaved individual to do something for the deceased, either to honor him or (as in the case of a bereaved parent) to symbolically take care of him. Ritual action involving personal creativity (writing, drawing or making something, composing or playing music, etc.) may be particularly empowering and provide a meaningful activity to focus upon when nothing seems to make sense. Drawing pictures of the deceased can be a helpful activity for children, giving them a way in to a largely alien ritual process. These drawings can be taped on walls, used in the bulletin, placed in the coffin or used to decorate the outside of it.

One of the main functions of the ritual that occurs shortly after death is to help the mourners assimilate the fact that N. really is dead. When I have asked students over the years to identify the "moments of finality" for them in the post-mortem ritual process (When did it hit you, or begin to sink in, that N. really was dead?), by far the biggest category of responses has to do with interacting with the dead body: seeing or touching it, closing the casket, lowering the casket into the ground, etc. When the body is unrecoverable or cannot be viewed, or when cremation takes place before the ritual, the display of photographs and personal mementos that is

often used now can help in bringing it home to us that it is this particular person who is dead. I would still argue, though, for having at least the cremated remains present to make the death real.

The ritual shortly after death should also help the mourners begin to grieve, to "move toward the pain of loss" (Wolfelt, 2003, p. __). There are many ways we can ritually give permission to grieve and make a safe place for grief. Personalization is one way, since anything that calls the deceased clearly to mind can elicit grief: sharing characteristic anecdotes, or smelling her favorite recipe, or touching something she often wore. Memories can also bring laughter and happy feelings. While it's problematic for people to try to keep it all happy, the element of joy can both fulfill mourners' wish to honor the deceased and help make it safe for them to share some tears as well.

Mourners have many needs which are best met by music. Music affects, calls out, expresses and enables people to share strong feelings. A ritual feels suited to a particular loss when the music speaks to what these mourners are feeling, helping them move towards the pain while also sustaining them with beauty and the possibility of joy. Contemporary church music resources such as *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contain hymns of lament which can house the questions and pain of tragic loss, as well as hymns of resurrection hope. Mourners also need to experience community solidarity, and there are few actions which incarnate that as effectively than communal singing (Ramshaw, 2008). If most of the occasional community gathered will not be familiar with hymns, it is important to try to find some sort of appropriate songs this particular group of people will be able to sing, whether that's a secular song with some depth in the lyrics or John Bell's songs for grieving (Bell, 1996) or "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore" (it's Michael the archangel, rowing across the Jordan river of death).

Music that the deceased liked may be used. If he had a favorite hymn, it can be used in a church ritual. A family lullaby may be sung to say goodbye to a child. Consider at what part of the ritual process a particular piece or song would work best, in terms of both the song's content and mood and the musical genre's accessibility to the range of people present. Would it work better at the post-ritual meal, or at a gathering of the deceased's age-mates? Surprising juxtapositions can work, though. One Lutheran pastor inserts a section called "Remembering N." into the Lutheran funeral liturgy just prior to the scripture readings and sermon. In the funeral for a 41-year-old lesbian woman who died of cancer, the satirical song "Always Look on the Bright Side" from Monty Python's "Life of Brian" (Brian sings it on the cross), which had been the woman's battle song during chemo, was sung at that point. The pastor felt that it provided a refreshing context for the readings while honoring the honest spirituality and humor of the deceased, and that it drew in the many church-disenfranchised people who were present.

Rituals early and later on in bereavement need to provide opportunities for story-sharing. "Storytelling for the sake of making a memory is the central work of grieving" (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. 113). The bereaved need to turn their shared lived experience with the deceased into memories they can carry into their future life without him. How and when this can best happen depends a lot on the health of the relationships involved and on how traumatic the death was. In dysfunctional families, secrets may abort memory-sharing or stories may be used to wound. "Many funeral and memorial services have been blighted by people who used them to air their personal grievances" (Bennett and Foley, 1997, p. 87). In such situations, the eulogy needs to be vetted. In the case of a terrible or shocking death, people may be too traumatized to be able to share memories helpfully at the immediate post-death ritual. I attended the funeral of a young teen who had committed suicide where there was an "open mike" style of memory sharing; after

hearing all the memories, I found I knew hardly anything about what the boy was like. The traumatized mourners had all talked primarily about themselves, even when telling memories featuring the boy. In cases of suicide, murder or other traumatic death, it is wise to plan some additional ritual later on (perhaps when something is given/dedicated in the deceased's honor, months later) at which people can be invited to share memories. It is also best to avoid "open mike" sharing at the main ritual if generational or ethnic subgroups among the mourners have conflicting standards for what would be appropriate to say. There could be other, less formal gatherings of, say, the deceased's colleagues, where they could tell their stories.

The key action of storytelling may happen in many ways over time. Ideally the sermon "weaves the individual and the divine [stories] into a seamless whole" (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. 118). There may be a single eulogy alongside the sermon, or several of the bereaved may share prepared memories. If there will be a time of open memory-sharing, it is helpful to give some guidance; Sarah York provides a good example of a clear invitation (2000, p. 30). Some pastors preselect people to be the first to share memories, people who will provide good models for others to follow. If "open mike" memory-sharing is done at some less formal gathering in the ritual process, people have more freedom to come and go (in case some of what is said disturbs them). The informal gatherings such as visitation or reception are times to encourage storytelling in conversation. Displays of symbols of the life of the deceased help to spark memories. These include photographs (on "memory boards" or in PowerPoint slide shows) and objects the deceased used, loved, played with, made, or wore. Quilts made by the deceased and the sail of the deceased's favorite boat have been hung on church walls. Another approach is to solicit written memories from people, during or in preparation for the ritual—if the latter, the gathering may be done at least in part online. Websites for online memorials provide the

opportunity for the bereaved to create a virtual memorial of photos, visual symbols and quotations, which other people can visit in order to leave their own memories or statements of solidarity in grief.

The needs both to remember and to honor the deceased are met not only by storytelling but by all the elements of the rituals that reflect her personality: the personal symbols, the favorite music or flowers, the favorite flower/tree that is ceremonially planted, the personalized memorial cards, bulletins/programs or bookmarks. The site of a ritual gathering (such as a scattering of ashes) may be a place of personal significance. It may be possible to find scripture or other appropriate readings that reflect some aspect of the deceased's life. For a gardener who did "pro bono" landscaping in neglected spots we read Isaiah 41:19-20; for a man who coached children's soccer, Zechariah 8:3-5; for a woman who was a champion leaf peeper, Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods," which speaks of mortality and autumn color.

In addition to entering into the feelings of grief and active remembering, another crucial task of mourning is to struggle with the questions of meaning that arise in the face of death. Our attempts both to honor and to address these ultimate questions in religious community will only be helpful if we speak directly, honestly and compassionately to this particular situation of loss. If a family in shock forbids honesty in the week after a death, it may be possible to arrange for another ritual months or a year later at which more truth can be spoken. All pastoral care can be described as the effort to help people make connections between their personal story and the sacred stories carried by the community. In the context of post-mortem ritual, this means that we together with the bereaved find forms (words, actions, pictures, musical expressions) of both lament and hope that resonate with them in their particular struggle.

Traditional ritual has too often been a procrustean bed. When a religious community is fully alive, its traditional ritual patterns are more like water flowing on land, taking the contours of each particular piece of earth it sinks into, enlivens and transforms. It is such living water that people need in the desert of grief.

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