

IN TIMES OF PAIN: RITUALS, PRAYERS AND POEMS

(To be adapted to fit personal circumstances)

RITUALS FOR GRIEVING

Rituals are symbolic actions which give expression to emotion, thought, meaning, and values. In times of pain, rituals help us to focus upon things such as grieving, remembering, honouring, acknowledging the need to let go, and to look toward hope.

Suggested Ritual Elements

Time: it is important to allow time for the physical act to be completed, with appropriate words, or with silence.

Music: There is no correct type of music- it should be chosen because it is meaningful to those present. It can be played before and after a ceremony, or perhaps during a pause for reflection during the ceremony.

Candles: light a candle or candles at significant moments in the ceremony. Candles may also be lit before the ceremony begins, to provide a welcome. Leaving a candle burning safely may help to provide a “presence” beyond the gathering. If the ceremony is designed to mark the completion of an event or a relationship, a candle may be blown out or doused in water as a symbol of this.

Flowers: Flowers can be used to remember and honour. Holding a flower during the ceremony may be a reminder of the possibility of new life emerging. Placing a flower at a focal point (eg on a coffin) can be a tangible expression of honouring and letting go. Alternatively, flowers may be set afloat on water. In choosing flowers, consider their symbolic value and connection to the situation.

Water: Performing the ceremony near water may provide important symbolism. Choose the body of water according to need. For example, the wildness of the sea can be helpful for cleansing, or for expression of anger; still water can offer peace. In grieving a lost opportunity (eg inability to have children) or a loss which needs cleansing or renewal, a ritual of washing in scented water (foot-washing, hand-washing, etc) by companions may be helpful.

Fire: Fire can be used for purging or cleansing. A symbolic object, or a piece of paper on which feelings have been expressed, may be burnt and the ashes scattered. Alternatively, the flame from a candle can express hope- light in the darkness. Incense may be burnt for visible smoke and/or fragrance: symbolic of prayers or aspirations.

Oil: this may be used for anointing, symbolic of healing, or burnt as a fragrance.

Paper: can be used for writing down feelings, eg in a letter, a poem, a few simple words. This can be placed at a focal point (eg on a coffin), or burnt, depending on the need. Appropriate origami objects may be made. For example, feelings may be written down, the paper folded in a boat shape and set afloat. For children, this may be an especially helpful action.

Movement: it can be helpful to use the space of the gathering to express emotional movement. For example, the main part of a ceremony may take place well within a room or building, but in cases where there is an emphasis on letting go and moving on, final words or action may take place nearer to a door that has been opened.

Simple Food and Drink: after the ceremony, sharing these symbolises our life together, and gives comfort to body and spirit.

Robyn Cadwallader

Dressing the Closed Coffin

A Ritual that may be part of a funeral service.

At an appropriate time early in the service family members or chosen friends perform this ritual act while suitable reflective music is played. This meditative action symbolises the beauty and preciousness of the loved one and a continuance of life and presence even after death. It creates an experience that carries the opportunity to feel grief, gratitude and some healing for those present at the farewell ceremony.

Firstly, two or three people sensitively cover the coffin with chosen foliage. I have seen this done on one occasion with peppercorn branches and at another time with almond blossom branches. Then other persons weave in flowers that had significance for the departed loved one. With the peppercorn foliage the family chose to use pink and white geraniums and white daisies since they carried a special significance. Something that symbolises the significance of the person's life may be added.

When the ritual dressing is completed, the funeral ceremony continues.

Sister Angela Moloney

PRAYERS and POEMS

Healing

Together let us remember simple healing things:

We remember
the warmth of the sun on our skin after winter
a hot bath when we're cold and tired
drinking cool water when we're thirsty
moving from heat into green shade
the companionship of music
and the balm of silence.

We remember our own times of healing
and bring them to this time together.

We remember:
being welcomed into a house with love
the feel of clean clothes and clean sheets
the joy of flowers and colours and scents
the good taste of food when we're hungry
moments of quiet calm in the evening
the blessing of sleep when we're tired.

We remember our own times of healing
and bring them to this time together. (pause)

We rejoice in these good things
in our present time of trouble,
and we call on the strength they gave us.

Jenny Wightman

The Rights of Grief.

I claim the time and space
to mourn your loss
I claim the right to raise
my voice in anguished cries
I claim the painful void you've
left behind- and honour it.

I claim memories of the private times

we shared- and treasure them.
I claim memory of your forgiveness
though now your voice is stilled.
I claim our secret joys and
revel in remembering.

I claim and own my anger
that you have gone from me.
I claim and own my dark despair
that you have gone from me.
I claim the time to grow toward
acceptance of my loss.

Eda Hamilton

How to Help

What can I do to help? you ask.
I say bring a casserole
write me a card
send me a letter
let me talk to you about my loss.

What can I do to help? you ask.
I say listen to my outpourings
encourage me to cry
don't tell me that time will heal
and continue to be my friend.

What can I do to help? you ask.
I say visit me often
let me show you photos
drink tea with me
accept my need to play the same tune.

What can I do to help? you ask.
I say your being with me helps
your empathy is supportive
your laughter is affirming
your friendship eases my burden.

Thank you for your help.

Eda Hamilton

Prayer at the Bedside of Someone Unconscious.

We come to your bedside, [name],
grieving for your suffering, feeling our helplessness,
fearing the future.

We are here to gather up our strengths, for you, for each other,
to help us endure together this dark time.

We remember the good you have given us,
the rich human moments we have shared.

[Pause, for people to recollect and perhaps speak their thoughts]

We hope that life will return to you in its fullness,
but we know also that death may be near.
In this time of uncertainty and grief,
we share with you our strength.

[Perhaps each person might place a hand on the bed].

Even when we leave, we will support each other
and hold you
in this circle of caring love.

Jenny Wightman.

Anniversary of a Death.

A year after [name]'s death, we have lived through
the first shock of grief;
but some of us will grieve until we die.

We are here because [name] lives in our hearts and minds.
We remember [him/her] at unexpected times
and when we recall all that [she/he] meant to us
[she/he] still touches our daily lives.

Our lives move on, new patterns form
but we carry with us
our memories and our loss.

Some of us look to the night sky
and feel our smallness.
Some of us turn to beliefs

which give comfort.
Together we recognise as solemn truth
that all life in this world meets with death.

But when someone loves and is loved,
that person has shaped the lives
and remains in the minds
of those close to them.

We meet today to remember the unique value of [name].
We meet today for the comfort of sharing our grief.
We meet today to rejoice that [name] lived and enriched our lives.

Jenny Wightman

For Someone Who Has Taken Their Life.

Now that you have gone
how do I reconcile myself
to loss of you, knowing
that it was your choice to leave?

I search through the richness
of your life and try to find
the moment in time when
you made up your mind to go.

Your note did not help. What didn't you tell me,
not write, and maybe I
could have tried to understand.

I search through the
anguished moments when
you wrestled with the lure of dying.

You must have known
the sorrow you would cause.
I know that blame is useless:
your own pain took over.

I have to think that
life got too hard,
you had no other way.
Finally, you're at peace.

Eda Hamilton.

Grieving at the birth of a stillborn child.

We are here to join our sorrow with your grief.

We understand a little of your recent journey:
the hope in your hearts when you learnt
of the promise of birth.

We know the feelings of anticipation which the child brings
as she/he grows in the womb:

the intimacy with you [*name*] as mother,
as she/he took shape and life within your body;
[*some of the following lines may be included or not as appropriate*]
the pride you [*name*] felt at coming fatherhood,
the changes from loving couple to prospective family,
the excitement of meeting with a new brother or sister,
the wonder of life continuing in a new grandchild,
the hope of welcoming a new life among you.

We acknowledge the dreams and imaginings
you held for this precious one,
and the energy, effort, perseverance and mutual support
you gave to her/his birthing.
But your expectations and joy at the prospect of new life
have not been fulfilled.

We weep with you who saw [see] a still, lifeless body.
We know how you longed to see her/him breathe, cry, suckle,
gaze at you and respond to your loving wonder.

We share your bewilderment at your unexpected loss.
We, too, ask the question, "Why?" "To what purpose?"
And know that we do not have answers.

We witness death in the natural world,
in the seasons, in plants and animals.
We know that death is a part of life's ongoing cycle.
But your loss tears at our hearts.

We commend this child, fruit of your love,
into the safekeeping of the Source of life and love,
that Source which alone knows
whether there is meaning and purpose in this child's death.

As you farewell this child
who died before separate life began

we wish you:

- gentleness with yourselves
- freedom from guilt and recrimination
- gradual healing, although this loss seems unbearable
- the seeds of hope for future life and living
- and confidence that life seeks to survive and live abundantly.

Dawn Colsey

Remembering Robyn

(a poem written in memory of a friend)

I walk our usual route
and miss you.
Summer strews her debris
in the park: swathes, straps
and shards of bark. Fallen gum leaves
die in delicate colours.

I do not come upon you
at the corner, short of breath,
forcing yourself on, quoting your doctor's harsh hope,
"Use it or lose it".

Both glad to pause,
our eyes would meet,
full of reality. We exchanged our truths.

I wish you were here,
sense your presence,
your prayer for me and all who are left.

And yet I need not grieve,
for you are in a blissful state,
your pain held in the Cross,
your release his open tomb.
I trust you rest in blessing,
far more refreshed
than on this parched earth,
here,
where you lost your life
for gain.

Dawn Colsey.

Litany for a Vulnerable God in a Suffering World.

We pray for those who suffer hunger, hardship or disease:
Suffering God, be with them.

We pray for those driven from their homes by violence or famine:
Homeless God, be with them..

We pray for those who cannot protect their children or give them education:
Mother and Father God, be with them.

We pray for those who must obey tyrants hungry for power:
God who knows fear, be with them.

We pray for those in prison, shut away from life's riches:
Heartbroken God, be with them.

We pray for those who kill or torture others:
God who knows death, be with them.

We pray for victims of injustice, and the perpetrators:
Despised God, be with them.

We pray for those who watch others die, whether they are enemies or friends:
Compassionate God, be with them.

We pray for those who fear they will be killed or violated:
Vulnerable God, be with them.

We pray for all suffering animals:
Mother of all living creatures, be with them

We pray for the beautiful planet itself, when its balance is destroyed:
Creator God, coax all back to your order.

Jenny Wightman

*These suggestions come from the **Sophia Liturgy Group**, and where appropriate, we would ask you to acknowledge this. September 2004 www.sophia.org.au*