

Funerals pose challenges in time of social distancing

March 23, 2020

WACO—While a huge focus is on health and mortality during the coronavirus outbreak, not to be forgotten are those who are grappling with death from natural causes, diseases, accidents and crime. Funerals and visitations are the customary means of support for friends and loved ones—but restricted travel and social distancing poses challenges.

Here are suggestions for grieving during the “new normal” from Candi Cann, associate professor in the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core of the Honors College and author of *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-first Century*; and Bill Hoy, clinical professor of medical humanities and author of *Do Funerals Matter: The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective*.

Q: Funerals and visitations are such a time of hugs, hand-holding, prayers, closeness—simply being there. How might travel restrictions, social distancing and concerns for personal health interfere—and how can family and friends be supportive?

CANN: I think live-streaming of funerals is a great option and allows people to be present from a distance. Most companies also offer virtual guestbooks where one can leave a teddy bear or flowers, light candles, etc., online in honor of the person. Many cemeteries are also moving online so that each gravestone will have a corresponding virtual memorial, filled with the deceased person’s playlist, videos, pictures and memories. Of course, as with all technology, the capability of funeral homes varies from business to business, but my guess is that from an industry perspective, we are going to see a jump in virtual and online offerings as the funeral industry tries to

stay relevant and contemporaneous.

Also, if presence is important, one can choose disposal options that allow for the return of the deceased into the home, such as being cremated into cremains, or made into a diamond that one wears, or a record that one plays. You can insert cremains into the vinyl and make a record, or a glass sculpture with the cremains mixed into the glass. So, you don't have to be separated from the dead.



Bill Hoy

HOY: I agree that live-streaming may have to suffice, but our experience shows it is a poor second choice. From time immemorial, we have seen that physical presence is vital, and I think that is what is so alarming to me about some of the current discussion in our culture. I was taking care of AIDS patients in Los Angeles in the 1980s when we saw some of the same disenfranchisement of grief, requiring direct cremation of the body and in some cases, forbidding the gathering of people in funeral rituals. It did not turn out to be a psychosocially sound practice and is creating a high level of concern on the part of my clinical colleagues.

Q: Have there been times in history when this has been an issue as well when it comes to contagious disease? Have people taken safeguards before?

HOY: Two notable examples were the 1918-19 influenza

epidemic—unfortunately misnamed Spanish Flu—and the 2014-15 Ebola crisis in West Africa. In both cases, high numbers of dead coupled with high levels of contagion caused health authorities to create quarantines and eliminate gatherings such as funerals. Recent research out of the Ebola epidemic indicates that at least in some cases, these measures were counterproductive in that “secret” burials took place and those who had money were able to bribe officials to look the other way. I think we want to be especially vigilant to make sure we are being economically and socially just in the policies we put in place.

Fortunately, we do have media to help bridge those gaps now that were not available in those other events, so that will almost certainly help. I am going to stop far short, however, of suggesting that media even approaches a point of providing the same psycho-social-spiritual benefit that sharing a space, rubbing shoulders and sharing tears do.



Candi Cann

CANN: The most recent epidemic in the United States was the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. By October 1995, there were over half a million cases of people with AIDS, and many people did not know how to treat or interact with those who were infected. And just this month, a second person was cured of HIV with a stem cell transplant. I have lots of faith in our scientists and that they will be able to create an effective vaccination or cure for COVID-19.

Q: Besides finding new or different ways to express support and love to others, what about oneself? We hear about self-isolation—what about self-comfort and self-care in other ways?

HOY: This is a great time for self-reflection. What I am doing for myself are the things I recommend to others. Besides being vigilant about what I eat and getting out in the fresh air, I am taking care of myself by limiting my exposure to media. I have not been a big user of social media anyway, but I recommend to folks to be very careful about that because the COVID-19 misinformation is rampant. Instead, I check the [National Institutes of Health website](#) once each day for scientific updates, and I have taken all the news update alerts off my phone. Instead, I am trying to give more time to talking with family and friends by phone and video conferencing, journaling and reading. Of course, like other Baylor professors, I am spending time talking with students and getting ready to take my classes online. ... In my personal Bible study time, I decided I would spend some time looking at Scripture passages that address fear and have particularly enjoyed hearing God's perspective on this.

CANN: I think one of the hardest things about death is that life goes on without the dead. The birds keep chirping, the flowers keep blooming, people keep being worried about the most mundane matters—and that's difficult when a part of our world has stopped. But this is also what is beautiful about death. It forces us to see life all around us—its fragility, its constancy and its beauty. So, for me, self-care in grief is talking about death, talking with others about the one we lost and living again—in honor of the person who died who doesn't get to be here living anymore.

As we embrace life, I strongly recommend that people reach out to friends and family. Social distancing does not need to mean social isolation. I'm also going on regular walks and spending time outside. We need to stay healthy and in shape during this time. Some people are finding it fun to do group-gaming and discovering new ways to spend time with family and

friends either virtually in games or via video. Catholic churches are offering drive-through Eucharist and confession, Protestant churches are live-streaming their services and youth groups, Islamic mosques are live-streaming prayers and Buddhist temples are live-streaming meditation sessions.