



## Honoring Customs and Ceremonies

**T**here once lived a Chinese man whose uncle had just died. The man asked his American employer for the day off to attend the funeral. “My family will leave rice at my uncle’s grave side so that he will have plenty to eat where he has gone,” the Chinese gentleman explained.

“Yes, you may go to the funeral,” his employer grudgingly replied. Then giving voice to his disgruntlement at the workweek’s interruption added, “When exactly do you expect your uncle to eat the rice?”

The employee turned to hide the smile creeping across his face and spoke softly, “About the same time your aunt who died last week will smell the flowers you left on her grave.”



**T**his story illustrates several important points we all need to remember. First, there are a wide variety of customs and ceremonies surrounding death. While we may not understand those that are different from our own, one set of practices is not inherently better or worse than any other. Second, it is easy to say or do something that may offend others if we are not sensitive to and respectful of their beliefs and traditions. Therefore, we should make every effort to honor the customs and ceremonies of both the person who has died and those who are grieving her or his death.

### **DIVERSITY AND CULTURE**

We are not always as aware of the differences within our own communities as we are of those between cultures. They do exist, however, and it is just as important to be sensitive to them as to the

dramatic differences we might find in situations like our opening story. Diversity today is evident by the fact that it is difficult to even define or describe a “traditional” or “typical” funeral. While funerals generally include some type of service and usually have the body of the deceased present, ceremonies and customs are changing for many reasons including:

- Family members may contact several funeral homes to compare prices and consider different types of funeral arrangements.
- More people are choosing cremation or earth burial without any type of funeral service.
- Many individuals are ignoring tradition and developing their own personal type of funeral services which are more meaningful to them.
- With a significant portion of our population not



maintaining church membership, the number of traditional religious rituals is declining.

- We are becoming a multicultural society. Each culture has its own way of mourning and conducting funeral ceremonies. As people from different cultures continue to come to our country, they are introducing new customs and ceremonies.

Today's diversity has both positive and potentially negative outcomes. On the positive side, variety adds to our society's cultural richness. On the negative side, differing customs may lead to insensitivity and misunderstandings with others. Misunderstandings are most likely to occur when we expect everyone to grieve in the same manner. Because of our lack of exposure to differing customs and ceremonies, we may believe that our own culture is superior to others. The first step in overcoming this prejudicial belief, called *ethnocentrism*, is to develop an understanding of grief and the ways a person's culture influences how grief is expressed.



### **BEREAVEMENT AND CULTURE**

Grief is an emotion. As with any emotion, no two people react exactly the same way to it. There are patterns, however. Ceremonies and customs associated with death generally reflect the basic philosophy of life shared by a group of people. The ways individuals carry them out are determined by the group's religious and cultural beliefs and traditions. In addition, the unique personality of each individual also plays a role in shaping death-related rituals. The following list provides just a few examples of the infinite number of ceremonies and customs humans may perform during bereavement:

- Crying is common among Americans.
- Japanese mourners rarely display their heartbreak since they do not want to burden others with their sorrow.
- Most Protestants and Catholics use embalming and view the body. Many believe viewing the body clearly brings home the reality of death.
- Most Jews do not embalm or view the body. They believe "making-up" the body for viewing is an attempt to prolong the idea that the person is with us.
- Among believers, religious traditions and references to a higher being are dominant features of funerals.
- Secular ceremonies may focus on celebrating the deceased's life and highlight the personal reflections of family and friends.
- Jewish people may rend or tear their clothes and mourning continues until they uncover the grave marker on the first anniversary of the death.
- In the past, some native Americans would gash themselves with knives or cut off a finger when a loved one died. Today, some simply complain they suffer pains in the limbs and joints that formerly they would have cut.

### **SHOWING RESPECT AND HONOR**

There are several questions you can ask if you want to understand a particular group's rituals and funeral traditions. Try asking the individual you are talking with questions such as the following:

- Are there specific things families in your culture do when someone is dying? This might include caring for the dying at home, having a member of the clergy present, or entrusting care to outsiders.
- What specific rituals do you use to recognize a death?
- What traditions surround disposal of the body?
- What do you believe happens after death?
- What are your feelings about mourning after death?

- What, if any, social stigmas are associated with certain types of death?
- How important a transition do you consider death?

When a person dies, no one can expect you to intuitively know these things about the deceased person's culture. However, it is reasonable to assume that you will be sensitive and try to find answers to them. Don't be embarrassed or afraid to ask questions. Rather than showing ignorance, asking thoughtful questions demonstrates your desire to respect and honor both the person who died and her or his immediate survivors.

If we find that the ceremonies and customs differ from our own, it is important to remember that their ultimate purpose is quite similar. Almost universally, people treat the body with reverence for what it was—a special person—rather than what it is—a dead body. There are many ways to grieve while still being respectful to the deceased.

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