

## **Culture and traditions of grief**

Over the past few years of Grief recovery ministry, the subject during travel around the world of how “other cultures” or religions observe and grieve death has been discussed.

The summary is the observations that the right way to observe a death is as varied at the cultures of mankind. When we think that the memorial service or the burial or interment has missed the mark for the emotional satisfaction of each individual in the circle of family and friends – that is likely very true. Length of an acceptable grief period, dress, food served when and where as well as honors that are displayed are based on traditions, religion, and geographic location. No culture has a lock on who the mourn a death of a love on. We seem to do the best we can with social aspects that are open to us.

### **The American Indian**

There were very specific time and honored traditions of the American Indian tribes. For those that lived on the East coast, at the time of death, a platform was built upon which the body was placed. Having four posts to the platform, those that grieved came to a pole and cried, mourned and expressed their grief for a week. In turn, each week the family moved to the next pole. When all four of the poles had been the scene of grief, about a month had passed. By then, the body would have been transformed into remains or bones which would be lovingly wrapped and presented to the senior female of the family. She had the honor of carrying the bones whenever the tribe moved.

When the Indians of Florida and the Carolinas were moved across the nation to Oklahoma for relocation, many of the women died from drowning as they crossed the river and streams. The sacred honor of carrying the bones was carried into their own death.

Other tribe built burial mounds where the bones of the ancestors were buried which created sacred locations of honor and worship.

### **Australia aborigines**

The tradition of the aborigines is the extreme opposite of the American Indian. When a loved one died, their name or any reference to them was forbidden. The grieving loved ones were to act as though the person never existed. Simply ignoring their memory by never referring to them or speaking their name.

To speak the name of my beloved is like honey on my lips, Sweet memories and drink in tiny sips.

In the early 1900s, burials of our American Great grandparents were from or in home instead of using professional services as we do today. It was in 1954 that Life magazine renamed the parlor (which had been used primarily as the room where the casket was placed for several days prior to burial at the church cemetery) renamed the parlor to the Living room. They declared that the room should be used to live in and not as a location that caskets of old were displayed.

As we reflect on that thought, the professional services are provided by Funeral Homes. That is really a misnamed facility as it is really a funeral facility. The transition was from the home parlor to the funeral parlor (outside of the residence) and then was renamed later to funeral homes.

For Great-grandparents, the rules were very specific. Men and women wore black, and the front door had a wreath which was wrapped in black material. All were public signs that for one year, the family in the house and those dressed in that special way were in mourning and should be treated gently and with respect.

Today very few companies offer bereavement leaves. The expectation is the griever should be back at work in 3-4 days after the funeral. Our fast moving economic times have dismissed the needed observation of a period of grief and pushed as an accepted period of grieving to fall within a 5-day work week.

Traditional Hasidic Jews follow the custom of 24-hour burial followed by a one-week seclusion by the widow. During that week, the widow stays in a dark room without any contact other than meals being brought in and possibly messages whispered that visitors have come by to express their condolences. The widow is not encouraged to dress, shower, or interact. It is a time of total mourning. A time to moan, express anguish without judgment or boundaries. The community honors the widows time to totally be immersed in grief.

Buddhists are directed by their monk about time and date of cremation. Dress in white and then black are observed with meal preparation by the family. 40 days of mourning with weekly visits to the temple for prayer are required as part of the observation of the death and family mourning. If the family can provide, a small precious stone is placed into the mouth of the deceased prior to cremation which is believed to ensure that when their soul returns to earth, they will be wealthier than in this life.

Even in the US we see very diverse observations of traditions. If you like, in the deep south food is delivered to the home of the deceased within hours after the death has occurred. In the north, the food is presented after the service as a meal for family and out-of-town guests. This usually takes place in the basement of the church.

Cremation of body interments take yet other versions of services and memorials.