

Why Meaningful Funerals are Vital After Traumatic Death

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

As we as a nation naturally struggle to comprehend the traumatic, violent deaths of innocent children and adults in Newtown, Connecticut, and as we hear about the funerals of each unique, precious person killed in the massacre, let's pause to consider the importance of ceremony. As I often say, when words are inadequate, start with ceremony. This is not a time to "talk at" these devastated families. Rather, it is a time to "be with" and support them and their community through the power of meaningful funeral experiences.

Understandably, traumatized mourners often don't know where to start after the sudden, unexpected, calamitous death of someone they love. That is why we have funerals, which are not about "closure" but instead about the beginning of the need to mourn. Mourning is the expression of the grief we feel on the inside, and a personalized, meaningful funeral gives us a way to mourn in solidarity with others. Funerals help all of us know what to do when we don't know what to do.

The whys of meaningful funerals

The funeral ritual is a public, symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the death of someone loved. Rich in history and rife with symbolism, the funeral ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the person who died, encourages the expression of grief in a way consistent with the culture's values, provides support to mourners, allows for the embracing of faith and beliefs about life and death, and offers continuity and hope for the living.

I have discovered that a helpful way to teach about the functions of authentic funeral ceremonies is to frame them up in the context of what I refer to as the "reconciliation needs of mourning." The reconciliation needs of mourning are the six needs that I believe to be the most central to healing in grief. In other words, bereaved people who have these needs met, through their own grief work and through the love and compassion of those around them, are most often able to reconcile their grief and go on to find continued meaning in life and living.

How the funeral experience helps meet the six reconciliation needs of mourning

Mourning Need #1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.

When someone loved dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and the finality of the death if we are to move forward with our grief. Typically, we embrace this reality in two phases. First we acknowledge the death with our minds; we are told that someone we love has died and, intellectually at least, we understand the fact of the death. Over the course of the following days and weeks, and with the gentle understanding of those around us, we begin to acknowledge the reality of the death in our hearts.

Meaningful funeral experiences can serve as wonderful points of departure for "head understanding" of the death. Cognitively, funerals teach us that someone we loved is now dead, even though up until the funeral we may have denied this fact. When we contact the funeral home, set a time for the service, plan the ceremony, view the body, perhaps even choose clothing and jewelry for the body, we cannot avoid acknowledging that the person has died. When we see the casket being lowered into the ground or create elements of ceremony for the disposition of cremated remains, we are witness to death's finality.

Of course, in cases of violent, untimely death, mourners are initially in shock. Shock, numbness, and disbelief are nature's way of protecting us from realities that are too terrible to understand. Also, traumatized mourners often find themselves replaying and reconsidering over and over the circumstances of the death. This is both normal and necessary. Such replay helps them begin to acknowledge the reality of the death and integrate it into their lives. It's as if their minds need to devote time and energy to comprehending the circumstances of the death before they can move on to confronting the reality that someone they love has died and will never be present to them again. Yet supported by the structure of the funeral and in the company of others who love them, even families still in shock are helped to begin to confront this first critical need of mourning.

Mourning Need #2. Move toward the pain of the loss.

As our acknowledgment of the death progresses from what I call "head understanding" to "heart understanding," we begin to embrace the pain of the loss—another need that mourners must have met if they are to heal. Healthy grief means expressing our painful thoughts and feelings, and healthy funeral experiences allow us to do just that.

People tend to cry, even sob and wail, at funerals because funerals force us to concentrate on the fact of the death and our feelings, often excruciatingly painful, about that death. For at least an hour or two—longer for mourners who plan the ceremony or attend the visitation—those attending the funeral are not able to intellectualize or distance themselves from the pain of their grief. To their credit, funerals also provide us with an accepted venue for our painful feelings. They are perhaps the only time and place, in fact, during which we as a society condone such openly outward expression of our sadness.

Not only are Newtown's families embracing their pain in the context of the private funeral ceremonies for those who died, many of us across the country and around the world have attended ceremonies in honor of the victims. We have lit candles and said prayers at our places of worship. These ceremonies give us a time and a place to feel and express our pain.

Mourning Need #3. Remember the person who died.

To heal in grief, we must shift our relationship with the person who died from one of physical presence to one of memory. The funeral experience encourages us to begin this shift, for it provides a dedicated time for us to think about the moments we shared with the person who died. Like no other time before or after the death, the funeral invites us to focus on our past relationship with that one, single person and to share those memories with others.

At traditional funerals, the eulogy attempts to highlight the major events in the life of the person who died and the characteristics that he or she most prominently displayed. This is helpful to mourners, for it tends to prompt more intimate, individualized memories. Later, after the ceremony itself, many mourners will informally share memories of the person who died. This, too, is meaningful. Throughout our grief journeys, the more we are able "tell the story"—of the death itself, of our memories of the person who died—the more likely we will be to reconcile our grief. Moreover, the sharing of memories at the funeral affirms the worth we have placed on the person who died, legitimizing our pain. Often, too, the memories others choose to share with us at the funeral are memories that we have not heard before. This teaches us about the dead person's life apart from ours and allows us glimpses into that life that we may cherish forever.

For the mourners of Newtown, sharing memories of those precious children and educators, both during the funerals and in the months and years to come, will help them not only survive but find meaning in the lives lived, however tragically brief many of them were.

Mourning Need #4. Develop a new self-identity.

Another primary reconciliation need of mourning is the development of a new self-identity. We are all social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Alan Wolfelt, but a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity as defined in those ways changes.

When someone with whom we have a family relationship dies, our self-identities naturally shift, and the funeral experience helps us begin this difficult process. If you are a parent of a child and that child dies, the funeral marks the beginning of your life as a parent and family with one fewer living children—a family with someone “missing.” Others attending the funeral are in effect saying, “We acknowledge your changed identity and we want you to know we still care about you.” On the other hand, in situations where there is no funeral, the social group does not know how to relate to the person whose identity has changed and often that person is socially abandoned. In addition, having supportive friends and family around us at the time of the funeral helps us realize we literally still exist. This self-identity issue is illustrated by a comment the bereaved often make: “When he died, I felt like a part of me died, too.”

Mourning Need #5. Search for meaning.

When someone loved dies, we naturally question the meaning of life and death. Why did this person die? Why now? Why this way? Why does it have to hurt so much? What happens after death? To heal in grief, we must explore these types of questions if we are to become reconciled to our grief. In fact, we must first ask these “why” questions to decide why we should go on living before we can ask ourselves how we will go on living. This does not mean we must find definitive answers, only that we need the opportunity to think (and feel) things through.

The funeral experience provides us with such an opportunity. For those who adhere to a specific religious faith, the meaningful funeral will reinforce that faith and provide comfort. Alternatively, it may prompt us to question our faith, which too can be an enriching process. Whether you agree or disagree with the belief system upheld by a particular funeral service may not matter; what may matter more is that you have held up your heart to that belief system and struggled with the gap.

Of course, all of us, and most certainly the close friends and family members of those killed in Newtown, Connecticut, are struggling with the “why” of these senseless deaths. Sudden, violent death never makes sense, especially when the lives of innocent children have been taken, yet it is normal and necessary nonetheless for us to ask why. The funeral marks the beginning of our search for meaning.

On a more fundamental level, the funeral reinforces one central fact of our existence: we will die. Like living, dying is a natural and unavoidable process. (We North Americans tend not to acknowledge this.) Thus the funeral helps us search for meaning in the life and death of the person who died as well as in our own lives and impending deaths. Each funeral we attend serves as a sort of dress rehearsal for our own.

Funerals are a way in which we as individuals and as a community convey our beliefs and values about life and death. The very fact of a funeral demonstrates that death is important to us. For the living to go on living as fully and as healthily as possible, this is as it should be.

Mourning Need #6. Receive ongoing support from others.

As we have said, funerals are a public means of expressing our beliefs and feelings about the death of someone loved. In fact, funerals are the public venue for offering support to others and being supported in grief, both at the time of the funeral and into the future. Funerals make a social statement that says, “Come support me.” Whether they realize it or not, those who choose not to have a funeral are saying, “Don’t come support me.”

If there was ever a time and place to activate support for families and a community it is right now in Newtown, Connecticut. Thankfully, we are witnessing the families in this community allowing us to wrap our loving arms around them in their early, overwhelming grief. This public affirmation value of funerals cannot be overemphasized.

Funerals let us physically demonstrate our support, too. Sadly, ours is not a demonstrative society, but at funerals we are “allowed” to embrace, to touch, to comfort. Again, words are inadequate so we

nonverbally demonstrate our support. This physical show of support is one of the most important healing aspects of meaningful funeral ceremonies.

Another one is the helping relationships that are established at funerals. Friends often seek out ways in which they can help the primary mourners: May I bring the flowers back to the house? Would you like someone to watch little Tyler for a few afternoons this week? I'd like to make a few meals for your family. When might be a good time to bring them over? Friends helping friends and strengthened relationships among the living are invaluable funeral offshoots.

Finally, and most simply, funerals serve as the central gathering place for mourners. When we care about someone who died or his family members, we attend the funeral if at all possible. Our physical presence is our most important show of support for the living. By attending the funeral we let everyone else there know that they are not alone in their grief.

As Helen Keller reminded us, "The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door." Meaningful funerals are doorways to healing for those who mourn. This is especially true when death is sudden, unexpected, and calamitous. As you keep the families of Newtown, Connecticut, in your thoughts and prayers, also keep in mind the value of the funeral and other ceremonies that honor and remember those who died in the tragedy. Thank you for taking a few minutes to read this article and educate yourself about this important topic.

About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He believes that meaningful funeral experiences help families and friends support one another, embrace their feelings, and embark on the journey to healing and transcendence. Recipient of the Association of Death Education and Counseling's Death Educator Award, Dr. Wolfelt is Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty of the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. He is also the author of many bestselling books, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner's Book of Hope* and *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies*, available at www.centerforloss.com. Also visit www.meaningfulfunerals.com to learn more about the importance of funerals.