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## THE VALUE OF VIEWING THE BODY

*by Donald W. Steele, Ph.D.*

*Meeting the challenges* that arise from social and technological change is important for furthering our abilities to cope in modern society. The twentieth century has been a time when change has affected every aspect of living. Major changes have been especially pronounced in the relations of most people with the events of death, dying, and grieving.

In previous times, death was both more frequent and more visible in its occurrence. Individuals died at younger ages and infant mortality was higher. Consequently, the number of times a person encountered death in a lifetime was higher than presently. Moreover, when death occurred, it took place in homes where families and friends observed, and became aware of, the actual dying process. Today in America people die in hospitals and nursing homes where family and friends have minimal contact, and thus, minimal awareness of the feelings and events that accompany such an important part of living. Finally, in the past, when a person died it was left to the family to minister to the dead, or at least to spend time with the body, which was kept at home until the funeral. In contrast today, the professional funeral director takes charge of the deceased's body and helps the family in planning for the funeral.

Attitudes toward death and the rituals by which we mark death have changed because of changed relations to death. Many sectors of the public have rejected ceremonies because they no longer understand their importance. Others raise serious questions about their usefulness. The public often must make decisions about death, grief, and funerals. Since many do not have experience or good information, they can easily dismiss useful custom or ritual when such a decision is not in their best interest. One custom that generates controversy and is especially vulnerable if not explained to the public is the custom of viewing the body of the deceased.

Responsible consideration of this problem must center on whether the viewing of the body is a custom with benefits to the family and friends of the deceased. Examination of the problem through study and observation shows that viewing the body of the deceased is helpful to family and friends because viewing helps the bereaved to test the reality that this death has indeed occurred, provides comfort, and provides a means of social support.

### **Reality Testing**

Dr. Murray Parkes defines grief as "a process of making psychologically real an event which is not desired, and for which coping plans do not exist." In short, Parkes is saying that when a loved one dies we find it most difficult to believe that death has happened. The whole process of grieving helps us accept and learn this reality. The process takes months. In the early part of the process the bereaved is often shocked and numbed, refusing to believe. Even if they are able to say and realize intellectually that the death has occurred, it is difficult to fully accept emotionally this event in the early period. By seeing the deceased, and even by touching the deceased, we have a visual and tactile image of what the fact of death means. We know that being dead is different than being alive, and we know that the person whom we loved is truly dead, not simply gone away.

A good example of this is provided by Mrs. A. Mrs. A left her husband at home when she went to work one Tuesday morning. In the early afternoon, Mr. A suffered a heart attack and died immediately. Mrs. A made all the necessary preparations at the funeral home for a complete funeral and visitation. During the evening of the first day and throughout the next day, Mrs. A said that she could not believe that he was dead, and was concerned that even in the casket her husband might be alive. She also concerned herself that Mr. A would be alive while in the grave, allowing her conflicts to center on the fear of leaving him alive at the cemetery. At the visitation Mrs. A saw that her husband was dead and went so far as to touch his lifeless body. After the visitation, at home again, she said that she was relieved to see him and to touch him. She continued, "I now will not worry about him being alive in the grave because I know that the body I saw and touched is very different from the live and warm person I knew."

Another woman, Mrs. B, lost her father. If it had been her choice, she would have had no visitation. Her mother wished for one, so family and friends gathered at the funeral home. Later Mrs. B was able to say she was most helped in seeing her dead father. Up to the time of the viewing, it was difficult for her to imagine that he was really dead.

## **Comfort**

It is difficult to place a value on comfort. Mrs. D lost her son who had been on life support equipment for three weeks. Throughout the period of suffering she had remained daily at his bedside and watched as machines kept her son alive. She was pained as much by the loss as she was by watching the seeming agony her son was experiencing. At the viewing she exclaimed many times that she did not want to lose him, but was relieved that he was now at peace because he looked peaceful.

In a small church in central Wisconsin the question of viewing and its usefulness was raised by a woman participant in a course on death. After explaining some of the reasons that viewing is helpful, I looked up to see an elderly woman with her hand raised. Upon acknowledgement Mrs. E said that, many years before, she had cared for her eight-year-old through a six-month fight with cancer. The boy died after being wasted by the disease. Some thirty years later the woman was still able to say, "I will always be grateful to the funeral director for making my son look human again."

This type of comfort cannot be minimized.

## **Social Support**

People come together at the time immediately after death to view the body of a loved family member or friend. In the process they console one another and recall pleasant memories from the past. Sometimes critics of viewing state that this is inappropriate and that the period of viewing becomes too much of a social occasion. Still, the bereaved need support from family and friends at the time of viewing to help soothe the pain and alleviate loneliness. Even recall of pleasant past memories helps communicate the affection and caring that cannot always be stated otherwise. Besides this value the recall of pleasant past memories offers a break in the intense anguish of the bereaved. The toll of grief is great; sustained intense grief is difficult on the survivor. Light moments can be helpful in offering some respite.

The bereaved need the help of others. Viewing the body in the presence of friends is a formalized way to assure that such support will be given.

Expressing feelings about death and grief informally is difficult for many. A formal setting by its nature defines the reason for coming together, and gives needed permission to discuss the event which gave rise to the gathering. Certain topics, which would otherwise be difficult to discuss, are more easily discussed in such settings. Friends and relatives of the bereaved who do not get the chance to express their feelings at the time of a visitation often report that it is awkward to bring up the situation later without feeling as though they are making the

bereaved or themselves uncomfortable. Social support, which results from the coming together of like minded persons at a time that is acceptable to discuss the death and to express mutually held feelings, is a major reason for the custom of viewing at a visitation or at the funeral.

The value of viewing the body of the deceased is not a commonly thought about topic and when it is considered by the public, it is often dismissed as not worthwhile. Nevertheless, there is a value which can be explained. The professional who has taken over the task of caring for the dead can offer him/herself and the public a great service by making such information available.

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