

## Rites in the Making: The Ministry of Hospitality and Presence

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There is an often unspoken assumption for many in our culture that when one wants to get married or needs to bury a loved one, it requires a pastor or priest to perform appropriate rites. Very often those of us in ministry are asked to officiate.

Some brothers and sisters in ministry are convinced that their ministry, especially their ritual ministry, is to the members of their congregation. Some would interpret that as meaning the active members. Others would include those who attend, are on the church roles, or have some connection with the life of the church. They observe that the rites of the church are written for those who are a part of the Church's life and faith. In the absence of that, there is no reason to serve as a functionary for the state or the culture.

Others do not follow those restrictions to their ritual ministry. We have observed Christian rituals being performed *for/with* persons who do not profess to believe and who are not a part of a Christian community. Pastors, priests and deacons may use the church's rituals, but this often requires folks to make vows or to affirm beliefs that they really don't understand or mean or believe. Then none of the parties involved is really acting with integrity. And we believe the experience is less than it could be.

Many in American culture assume with murder mystery writer, Anne Perry, that some things have "to be done with all the proper ceremony or it doesn't count."<sup>1</sup> But we believe "proper ceremony" that does not grow out of one's community and speak to us and for us, is likely to be dead ritual that does little good and may do real harm.

Rituals<sup>2</sup> are about

- Hearing stories
- Sharing memories
- Naming our pain and hurts
- Celebrating our joy and gifts
- Giving and receiving valued objects that symbolize who we are and who we can become
- Being empowered to continue life's journey with hope

In the winter of 2002, on Sunday evening, February 25, we were checking some e-mail when a new message popped up from our eldest son and daughter-in-law in South Carolina. "Bad news" read the subject line. Our twenty-six year old grandson, Caleb, had been in a motorcycle accident near Phoenix and, while still on life-support, was probably "brain dead."

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Perry, *Brunswick Gardens*, New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Linda J. Vogel, *Rituals for Resurrection: Celebrating Life and Death*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996.

We remembered that Anthony Tang, one of our seminary graduates, was on the staff of a United Methodist church there. His fiancé was still in seminary. We called her, got his cell phone number and called him. We flew to Phoenix to be with our son and daughter-in-law and our granddaughter (Caleb's sister). Not only did Anthony meet our plane; he had met their planes, too. He had been in the hospital waiting room when he wasn't meeting planes. When we arrived at Caleb's home, we found an amazing "community" of diverse persons gathered to grieve and to try to support one another.

We were so proud of our son, Mark, as he said to that group of persons representing at least six distinct communities, "We have not come here to take Caleb away from you. We will find a way together to honor and celebrate his spirit." So Mark and Virginia began to work with his friends to plan the service. "I want you to find a place Caleb loved or would have loved," Mark said to them, "where we can have the service." Later he said to Dwight, "Dad, we want you to have a brief traditional service as part of it."

His friends chose a pull-off with a sun shelter overlooking a lake with mountains all around. On the afternoon of the memorial service, Mark and Virginia drove Caleb's jeep there and tied a bunch of balloons on it. Pastor Anthony drove us there. Reminders and photographs of Caleb's life were placed in the shelter overlooking the lake. And then the mourners began to arrive.

We heard a roar from far away draw nearer. About fifty "bikers" with their leather and body piercing and tattoos, ranging in age from their twenties to their sixties and led by Caleb's girlfriend, pulled in. They had all been on a memorial ride to honor another biker who had died when the accident occurred. There were a dozen folks from the freight company where Caleb worked in their sports shirts and ties and casual office wear (women and men, some of whom had kids whom Caleb had loved to entertain and build legos with). There was his best friend and housemate and others who played in a rock band together with Caleb. There were clean shaven military friends who had served with Caleb before he finished his tour of duty in the Air Force who decided they would provide an unofficial honor guard. There were his rock climbing friends. There was his family including two sets of grandparents, one set unchurched, the other an elder and deacon (us!) in the United Methodist Church, and there was Caleb's father coming from a Methodist background and his mother who is Christian Scientist.

Mark and Virginia welcomed them all and each of them gave their own witness to Caleb's life. The invited others to do so, too. And with a tremor in their voices and tears in their eyes the stories began.

Then they turned to me. Somehow, the service of death and resurrection taken from the Book of Worship would not have been an authentic and effective way of helping these folks grieve their loss and celebrate the spirit and life of this young man who loved and was loved by so many diverse persons! Caleb had not been active in any church; he had not been baptized. While it was clear from the witnesses to his life that he had made a profound difference for the good in the lives of many, the extent to which that emerged from latent or self-acknowledged faith was unknown to us. It might have; we just didn't know.

It pays to know *The United Methodist Book of Worship* inside out! I recalled that there was a section entitled "For an Untimely or Tragic Death." Adapting it to the situation, I prayed:

Jesus, our Friend, you wept at the grave of Lazarus,  
you know our sorrows.  
Behold our tears, and bind up the wounds of our hearts.  
Through the mystery of pain,  
bring us into closer communion with you and with one another.

. . . .

A life we love has been torn from us.  
Expectation the years once held have vanished.  
The mystery of death has stricken us.  
O God, you know the lives we live and the deaths we die—  
woven so strangely of purpose and of chance,  
of reason and of the irrational,  
of strength and frailty,  
of happiness and of pain.

Into your hands we commend the soul of Caleb.  
No mortal life you have made is without eternal meaning.  
No earthly fate is beyond your redeeming.  
Through your grace that can do far more than we can think or imagine,  
fulfill in Caleb your purpose that reaches beyond time and death.

. . . .

Into your hands also we commit our lives . . .  
Help us know the measure of our days, and how frail we are.  
Hold us in your keeping. Forgive us our sins.  
Save our minds from despair and our hearts from fear.  
And guard and guide us with your peace. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

And that was all I said. Whatever the faith of those who were present, it was clear from the silence and spirit of the moment that this was a corporate act of prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 163-164.

Mark reminded folks that Caleb was a citizen of the world—the son of military parents and then having been in the military himself, he had lived in many places—born in Spain, having lived in Texas and Colorado and the Upper Peninsula in Michigan, graduating from high school in Boston, and then having served with the air force in Germany and Saudi Arabia and Arizona. So, Mark said, if any of you know of places Caleb loved or would have loved, let me know and I will send some of Caleb’s ashes to you so we can scatter them around the world. We did and Caleb’s ashes have been scattered around the world. Mark says filling those 4 oz. glass medicine bottles with his son’s ashes was the hardest thing he has ever done.

There were rituals, too, though not from *The Book of Worship*! We learned that the night before at the bar that was the gathering place for these bikers, his friends, in keeping with biker tradition, had taken all the shot glasses in the bar and shattered them against the wall. At the “funeral luncheon” where friends gathered again at the bar after Caleb’s service, we were welcomed hospitably; many of his friends went out of their way to talk with us and tell us touching stories about our 26 year old grandson. Then they went outside to the parking lot and poured gasoline in the shape of a giant R.I.P. and lit it; they held the rear tire of a bike just barely touching the ground and as they raced the motor, the friction sent forth billows of black smoke. They always do these ritual acts, we learned, when one of their number died. It was a way of expressing their anger, their frustration, their grief.

And there were rituals in the memorial service, too. Mark and Virginia had brought a case of Caleb’s favorite drink—warm Dr. Pepper! They passed the cans around and with tears in our eyes, we all joined in toasting Caleb’s spirit. Someone began pouring Dr. Pepper on the ground—with tears in our eyes, we all joined in.

Virginia had small bottles of bubbles passed around. She told this story: “Caleb and I always loved to blow bubbles. When he was a teenager we had a car with a sun roof and we used to love to raise our hands and let the wind create beautiful bubbles in the sunlight. Sadly, a few drivers behind us chose to focus on the soapy spot on their windshield instead of being blessed by the beautiful rainbows floating by.” And then she invited us to blow bubbles as we remembered that even in our sorrow there can be joy and hope.

The honor guard played taps, marched up and presented a flag to the grieving parents with the traditional words. And when we thought it was nearly over, we saw seven bikers go to the low wall at the edge of the area and draw their revolvers. Three times we heard the order: “ready, aim, fire,” and the volley of shots. Then it sunk in: three times seven is twenty-one. They were giving Caleb

a twenty-one gun salute. That surprising end to a moving and powerful shared experience was followed by an older biker asking Mark if he could play a CD of Caleb's favorite music. "Of course," Mark said, so a huge Harley was wheeled over, and the CD player on his bike was revved up.

In the conversations afterwards we learned some important things. There were a number of requests for the prayer Dwight had given. Pastor Anthony offered to run them off and take them to the bar. We suggested that he also put his name and the church's name, address, and phone number at the bottom with the invitation to call him if he could be of help.

The conversation made clear to us that we had seriously underestimated the depth and extent of faith that was there. Unchurched does not mean unfaithful. To assume that it does ignores the presence of God's prevenient grace in those with whom we minister. And there is a hunger for the spiritual dimension that is deep and real in many people. It is at times of grief and joy that we have opportunity to be a channel of God's grace to those who seek.

Through it all, Pastor Anthony was a quiet and consistent presence—at the hospital, in the home, at the service, at the bar. His ministry of presence and acceptance, of listening and caring was gratefully received, and only God knows what fruit it will bear.

The service that Caleb's parents put together with the help of many of his family and friends was a powerful and moving experience for all who attended. Sharing our experience of this celebration offers us a real life situation out of which we can develop guidelines to guide persons of faith who are asked to offer ritual leadership for persons outside their own communities of faith.

One of the most important ministries we have to offer the world is to demonstrate how *dignity* and *respect* and *interdependence* and *community* are what holds a society together—rather than autonomy and independence and individual productivity which have been so highly valued by our culture.

We believe that unless we learn to acknowledge and value our interdependence and engage in building community, our society is in grave danger. We need to find ways to lift up the common values and beliefs that we share instead of focusing on differences. Those living in our fast-paced world that seems to be catapulting out of control need the stories and rituals that we can share and help them create.

As ministers of the Gospel (and that includes all the baptized) we need to invite folks to tell us their stories. Jesus did exactly this as he walked unrecognized with those two disciples on the Emmaus road. Our task is to invite persons to

share their stories with us. If we listen attentively and silently invoke the Spirit's presence in this conversation, we believe we will be led to find ways to help persons create rituals that speak to them and for them. Without imposing religious language or doctrine on those outside our faith community, we believe we will discover that, as Roberta Bondi has written, "gratitude is not something we do. ... Rather it is a medium of grace, a gift of God that softens the heart and enables it to see and hear and receive the things that come to it from God" <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta Bondi, *In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 173.