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GRIEVING THROUGH CULTURE AND COMMUNITY: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

This article considers the use of culture and community to promote both individual and community grieving and healing in South Africa. The uniqueness of the nation's ubuntu philosophy ("We are who we are through others"), enshrined in many cultural mores, provides the basis for this. The healing power of community and culture finds expression in the following sources:

- Physical and financial support;
- Cultural and emotional support;
- Spiritual support.

Despite technological advancements South Africans have not regressed humanistically (Bernard *et al.*, 1996). Instead many South Africans have become caring of one another and have embraced the varied and conflicting behaviours and emotions associated with death and loss.

CONTEXT OF DEATH AND DYING IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is currently undergoing a violent transition towards a new dispensation and peace. Crimes such as rape (and its fatal consequence, death from AIDS), deaths through tragic accidents, murders that are politically motivated; and disregard for property and life are common phenomena. Our staggering road death toll testifies to a disregard for life. Selfish driving and taxi, train and bus violence and warfare all contribute towards an increase in mortality rates. These incidents of death provoke "shock, anxiety and distress" and render people "vulnerable and fearful" (Tatelbaum, 1994:15).

Climatic conditions too have contributed to deaths through mudslides, tornadoes, floods, drought and veld fires. The nation survives in an environment of "multiple loss" and therefore we may be regarded as a society experiencing "bereavement overload" (Walker *et al.*, 1996:51). Walker *et al.* (1996) refer to the difficulty of grieving when experiencing multiple loss. South Africans may well experience multiple loss, but appear to have refined the art of supporting and caring for others in the face of constant exposure to death.

Human catastrophes have also added to our multiple losses. Death that is motivated by greed, jealousy or unsound business practice or administration has been widely experienced. Last year 13 youths died when they attended a term-end party where there was a stampede; this year, we witnessed the deaths that resulted from a stampede at a sports event. These events shock a community as well as unite it to grieve together. The "layers of grief [become] interwoven into a quilt of stories" by all who share the loss (Bernard *et al.*, 1996:79).

Inter-party political conflicts claim lives too, adding to loss and grief. Land reforms that include violence and death compound our bereavement overload. Although South Africans may believe that they experience the lion's share of multiple loss, they need to take cognisance of other

communities and countries where death, loss and grieving are equally prevalent and where culture-specific forms of grieving are practised (Corr *et al.*, 1997; Kastenbaum, 1986). Thus one community's loss and grief cannot be regarded as more painful than or superior to that of another. Hence it is possible to introduce what works well into a developing array of responses that may be used during loss and bereavement.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Although the identified systems of support have been categorised as physical, financial, spiritual, cultural and emotional, there are large areas of overlap; for example, a gesture of financial help will invariably provide concomitant emotional nurturing which can be contextualised within cultural norms.

Physical and financial community support

Western societies are generally regarded as "death-denying" cultures as they view death as "unnatural" (Grief & Ephross, 1997:69). Responses to death may be superficial and sanitised, with the bereaved having to grieve alone. Isolation can be the result of a community's awkwardness about the way to react. Even in South Africa there are westernised communities that experience isolation and lack of community support. This finding is supported in a South African study by Strydom & Fourie (1999:69), who report that friends were "uncomfortable, withdrew and did not visit" after the death of a child. Gilliland & James (1992:418) also note that avoidance is the single most unhelpful response to the bereaved. Avoidance produces repression that compounds pain rather than relieves it.

Tatelbaum (1994) refers to "translating" the indignation experienced in the face of violent and unexpected death to provide for justice. In many communities such justice systems have to be monitored or else they turn into "kangaroo courts" that may further destroy rather than mend and heal. Murder through "necklacing" is an example of justice gone awry. However, if there are close working partnerships with recognised justice systems, further violence and death may be prevented, thereby generating social support. Strydom and Fourie (1999:69) concur that the social support a community can provide is "a therapeutic necessity for the bereaved". In more traditional communities death is as fully accepted as is living. The community responds to death as a public rather than a private event. The South African philosophy of *ubuntu* finds expression in this phenomenon and in many communities there are multi-faceted systems of support.

When faced with death, the bereaved are usually unable to continue with normal social activities and are exempted from performing them by the community. This is predicated on the idea that the bereaved are temporarily immobilised and need respite from everyday obligations. Both family and community accept this and rescue the bereaved in many ways. Joy shared is joy increased. The corollary is that grief shared is grief diminished (Leming & Dickinson, 1994:460). Tatelbaum (1994) too asserts that small, isolated units of living – a feature of modern times – force us to create support networks outside the intimacy of the family. These sources of support are often neglected, whilst other life tasks take precedence.

In most traditional communities, upon receipt of news of death, there is immediacy in visiting the family to convey condolences. The funeral becomes a "vehicle to bring persons of all walks of life and degrees of relationships to the deceased together in one place for expression and support" (Leming & Dickinson, 1994:460). Even if not invited to the funeral, people attend and mourn with the bereaved. It is possible that because of bereavement overload we are sensitive to loss and need to work through our own feelings. Orford (1992) also found that entire communities attend a

funeral and that there is media awareness created regarding the special circumstances surrounding the death. This allows for further support in the form of material assistance.

Friends, family and the community provide support by informing significant others of the death. This takes place quickly, quietly and respectfully without disruption to the family's grieving. All types of ventilation of grief are accommodated and encouraged. The elders in the family and community prepare the body for burial/cremation in accordance with recognised rituals. Funeral arrangements include the release of the body and obtaining the death certificate. Family and community take responsibility for sending out notifications of the death, the venue of the ceremony and appointing speakers at the funeral. Meals are prepared by family, friends and community. They perform these tasks with compassion until the bereaved feel strong enough to care for their own needs. If this support is withdrawn too suddenly, then it may be perceived as further loss (Tatelbaum, 1994).

In order to cope with loss and prevent feelings of isolation, close friends and family live with the bereaved for as long as is required. Leming and Dickinson (1994: 376) refer to the "affirmation of social bonds and ties" through mourning with the bereaved. However, some bereaved may choose to share their grief with only close friends and family, which must be respected. In this regard Strydom & Fourie (1999:68) caution that isolated grieving without community support may lead to the community prematurely demanding an end to the mourning. The Western philosophy of the "stiff upper lip self-control and silence" (Tatelbaum, 1994:51) may produce pathological repression. Sharing and understanding grief by the community is a therapeutic necessity.

Unsolicited monetary assistance is often forthcoming, especially in rural communities where poverty is rife. Burial societies and funeral cover are becoming increasingly popular to accommodate the spiralling costs of disposal. South Africans may be expressing grief by supporting the family financially, thereby facilitating their own grieving process.

Emotional, cultural and spiritual support

Emotional, cultural and spiritual support are inextricably linked. Tradition provides a framework for the spirit to infuse our lives, whilst ritual is dictated by tradition and culture.

Eulogies and memorial services provide us with opportunity to celebrate the life of the dead. Telling stories enables us to express unrestrained grief in an atmosphere of caring and concern. It is not the prerogative of a selected few to tell these stories, but all are invited to honour the life of the deceased. This is similar to narrative family therapy, where the focus is on story telling to promote healing and problem solving (Anderson 2000). In narrative therapy a stage is reached when a wider audience is selected to celebrate and advertise accomplishments. Similarly, the wider community is the selected group that validates the life of the deceased. In many African communities song, poems and narrative are used in combination to bring alive these stories. Especially when death is unanticipated, memorial services where stories are shared allow for unfinished business and detachment to occur within a climate of mass support (Walker *et al.*, 1996:51). The participatory nature of such mourning engenders communal grieving.

According to Bernard *et al.* (1996:46), spiritual support is drawn from several levels: caring relationships, God, religious persons and prayer, which all help with acceptance of our own mortality. These nurture the spirit of the living as much as allowing for letting go of the dead.

In addition, many communities arrange daily prayers and singing for a specified period of time at the home of the deceased. This gives the bereaved a daily event to prepare for, thereby occupying them meaningfully. Again these occasions provide an opportunity for ongoing grieving and for

feeding the spirit. An important component of spirituality is identifying and sustaining a hope which is grounded in the reality and goodness of life (Corr *et al.*, 1997:159)). These daily community prayers encourage healing by giving hope.

The link to God is expressed in many cultures by means of light, either of candles or lamps. Light denotes healing, illumination and clarity and is symbolically used for building strength and courage. Other symbols commonly used are flowers that herald a new life or the passage of the deceased to a new dimension. In Hindu culture the lamp is kept alight for a specified number of days, the activity of sustaining the light being the responsibility of the family of the deceased. The physical activity of keeping the flame alight may serve to rekindle memories, allow the bereaved to mourn their loss and to say goodbye to the dead, when the flame is allowed to die.

Rituals often have a spiritual connection. Rituals may not only be culture specific, but also peculiar to a family or individual. Some of these rituals include toasting the deceased, and making quilt squares about special relationships with the deceased and about unfinished business. Some cultures bathe the body and anoint it with oils, others cover the body in a special shroud and sprinkle it with holy water. These rituals are meant to assist the journey of the soul into the next realm in accordance with the spiritual and religious beliefs of the bereaved. Healing, according to Singh (1999: 101), involves understanding pain and is a process in re-connecting and re-living after experiencing death.

Spirituality involves the belief that there is order and meaning in this world (Corey & Corey, 1997:385). According to Corr *et al.* (1997:159), spirituality entails three core tasks :

1. To find meaning in one's life;
2. To die appropriately according to one's self identity;
3. To find hope that extends beyond the grave.

Death "begs spiritual guidance and content perhaps more piercingly than it calls for medical science's assistance" (Singh, 1999:170). Such an understanding of spirituality suggests that there is a caring and intelligent force that guides every soul. Contact with this force allows one to find peace and accept both the joys and contradictions of life. Even in South Africa, amidst violent death, there is scope for forgiveness, faith and acceptance if spiritual beliefs are allowed expression.

The community taps into the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the bereaved and organises itself to fulfil some or all of the functions mentioned by Corr *et al.* (1997). Spiritual dimensions of support are often actively ignored by professional caregivers (Kasiram, 1998:171). However, in the matter of death and dying, spirituality offers solace for both the bereaved as well as the caretakers of grief (Gilliland & James, 1992).

Many societies believe that death is not the end of the person, but provides a passage to another world or spirit realm (Bacher *et al.*, 1994:169). Memorial services, eulogies, speakers, friends and family give comfort and participants are themselves comforted by this religious belief. Ideas on what exactly constitutes the afterlife are as different in South African communities as anywhere else in the world. Many African cultures hold that the dead must be revered, since ancestors guide and control the living. So the dead have a special place in these societies and are regularly remembered and revered. Death does not denote finality in existence. In other cultures, such as with the Hindu, the deceased are viewed as undergoing another birth in accordance with the seeds of desire and attachment that they have sown. Again, death is not the final destination of the soul. The Christian belief in the soul waiting in heaven or hell until the Day of Judgement also implies

that physical death does not mark the end of the soul's journey. These beliefs allow the bereaved to glean comfort that only an aspect of the dead person's life has been completed and that further living, a new beginning, is to commence (Backer *et al.*, 1994:170). In many traditional South African communities death does not break the link with the individual, but connects the past to a future and the dead with a new life. This is different to the Western view of the finality of death as a clinical reality, as not involving anybody else but the individual, and as not giving hope of an afterlife.

CONCLUSION

Death in South Africa is embraced with warmth, care and compassion in accord with our collective consciousness of *ubuntu* and *ukusukuma*. Crises have produced a people who feel, love, care and mourn openly. "Only people who avoid love can avoid grief" (Corr *et al.*, 1997:219). This capacity for care may be harnessed by our varied systems of support to reduce the pain of death and promote healing at an individual and community level.

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