



A Case in Point:

Robert died at Zen Hospice on September 30, 1996. His wife Diana reflects on those last few weeks:

Robert was a journalist and writer. He did not belong to any religious denomination but was one of the most spiritual men I ever met.

So it became apparent to him, much sooner than to me, that he was dying. We have a beautiful garden at home that he loved to sit in. I think he would have loved to just drift into death sitting there in the sunshine, but the cancer spread to his bones.

He had to go back into the hospital. This time it was a nightmare. He was absolutely shattered. While he had been emotionally and spiritually a whole person, now he just blew apart from the pain.

We took Robert by ambulance to the hospice. His body tense on the stretcher; he was carried up the stairs to the large sunny front room. I watched as they laid him in his bed. Within minutes his whole body seems to relax. He then turns to me and says *I feel as if I'm in a sanctuary*. Just being there, he was whole again. I slept on a sofa in his room in those final days. Everyone was so kind to me too, I felt nurtured by their caring.

The morning he died, we performed a ritual bathing. The caregivers, his daughter and I washed his body with an herbal Yerba Santa bathing mixture. We created a small altar in his room with candles and had a service. Together we linked hands and prayed. It was a wonderful transition and I was grateful to the volunteers for suggesting it. Robert would have loved it, as he believed very much in ritual.

Looking back, it meant so much to me that he got good physical care in those last weeks and that he also got all the other kind of care he needed. That made all the difference.

Case study adapted from:

“Everyone’s Story Matters”
Robert Comes Home
Zen Hospice Project 1998

Caring for a Terminally-Ill Loved One:

Rituals Around Death



Dying is a sacred art, the final ritual, the last opportunity we have to discover life’s ultimate meaning and purpose. Kenneth Kramer’s book, *The Sacred Art of Dying*, further states therefore, religious traditions ritualize the death process to remind us of the impermanence of life. These rituals offer mourners a sense of victory over death, a way to dance on the dome of death.

About Ritual – ritual provides a socially acceptable, and most oftentimes healing, method for us to respond to significant events in our lives. A ritual need not be grandiose or dramatic to be effective. Perhaps it is simply a minor action that you take differently from your normal day-to-day actions that helps your heart to remember to mark an event or remember a loved one. It may be as simple as saying hello each day to a photograph of your mother on a small altar you have created in remembrance of her life with you. Participating in ritual helps us to make transitions through difficult times in life, such as at the moment of death of a loved one.

Rituals are most effectively performed as a family or community. The sharing of the experience with others can be very healing and comforting. For example, the Zen Hospice volunteer community remembers all those who have died over the year at the hospice by placing individual name cards ceremoniously into a fire. Personal rituals can also be effective, especially daily rites that one establishes to aid them in the grieving process.

Rituals and Culture – the cultural diversity of the world’s sacred traditions has created many interesting perspectives on death and associated rituals. Becoming familiar with and being open to other tradition’s beliefs about death and ritual can help us to better develop our own rituals. Here are a couple of examples.

Hindus wash, anoint and clothe the dead body in preparation for cremation. During the procession to the funeral pyre, relatives and mourners chant. Before starting the fire, the eldest son walks around the pyre 3 times, each time pouring sacred water on the deceased. He then sets fire to the wood in 3 places with a torch that has been blessed. Upon returning home, mourners are obliged to ceremonially bathe themselves and offer a libation at the family altar. This is done for 10 days. Three days after the death the eldest son retrieves the remaining bones and buries them or casts them into the Ganges River. These rituals are intended to support the journey of the soul into the next world.

Jewish cultures maintain a constant physical presence with the body throughout the entire period between death and the funeral. At the time of death, a son, or the nearest relative, closes the eyes and mouth and extends the arms and hands to the side of the body. Prior to burial, the body is lovingly washed and dressed in white linen or a shroud. The body is buried in a pine box as soon as practically possible after death. At the end of the service and at the gravesite, the relatives recite a mourner's prayer (*Kaddish*) which is a prayer to life, praising God. Famous for its rhythmic cadence, the *Kaddish* prayer is an essential part of the mourning experience. After the casket is lowered into the ground, the mourners throw handfuls of dirt on it to mark the final farewell. For the next 7 days, the family observes an intense period of mourning (*shiv'ah*). During this period all other normal activities are ceased. There is no entertainment, no shaving, no sex, no working, no looking in mirrors, and no wearing of shoes. Each day a member of the family says the *Kaddish* prayer, a practice which continues through the entire year of mourning.

The happiness of the drop
is to die in the river.

Ghazal of Ghalib