

The role of ritual following a loss

Kenneth Doka, in the revised edition of his book *Disenfranchised Grief* (published in 2002), writes about the meaning and purpose behind the funeral ritual. A ritual such as a funeral can assist the bereaved to incorporate their loss experience into their lives. The funeral also provides an opportunity to express gratitude for the contribution made by the deceased. Rituals can also legitimise the expression of grief and can be adapted to incorporate a variety of grieving styles. They are of particular value when grief is disenfranchised, as they can assist disenfranchised grievers to own and name their losses. Doka indicates eight therapeutic benefits to be gained by mourners from a ritual, such as a funeral, following a bereavement.

These benefits are:

1. to confirm the reality of the death
2. to assist in the expression of grief
3. to stimulate recollections of the deceased
4. to focus emotional energy on a structured activity
5. to provide social support to the grievers
6. to provide a sense of meaning to the loss
7. to reaffirm the social order and the place of death in that order
8. to bring a sense of finality to the loss

When a child is separated from his or her families by adoption, there is no ritual which corresponds with a funeral and so the benefits of a funeral, as outlined by Doka, are not provided, either for the child or for the family members. These benefits can, however, be provided by a reunion, occurring once the adopted child has reached adulthood. The reunion, in this way, can provide a useful ritual which confers benefits on all those who have experienced an adoption separation.

The corresponding benefits of reunion are:

1. to confirm the reality of the family relationships and the experience of the separation
2. to allow the grief resulting from the separation to be experienced
3. to allow the experiences of those involved to be recounted and validated
4. to translate emotional energy into action
5. to allow a sharing of the grief by bringing together those who have been separated
6. to provide a sense of meaning to the separation experience
7. to acknowledge the place of adoption in the lives of those involved
8. to bring a sense of finality to the original loss

It is my view from my extensive experience in post-adoption work, that many of those who seek reunion are subconsciously attempting to create a ritual, which will provide for them the above therapeutic benefits. No matter what the outcome of the reunion, I believe that it can serve a useful purpose in the same way that a funeral serves a useful purpose after a death. A reunion, like a funeral, can assist those involved to incorporate their loss experience into their lives. It can also allow for an acknowledgement of the opportunity for growth provided by the adoption separation experience. For those who have been separated by adoption, the reunion can provide a sense of completion and can allow them to acknowledge their loss and its impact on their lives. Those who are unable to experience a reunion may be able to create their own alternative rituals to confer the above benefits.

I hope that, in the future, reunion between family members separated by adoption will come to be seen as a positive ritual, which serves a useful purpose and that there will be more social support and understanding for the benefits of the reunion experience, no matter what transpires after it has occurred.

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Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion

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