



Citation for published version:

Valentine, CA 2009, 'The role of the funeral in some contemporary bereavement narratives', *Funeral Director Monthly*, vol. 92, no. 1.

Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

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The Role of the Funeral in some Contemporary Bereavement Narratives

Dr Christine Valentine
Centre for Death and Society
Department of Social and Policy Sciences
University of Bath

This article explores the role and meaning of the funeral for bereaved individuals in contemporary society as conveyed in their recollections of losing a loved one. These recollections are drawn from interviews held with 25 bereaved people, 15 women and 10 men, aged 17 to 63, in Bath from 2003 to 2005 (Valentine, 2008). In these interviews participants were encouraged to set the agenda by talking about those aspects of their bereavement that were important to them. Their responses, whilst highly individual and diverse, in all cases conveyed the continuing significance of deceased loved ones in the lives of those they left behind. Indeed, the very process of recalling the impact of loss served to evoke a powerful sense of the person's presence. Similarly, the experience of presence, something that often included discovering more about the person and realising how much they meant, would be accompanied by a poignant reminder of their absence.

These interview narratives confirm and build on the growing academic interest in the importance of 'continuing bonds' for bereaved people. The shift away from an emphasis on the therapeutic value of 'severing ties' to an appreciation of the variety of ways bereaved individuals may maintain contact with dead loved ones has enriched our understanding of the human response to loss. It has revealed the profoundly social nature of grief rather than treating it as a psychological or even medical condition of the individual. Indeed the narratives of those I interviewed emerged in the social setting of the interview encounter, sharing experiences with another serving to reconnect people with dead loved ones. These experiences allowed me to enter participants' social worlds, particularly those aspects that evoked a dead loved one's absence and presence, such as conversation, day-to-day activities, certain objects, particular times, places and occasions.

The funeral was one such occasion, in some cases being vividly recalled, even after several years, particularly by those who had contributed something of their own to the ceremony. These contributions reflected increasing emphasis on self-styled funerals designed to celebrate the uniqueness of the life lived. Indeed, though people's recollections were highly diverse, a common thread was the role of the funeral in evoking and affirming the deceased person's continuing presence in the immediate aftermath of death. Yet, as indicated, recalling presence would tend to evoke absence and vice-versa. This dimension of the funeral's significance for those I interviewed will be illustrated through extracts from their narratives, focusing on three features that were experienced as particularly evocative: the coffin, the music and the eulogy.

The coffin

The coffin as the container of the deceased person's physical remains could be a particularly stark and painful reminder of absence. Yet, Brian's recollections of the sense of finality evoked by the coffin disappearing behind the curtains at the crematorium at his aunt's funeral, allowed room for the possibility of her continuing presence:

"It's not really the last goodbye but it feels like it – it's the last time you're ever gonna see them. I mean I didn't even see her – we didn't look inside the coffin but I knew my grandma was there and it was gutting – it really was gutting when that – that was the hardest bit...when they start the rollers and the coffin goes and the curtains go and I think that's it – that's the final moment and that's the hardest bit..."

The addition of some personal touches could transform the coffin from a symbol of absence to a celebration of unique presence. Thus, Fiona conveyed how the coffin evoked her father's presence at his own funeral in a way that provided some light relief:

" 'cos dad used to do line dancing and we decided that dad would have thought it quite fitting and quite funny if we had his stetson hat and holster on top of the coffin. So we had a nice display of flowers and also his hat and his line dancing stuff as well. So that was quite nice 'cos that was very dad and sort of put a bit of humour into it"

For Lynne, the addition of personal touches to her mother's coffin reflected a more painful symbol of presence, one that evoked abandonment:

"...but I just thought no she must feel very lonely down there somehow - 'cos she was very – absolutely potty about her dog so we put the photograph of her present dog... in the coffin with her for company"

The music

The role of music in funerals reflects its power to invoke memory and emotion in a deeply moving way. Roy conveyed how particular music can be experienced as having therapeutic value, easing the sense of loss through providing emotional release. In relation to his father's funeral such value was linked to his father having been a musician. Since Roy too was a musician, he had been entrusted with choosing the funeral music, his choice being guided by a desire to provide an outlet for the emotional expression of grief:

"... 'Cos mum asked me if I'd chose the music because I'm a musician and I suppose she thought well Roy would know what dad – or what should be played. So I picked the ones that would evoke emotion – and it certainly did. We were all blubbing when we were in there. As soon as you heard the music coming through. Moonlight Serenade and Eva Cassidy definitely. Very powerful they were"

Roy's reflections, along with those of others, conveyed how the invoking of emotion was linked to associating loved ones with particular pieces of music. Both Diane and Patrick, in reflecting on their choice of music for their parents' funerals, drew

attention to the way its intimate association with the deceased person took priority over more conventional considerations:

“...and you know our choice of music was really strange for a funeral. I’ve never heard Onward Christian Soldiers sung at a funeral before – but as the minister explained we’re having this for a particular reason and that’s because when the three children were small this was what she used to sing to them to get them to sleep. And when we were choosing music I said we must have Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata because that was her favourite – she used to play it to me”. (Diane)

“Yeah we chose the songs ...that was cool. One of them was Kumbaya which is like the scout’s song um and it sounds really cheesy but - when my eldest brother was about 10 or so my dad found a scout troop and he helped at the scout troop and became a leader of the scout troop and then my dad became a district commissioner of the whole area...”(Patrick)

Eulogies

The role of the eulogy reflects the power of words to evoke presence and absence. Thus Pat drew on her deceased aunt’s own words taken from some letters she had once written:

I wanted to say something at the service ‘cos I’d found in the days after Evelyn died I’d managed to find letters of reference that she had been written in the 1920’s and 30’s that she would take to employers and they described her beautifully. So I was able to read some of those out and say my piece about her – how she was very unique and with some fantastic qualities.

Janet’s words emerged from her sense of identification with her friend to convey her sense of outrage at the unfairness of his death:

“ It was just like he’s such a good person and it’s not fair that he’s not here today and it was just the fact that he’d never reached his 18th birthday and it didn’t seem fair – there’s no justice in the fact that he didn’t get to his 18th – and all the things he wasn’t going to get to do – that was just what was going through my head”.

Diane drew attention to the therapeutic value of the eulogy, particularly the more private experience of preparing it:

“I think it’s quite therapeutic actually to sit down and think about the points in somebody’s life and try and pull them together. So you’re like typing away and sobbing at the same time. ‘Cos it’s the memories of the person really that kind of bring this to the fore...”.

Conclusion

Keeping alive memories of dead loved ones involves managing the paradox of their simultaneous absence and presence. In Diane’s words, *“... you can’t think about the good things without remembering that they’ve gone.... It’s joy and sadness mixed together”.* These recollections of bereaved individuals have conveyed how, in the

immediate aftermath of a death, particular aspects of the funeral may evoke and provide support for this dimension of grief. This was particularly apparent in those personal touches that, in so poignantly bringing home the uniqueness of what had been lost, celebrated and validated the person's life.

References:

Valentine, C. (2008) *Bereavement Narratives: continuing bonds in the 21st Century*. London, New York, Routledge.