

Ancient and Modern Ritual: A Creative Approach to Working with Grief, Loss, and Change

By Samantha Black - Posted on May 25, 2023

Sometimes, the prevailing model of talk therapy doesn't work. What do we do when a loss is so deep that it defies verbal expression? There is evidence that the brain stores trauma in areas that bypass speech,¹ and anyone who's experienced a deep shock can attest to this. Creative therapies expand our options beyond words by inviting expression from the whole spirit-mind-body and its array of senses. Creative therapies are evidence-based healing methods based in the expressive arts and include ritual therapy, drama therapy, visual arts, dance, narrative, and music therapies. In this article, I will introduce ritual therapy and show how and why it is effective as a treatment for grief. I will offer some ways anyone can begin to practice ritual to ease bereavement, I'll talk about culturally specific models of grief work, and will include resources for professional counselors who might want to incorporate this therapeutic intervention.

Across cultures, a widely accepted definition of successful grieving is acknowledgment of loss leading to adaptive coping. Carefully tended grief rituals provide a safe way to encourage adaptive coping.² Clinically proven benefits of grief ritual include providing structure and comfort of the expected, which can increase feelings of trust in self and others; increasing feelings of effective coping through repetitive actions; encouraging self-acceptance and compassion; personalizing the grief process; allowing room for emotional expression; establishing feelings of belonging; offering social support; moving towards integration; and providing an opportunity to continue or relinquish bonds with the deceased.³

So, how exactly does a grief ritual heal? Ritual is a tool for controlled transformation, and includes three main processes: disruption, transformation, and re-patterning (before, during, and after).⁴ *Disruption* happens when our reality is knocked apart by loss, and again, when we leave behind everyday reality to enter ritual space. *Transformation* happens when we become willing to

rearrange our relationship to whom or what we have lost. We *re-pattern* as we make sense of the ritual experience and return to everyday consciousness.

Spontaneous and planned ritual can both create positive transformation. Familiarity with ritual structure can help when planning a ritual event. Ritual structure researchers, most recently Sas & Coman,⁵ identify five main phases in a therapeutic grief ritual: structure, purpose, sacred symbolism, liminality, and closure/integration. Cole's Five Healing Principles⁶ for Ritual are similar: centering, assessment, gathering energy, identifying symbols, and closure.

Careful choices about timing and location add substance to ritual. For example, healing ritual done on a death anniversary can transform the acute grief often felt at such nodes. Doing ritual in a location that is meaningful to one's ancestors can help assuage feelings of ancestral loss and restore feelings of connection to place and lineage.

When planning a ritual, some questions to start with might be: *What is the desired transformation? Where will this event take place, and why? What is needed to prepare? How will safety be ensured?*

There are three basic types of grief ritual: honoring, letting go, and self-transformation.⁷ *Honoring* is the ritual focus when a person wants to generate positive feelings and thoughts around the deceased. *Letting go* becomes the focus when the bereaved needs assistance to let go of the deceased. *Self-transformation* is the focus when the main task is to allow newness to emerge after a loss. Self-transformation tends to be the most complex ritual environment because it blends honoring and letting go of the past with hopes for the future.⁸

As the structure and purpose of the ritual unfold, an object is chosen or created to symbolize the loss. The participant will transfer feelings about the loss onto the object, which brings intangible feelings into the physical realm. We do this almost automatically when we handle a loved one's ashes and personal effects. To ensure relevance and authenticity, the symbolic object must be identified and chosen by the participant, and not by a therapist, ritualist, friend or family member. The act of selecting a symbolic object intended for ritual use imbues that object with transformational power. Symbolic objects can be retained after the ritual to become power objects. A power object is an item conferred with concentrated meaning during a significant event; its owner decides how and when to use it.

There are two main types of symbolic objects used in grief ritual: linking/transitional objects and melancholy objects.⁹ *Linking/transitional objects* are

used to manage separation anxiety; the classic example is a security blanket. Ashes are often used as a transitional object. Religious iconography can also be used. Artwork and shrines made in honor of the deceased are also common transitional objects, as are memorial tattoos. Some cultures have elevated memorial tattoos to a socio-spiritual art form; in the South Pacific, for example, memorial tattoos are applied by highly trained healers in a ritual setting and contain symbols that invoke the strengths received from one's ancestors.¹⁰

Melancholy objects undergo a transformation from everyday object to remembered object. Anything cherished by the deceased can be a melancholy object: a coffee cup they used daily, a special photograph, or a piece of their clothing. Melancholy objects can be lovingly held, released, or destroyed. People commonly make jewelry, tattoos, and other artwork out of a loved one's ashes and scattering or ensconcing ashes is a widely accepted grief ritual. Use of a melancholy objects encourage acceptance of loss, which allows new attachments and new meaning to emerge.

From the Jungian point of view, a person is ready to engage in a transformative process when symbols arise spontaneously in the imagination. Imaginal projections of the unconscious indicate that some organized mental-emotional movement has returned after the "fight, flight or freeze" stage of a shock.¹¹ Symbolic imagery arises naturally in the imagination through dreams, reverie, art-making and finds expression as thoughts, external synchronicities, auditory, kinesthetic, or visual perceptions. The symbolic object makes the loss physically tangible, and acknowledges the unseen, and this can soothe the facet of grief that deals with the invisible: *Where did they go? Why can't I touch them anymore? Where did they disappear to?*

Choosing a symbolic object involves creative vision, and people might need support in order to access their creative capacity. Many cultures have traditional ways to alter consciousness in order to invite visionary and other expanded perceptions,¹² such as ritual fasting, ingestion of special herbs and plants, dancing and meditation, lengthy wakes or ritual clothing; the conventional Western all-black attire of mourning can signal a shift in consciousness. Carl Jung developed a creative technique called Active Imagination, specifically used to conjure symbolic imagery from the unconscious. One technique used in Active Imagination is to keep a dream journal with images and feelings from our dreams. People who keep a dream journal find that they are better able to recall dreams and to use their dreams to enhance their everyday lives, especially in creative areas.¹³ It is common for a deceased loved one to appear in dreams,

daydreams, or visions and so a bereaved person might choose to keep a dream journal to assist in the selection of their ritual object.

Rituals have power because they are liminal.¹⁴ The essence of liminality is somewhat hard to grasp because it is not an everyday experience. The word liminality comes from the Latin for “threshold,” and describes an encounter with the unconscious or the unknown. We feel the liminal when babies are born, when people die, when crisis strikes, or when we experience unearthly bliss—in other words, liminality tells us that something outside of the ordinary is happening. Touching on the liminal can feel like touching on the sacred, and like any threshold experience, this allows us to receive new insights and feelings, and to arrive at new experiences. Ritual therapy is designed to evoke liminality, and this can be useful in healing grief, because loss – especially major loss – is itself a liminal experience. Wounds that were formed at a liminal, unconscious or archetypal level must also be healed at that level. In psychological treatment, liminality means we have crossed the irreversible threshold where a treatment begins to have effect, suggesting that healing involves a shift in consciousness. An encounter with the liminal is often a key component of transformation, because when ordinary, habitual patterns cease, we are free to re-pattern the self and create new meaning.

Ritual therapy is designed to evoke liminality, and this can be useful in healing grief because loss — especially major loss — is itself a liminal experience. In the words of Jungian mentor Dr. Laurel McCabe, “If the wound was formed at the unconscious level, it must also be healed at the unconscious level.”¹⁵ In psychology, liminality is the irreversible point when a treatment begins to have an effect, suggesting that healing involves a shift in consciousness. Touching on the liminal can feel like touching on the sacred; it allows us to receive new insights and feelings, and to arrive at new experiences.

Ritual allows us to meet with our grief and transform it through handling a symbolic object within safely contained space, and this can be done alone or with others. Memorial services are a common way to communally grieve; the ritual objects are flowers, candles, and memorial printouts, and the ritual activities are preparing the body and participating in the memorial service. I’ve been to a musical performance in honor of a deceased person, a community walk to the mausoleum after sitting shiva, and I’ve seen parents establish legacy trusts with yearly gala fundraisers in honor of their deceased children. Surfers have their own ritual of paddling out and forming a circle in calm waters, to scatter ashes at sea. I once made a wrong turn at a conference in a large hotel complex, and mistakenly stumbled into a ballroom where a family was grieving their deceased

kin by feasting, drinking, and singing karaoke songs. The singer was sobbing into the microphone, and the energy in the room was electric. In that circumstance, the symbolic object was songs that reminded the bereaved of their dead relative.

After handling the symbolic object, the ritual comes to an end. Closure is an essential part of ritual structure and can be as simple as stating that the ritual is now done. Closure activities might draw from cultural or religious traditions, or they can be a physical gesture like scattering ashes, completing a religious protocol, closing a door, pouring a pile of altar-rocks into a river, or striking camp and hiking out of a forest. In Cole's model, gratitude is the key to closure.¹⁶ Closure opens the way for integration.

Integration of the ritual experience takes time and may continue past the moment of closure. Guiding questions will naturally arise: *We are done with that ... now what? Is there something more to be done? How am I different now, and how am I the same? How do I maintain the positive effects of my transformation?* Some ways to support integration are to keep a memento from the ritual; to process the experience via creative expression; to talk about it with a trusted ally; to preserve a photograph of the event; or to continue relationships with others who were involved in the ritual process. Integration supports should be identified before the ritual opens. Nobody should be taking photographs of someone else's ritual, for example, without prior consent.

Each grief ritual is unique and involves the client's cultural background. There are vast differences in how various cultures approach grief. Japanese funerary rites are an art form of reserved and elegant decorum, while in Tibetan sky burial, a specially trained priest called a *rogyapa* violently breaks the body and feeds it to vultures, completing the life cycle by offering the body to nature.¹⁷ Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims each have their own specific rites and protocols, as does each Indigenous nation. Therapists should be aware that at times, a client may wish to grieve entirely within their own culture, and the best treatment plan might be referral to a religious functionary or traditional healer.

Modern medicine has yielded insightful and useful models of grief work. As a healing modality, ritual applies to both creative and clinical frameworks. Ritual theatre is simultaneously a fine art and a profound healing practice.¹⁸ In the clinical realm, ritual therapy has been successfully blended with clinical and hospital-based psychotherapy,¹⁹ short-term behavioral therapy,²⁰ depth analysis,²¹ spontaneous independent healing practices,²² cognitive meaning-making approaches,²³ and community healing work.²⁴

But ritual is ancient, and creative healing is an innate capacity that needs no stamp of approval from modern science. Long before Western psychology canonized itself as the arbiter of legitimate grief work,²⁵ Indigenous communities were processing grief in meaningful and sophisticated ways that have been overlooked, inaccurately interpreted, shamelessly pilfered, discounted, destroyed by and imagined as subservient to the Western academy. As a decolonizing strategy, we can affirm that Indigenous healing methods, including traditional grief rituals, are not adjunct or alternative to the mainstream. They are whole and complete healing systems that do not need to be validated by Western scientific notions. It's not appropriate to use these traditions unless invited to do so, but it is important to acknowledge that multiple ways of grieving exist outside of Western health frameworks, and that there is no one way or right way to grieve.

Beloved elder Sobonfu Somé was from the Dagara tribe in Burkina Faso, West Africa, and one of the teachings she shared was on Dagara grief ritual. Her Dagara name means “Keeper of Ritual” and she facilitated grief rituals in the West for several years before her death in 2017. She discusses grief work in her book *Falling Out of Grace: Meditations on Loss, Healing and Wisdom*.²⁶ Sobonfu taught that when one person is hurt, we are all hurt, and this care extends to our relationships with animals, plants, spirits, and the body of the Earth. Dagara grief ritual builds community, is accepted as normal even when emotions are extreme, and is seen as necessary emotional hygiene. Sobonfu taught that we need to remember how to grieve together in order to restore our mental and emotional health. In her own words, “Communal grieving offers something that we cannot get when we grieve alone. Through validation, acknowledgment, and, witnessing, communal grieving allows us to experience a level of healing that is deeply and profoundly freeing.”²⁷

There are vast differences in how various cultures approach grief, and local grief rituals provide support for distinct communities.²⁸ Consider the Irish “three steps,” where a stranger who encounters a funeral procession takes three steps in solidarity alongside the mourners; Finnish lament singing,²⁹ or an Athabaskan potlatch.³⁰ National observances like Memorial Day offer space for societies to grieve collectively. Japanese funerary rites are an art form of reserved and elegant decorum, while in Tibetan sky burial, a specially trained priest called a *rogyapa* violently breaks the body and feeds it to vultures, completing the life cycle by returning the body to nature.³¹

Much of the world practices ancestor reverence, which provides an everyday opportunity to acknowledge relationships with the deceased, including the liberty to decide whether to continue or discontinue bonds with the dead.³² In Thailand,

it is normal to see people offering sunrise prayers and incense to their ancestors at a miniature spirit-house built for this purpose, often placed by the front door. Jewish people tell and retell stories at traditional rituals designed to sustain ancestral connection, such as Passover seder. Established cultural rituals empower us by providing personal ways to remember and revise our relationship with the dead.³³

Apache elder and clinical psychologist Dr. Eduardo Duran says, “All we need to do to achieve cultural competence is to engage with the healing tradition that is part of our genetic memory and be true to that tradition ... In order for the therapist to make contact with a Native, or any other patient, the ancestors of the Healer must be known. The ancestors of the Healer and the ancestors of the patient also will be relating in the healing process.”³⁴ This is an elegant explanation of why it is particularly important for healers to be in good relationship with ancestors. Grief work is core to that endeavor.

Although I’m unclear on some parts of my ancestry, I have the privilege to know almost entirely where I come from. Over the years I’ve discovered that my ancestry is Scots-Irish, Welsh, and Scandinavian, with a small vein of African on my mother’s side. I present as white, as the African blood is not physically noticeable. I live on the Canadian prairies, which are the homelands of the Métis, Cree, Dakota, Lakota, Nakoda, and Salteaux First Nations. I’ve pursued a PhD and now teach psychology, and I identify as queer and non-binary. Situating myself in these ways allows me to examine power differentials that might come into play between myself and the variety of individuals and communities I interact with.

When I began to explore my Scandinavian roots, one tradition that caught my attention was the runestone. A runestone is a boulder or large stone elaborately carved with ancient Scandinavian patterns that tell an ancestral story. For a few years, I have had a runestone in my yard that I painted while talking (in my mind, and out loud) with my Scandinavian ancestors. I told them how I’d come to this place in Canada, so far away from Swedish soil, and I chose traditional imagery that symbolizes connection, protection, and healing. When I selected the stone, I spoke to it and gave it an offering as I was instructed to do by a local Nakoda Elder. I asked an Elder for guidance and used the proper protocol of reciprocal gifting for his knowledge because I wanted to respect the local Indigenous traditions around land and place. It felt nourishing to affirm a positive connection with my ancestry that harmonizes with the place where I now live.

In my work, I have noticed that many people feel an ache created by disconnection from ancestral lines but can’t quite figure out what that ache is or

how to address it. Working with ancestral grief brings unique issues. What if one's ancestors did something injurious that awakens anxiety, or is difficult to come to terms with, such as abuse between family members, slave-trading, or supporting Nazi Germany? By the same token, it requires tact and sensitivity to inquire about ancestors who have been on the receiving end of historical traumas, such as residential school survivors, slaves and indentured servants, or victims of war. Grieving these kinds of issues may require guidance from a counselor who is qualified to work with complicated grief, family systems, reconciliation issues, and intergenerational trauma. Ritual can help to resolve these layers of grief and depending on the client's belief system and cultural background, this is one place where culturally specific ritual activities might intersect with psychology.

Not everyone will be drawn to heal ancestral grief or dispossession by reclaiming lost traditions – but investigating the quality of our ancestral inheritances is a common family systems approach, and it blends well with creative therapies. In my psychology classes, I assign a “storytelling as medicine” research project where students can choose to tell a story that has been passed down through generations of their family. The story can be about a family strength or about a trauma, and often, this is the first opportunity my students have had to approach intergenerational healing. The point is that through creative means – in this case, storytelling – we can begin to access and address the strengths and wounds of our ancestry, and complete pending grief work on behalf of past generations.

Grief is a complex set of emotions, some of which are volatile. It's important for these feelings to unfold in an atmosphere of safety and trust. Choosing to do a grief ritual asks us to give compassionate attention to our wounded parts. Many of us are still learning how to be kind to ourselves and to our pain body, so there might be a learning curve. Ritual therapy is not right for everyone; it might be overwhelming or triggering for some, go against the grain of certain world-views, or not feel right for an intuitive reason.

Grieving involves delicate feelings and matters of the heart that need to be protected and held with empathetic care, and this makes the facilitator's compassion for suffering essential. The most perfectly planned ritual done without heart will be of little use. Problems can also arise if ritual space is not kept confidential, when it is opened or closed too slowly or too quickly, or entered without adequate preparation.

Ritual involves “contained anti-structure,” commonly known as “falling apart” in order to invite change before coming back together in a new form. This temporary chaos must be contained by a mature grief ritual facilitator or trained

therapist who has the knowledge and experience to safeguard the process. “Structure alone yields rigidity Anti-structure alone yields traumatic derangement.”³⁵ It’s good to be careful with ritual, because it is real. Real because ritual happens in real life, not inside the imagination, and results in real changes in behavior and in feeling states. When change is rapid, volatile, or complicated, good intentions may not be enough. The more familiar the facilitator is with ritual phases, the more easily they can track and protect the participant’s experience. Studying ritual structure can help, but the competence of a good ritual facilitator comes from lived experience.

We all experience grief and acknowledging this is fundamental to our well-being. Creative healing methods, including ritual therapy, offer us ways to address all kinds of grief: subtle to catastrophic, known and unknown, recent and historical. Healing rituals open up archetypal, creative dimensions that speak to all our senses. Ritual is a portable tool for controlled transformation and when carefully navigated offers a valuable healing resource appropriate for a wide variety of people, conditions and situations.

Footnotes

1. David Harris. “The Paradox of Expressing Speechless Terror: Ritual Liminality in The Creative Arts Therapies’ Treatment of Posttraumatic Distress,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 36.2 (2009: 94). Studies show that the brain processes traumas using primarily pre-verbal and visual pathways, and that talk-therapy is not sufficient to comprehensively access these neurological areas.
2. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. *On Death and Dying*. London: Routledge (1973). See also Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. “The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: A Decade On.” *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 61.4 (2010: 273).
3. Jason Castle and William Phillips. “Grief Rituals: Aspects that Facilitate Adjustment to Bereavement.” *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 8.1 (2003: 41-71).
4. Edward Canda. “Therapeutic Transformation in Ritual, Therapy, and Human Development.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 27.3 (1988: 210). Western ideas about the phases and structure of planned therapeutic transformation are mostly based on anthropological studies of rites of passage.

5. Corina Sas and Alina Coleman. "Designing Personal Grief Rituals: An Analysis of Symbolic Objects and Actions." *Death Studies* 40.9 (2016).
6. Ibid.
7. Sas and Coleman (2016: 563).
8. Ibid (2016: 563). Self-transformation ritual is often more complex than other kinds of ritual.
9. Ibid (2016: 560).
10. Jonathan DeHart. "Sacred Ink: Tattoos of Polynesia." *The Diplomat*. (November 25, 2016).
11. Joan Chodorow. *Jung on Active Imagination*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1997: 10-12). Chodorow draws on Carl Jung's original writings to describe how active imagination reveals unconscious content and shows movement in the psyche.
12. John Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1961). This historical account of the visions and dreams of Oglala Lakota holy man Black Elk details a culturally specific visioning tradition.
13. Michael Schredl and Daniel Erlacher. "Self-reported Effects of Dreams on Wak- ing-life Creativity: An Empirical Study." *The Journal of Psychology* 141.1 (2007: 42). An empirical study shows that creative exercises like journaling increase the ability to recall dreams in waking life, even for "non-creative" people.
14. Canda (1988: 208).
15. Personal conversation, October, 2012.
16. Cole, in Corina Sas and Alina Coleman. "Designing Personal Grief Rituals: An Analysis of Symbolic Objects and Actions." *Death Studies* 40.9 (2016).
17. Caitlin Doherty. *From Here to Eternity*. New York: Norton (2017).
18. For an example of ritual grief work in a fine arts context, see Diego Piñon's www.butohritualmexicano.com
19. Ritual in clinical psychotherapy: Alvis Orlandini. "The Transforming Power of Ritual (2009); Rhada Parker et al., "Sarah's Story: Using Ritual Therapy to Address Psychospiritual Issues in Treating Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse" (1997).
20. Ritual therapy in short-term behavioral therapy. See Stephanie Crockett and Elizabeth Perera. *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*. Scarborough, ON, Canada: Inner City Books (1981).
21. Ibid.
22. Spontaneous healing rituals. See Edward Canda. "Therapeutic Transformation in Ritual, Therapy, and Human Development." *Journal of*

- Religion and Health, 27.3 (1988: 205-220). Transformation is the result of both spontaneous and planned ritual events.
23. Ritual and cognitive meaning-making approaches: Robert Neimeyer (Ed.). *Techniques of Grief Therapy: Creative Practices for Counseling the Bereaved* (2012).
 24. Ritual in Community healing work: Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn. "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief" (1998).
 25. See Leat Granek. "Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology from Freud to the Present." *History of Psychology* 13.1 (2010: 46) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: St. Martin's Press (1999).
 26. Sobonfu Somé. *Falling Out of Grace: Meditations on Loss, Healing and Wisdom*. Richmond: North Bay Books (2003).
 27. www.sobonfu.com
 28. There are vast differences in how various cultures approach grief, and local grief rituals provide support for distinct communities.
 29. To hear a Finnish lament song, visit <https://soundcloud.com/yes-magazine/finnish-lament-singing-minna-hokka>
 30. Personal conversation with Athabaskan knowledge-keeper Polly Hyslop, June 2020
 31. Doherty (2017).
 32. Dennis Klass, Steven Nickman and Phyllis Silverman. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. London: Taylor & Francis (1996: 70).
 33. Ibid. This book originated the term 'continuing bonds' and discusses the therapeutic importance of consciously managing relationships with the deceased.
 34. Eduardo Duran. *Healing the Soul Wound: Trauma-informed Counseling for Indigenous Communities*. Kirkville US: Teachers College Press (2005: 45-47). It is important for the healer to know their identity.
 35. Canda (1988: 208).

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