

We are creating new rituals, and therefore new culture, every day. Rituals are part of the fiber of grief and death cultures across the world. Rituals have particular elements that make them particularly resonant in grief. There are many insights held in ancient migrant and POC cultures that can ground new grief rituals for U.S. culture.

In the days following the 2018 death of Jeffrey Hammond Long from injuries sustained from a vehicle-bike accident in Washington, DC, Matthew Sampson, a man who had never met Long, erected a “ghost bike” in his honor. Painted all white, and placed at the sites of fatal vehicular accidents involving cyclists, these memorials have emerged in the landscapes of communities across the United States, a memorial to those lost to this particular vulnerability in our society. Revd Laura Everett who offers liturgy at the sites of these ghost bikes, including one at a memorial bike ride for Long, observes that ghost bikes have particular power, “They force us to notice that we are passing by a place where someone has died, to acknowledge that our roads are often places of violence, and that we are vulnerable and fragile humans, and we can do something to make sure we all get home alive” ([Bloomberg News](#)).

More recently, in the wake of anti-Asian violence across the United States, Buddhist devotees gathered in Los Angeles for a national memorial ceremony to “honor the loss to the country and to repair the racial karma of this nation, because our destinies and freedoms are intertwined,” ([NYTimes](#)). Throughout the ceremony, the lotus flower was an important element. Duncan Ryuken Williams, a Soto Zen Buddhist priest who was among those who planned the gathering noted the symbolism of the lotus flower, which blooms amid muddy waters. The mud represents suffering and pain amid which the beautiful flower blooms. “And so our liberation is actually not about transcending or distancing ourselves from trauma or pain and suffering, but it is to acknowledge how we can transform ourselves, our communities, our nation, our world, from all that pain,” he said.

Both Revd Everett and Dr. Williams’ powerful insights draw on the particular nature of the ceremonies they participated in. These reflections indicate some of the powers of ritual in navigating the wilderness of grief. As research notes, “across countries, communities and historical periods, rituals have been a crucial element in dealing with grief and loss” ([Research Paper](#)). These rituals largely continue in some form in many of the world’s cultures, but the United States’ mainstream has seen much erosion of grief rituals, leaving many people with little room for the expression of grief.

This fading of rituals is among the failures of grief and death culture in the United States, the extent of which we established in preceding episodes, including the harm ripples onto individuals, families, communities, and indeed the whole country. But there is much possibility for new grief ways/traditions in the U.S. in building new ritual traditions. In fact, the grief support professionals who care for individuals in grief often recommend ritual making as a tool for managing grief ([GoodTherapy](#); [Psychology Today](#); [Center for Grief Therapy](#)).

But, to begin with, how do we define ritual? What distinguishes them from other patterns of behavior like routines or habits?

Many definitions of rituals have been proposed but the idea that they feature a certain set of actions, words, or gestures performed in a particular sequence, appears to resonate across them ([American Psychological Association](#), [Wikipedia](#)). Historian of religions, J.Z. Smith observes in particular that ritual features that are otherwise “ordinary activities placed within an extraordinary setting” ([Phys.org article](#) that refers to Smith’s book, [To Take Place](#)).

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Smith’s insight nods at the important role of preset intention in the meaning-making power of rituals. [One research paper](#) clarified this role of intention by drawing a distinction between the cognitive load of routines, a close corollary of rituals, versus the level of attentiveness that animate rituals. What we intuitively know about routine—that we can engage them almost automatically and with little to no thought—is reflective of the low cognitive and attention demands that they make on the brain. By contrast, ritual is marked by high levels of attention, including attention to particular steps and sequence. Moreover, the paper continues, “the framing of actions, not the actions themselves” is critical ritual-making ([Research Paper](#)). In that there are echoes of insight from cultural psychologist [Joanna Wojtkowiak](#) who agrees that rituals find their meaning in cultural contexts and that they can both express/serve as representations of beliefs and attitudes, and help to strengthen them.

Another pair of researchers writes: “Despite the absence of a direct causal connection between the ritual and the desired outcome, performing rituals with the intention of producing a certain result appears to be sufficient for that result to come true” ([Scientific American](#)).

Closely related to the place of intention in ritual is symbolism; in particular, the idea that actions and elements of ritual serve as stand-ins for other meanings. The act of walking across a stage and shaking someone’s hand on the way may be unremarkable perhaps on a Monday morning at a corporate workplace, but at a graduation ceremony, it signifies/symbolizes the ending of one’s time at an institution of learning, the conclusion of likely years of committed work ([Psychology Today](#)). Similarly in many ritual traditions across the world, would-be banal activities of cutting one’s hair, clothing choices, take on profound meaning when engaged with the intention and reverence of ritual.

Both structure and dramatization, the performance of ordinary actions in a particular order and with a level of formality, also appear to be key elements of ritual ([Research Paper](#)). These qualities contribute to the heightened levels of attention in ritual; they also serve as a valuable means to symbolically act out emotional and/or psychological states and transformation ([Research Paper](#)). Performance accounts for some of the psychological value of ritual. “Being able to act out one’s life-experiences (e.g. bringing flowers or candles after a collective trauma) gives a sense of control.”

Part of the performance of ritual is its embodied quality—that it is the performance of outward action, rather than solely in the mind—“having a deep foundation within our bodies and senses” ([Research paper](#)).

Other elements of ritual vary in emphasis among researchers—some view the exercise of ritual in communal settings as crucial to their power, others find that private, personal ritual, rooted in personal context may hold greater potential.

Arguing in favor of the former, Joanna Wojtkowiak observes that the ordinary activities of ritual find some of their meaning in communal beliefs about them as well as their performance in community. “Ritual is a social collaboration,” one paper reads, “which means that a group of people simultaneously experiences the same ritual episode, encompassing a variety of emotions and actions as well as private reflections

and thoughts.”¹ In fact, they argue, the greater social collaboration in ritual, the greater their potential for transformation ([Research Paper](#)).

This observation on community shows up among people of color across the United States, community is a big element of journeying with grief. Sarah Chavez of the Order of Good Death and the Collective for Radical Death Studies said in an interview, “shared traditions, cultural practices, language, and especially death and mourning rituals all serve to reinforce and define both the identity of self and community, culture and beliefs outside of whiteness.” She continued, “in a society where whiteness is the most prevalent representation, many folks must seek reflections of themselves within community. This can cultivate a sense of wholeness and connectedness” ([Huffington Post](#)).

Conversely, Michael I. Norton and Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School found, in a study of the power of rituals in soothing grief and loss, that many rituals reported by their participants were private, with only 15 percent including a social element. “By far, most of the rituals people did were personal and performed alone,” one journalist observes, reporting on their work. Those private rituals largely find their detail in particular linked to the person lost. One woman whose husband died washes her car every week the way she did when he was alive. One man continued to get haircuts on the first Saturday of each month, as he did with his wife before her passing ([The Atlantic](#)).²

Researchers have identified the psychological value of these ritual traditions and practices in grief. One recurring idea is that they can be an important on-ramp to help people transition through emotional states. “Rituals create bridges for moving from one psychosocial status to another. From spouse to widow or from child to orphan, rituals can help with the transition,” writes one grief support professional ([Hospice of Western Reserve](#)).³ Sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander builds on this widely held view of ritual arguing that it not only signifies these transitions in identity but actualizes them; “This means that ritual transformation is not just a way to mark a life-changing event, but to actually experience it in a symbolic, collective, culturally cultivated way.”

Rituals also have psychological power as containers of emotion, “Emotions are central to ritual as it offers a guided way to both express and contain strong emotions.”

This sense of order is particularly important amid contemporary experiences of grief marked as they are by a loss of control that contrast sharply with most other dimensions of modern life. One journalist reporting on the nature of this disruption in grief, and the power of ritual writes, “Day to day, most people go about their lives thinking they are in command. They decide what they do, whom they see, and where they go. And death—a familiar part of life in the past, when diseases were untreatable and public parks were cemeteries—is now remote, for the most part unseen, and often unthought of. So the sudden death of a loved one can shock and stun. The bereaved can be overcome by a helplessness that is otherwise foreign to their lives” ([The Atlantic](#)). Ritual helps re-establish that familiar sense of order for modern

¹ The same paper reads, “From a social representation perspective, ritual carries moral values that are shared and created within a certain community.”

² Wikipedia summarizes the elements of ritual described here as follows: “Rituals are characterized, but not defined, by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance.” For a closer look, visit [the ritual page at Wikipedia](#).

³ Another researcher writes, “The mourning traditions of earlier cultures prescribed precise patterns of behavior that facilitated the public expression of grief and provided support for the bereaved.” ([The Conversation](#))

grievers. “After people did a ritual or wrote about doing one, they were more likely to report thinking that ‘things were in check’ and less likely to feel ‘helpless,’ ‘powerless,’ and ‘out of control.’”

So new grief rituals could have incredible power for the United States as we move through grief. Importantly the beliefs and values shared by migrant and POC communities throughout the country, also offer much in the form of a foundation for new grief rituals and traditions across the country.

One belief that resounds among POC traditions is the idea that connections with the deceased never end. This is true of Mexican beliefs that animate the traditions of Dia de los Muertos. The celebration acknowledges the relationship between the living and the dead, and is a time full of warm expectation of reunion with the dead ([University of Albany](#)). Among the Inuit Indigenous community, beliefs are multivalent, and the idea of continuing connection with the deceased shows up in the conception that “a person never really dies, their spirit is passed on to a child” ([CBC](#)).

These ancient traditions of retaining relationships with persons lost line up learnings of modern western psychology. In particular, psychologist J. William Worden describes four tasks of mourning, the last of which is to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on new life.⁴ In this task, the bereaved do not “give up their relationship with the deceased, but find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional life—a place that enables them to go on living effectively in the world” ([Training Paper](#)).

In Confucius philosophy, grief is not to be avoided, rather it is seen as part of human life; “it demonstrates our commitment to those whom we grieve” ([The Conversation](#)).

There is also wisdom on grief among contemporary luminaries in the United States; psychologist Pauline Boss critiques the rush to closure in U.S. conceptions of grief saying, “Closure is a very good word in business deals where you close a deal, or you close the road if there’s a flood,” she says. “But it’s a cruel word in human relationships” ([NPR](#)). An expert on ambiguous grief, the kind of grief that attends unresolved losses like the disappearance of a loved one, Boss is also insightful about cultural muscle for ambiguity, which she describes in one interview as the capacity to live with opposing ideas at a time. “[People living with do that by holding two opposing ideas in their mind at the same time: My loved one is here and also gone. That way of thinking shakes us loose from thinking with certainty, you know: ‘You’re either dead or alive.’ Well, sometimes we don’t know.”

Of resetting the resistance to death in U.S. culture, writer and activist, adrienne maree brown says, “Everything dies, but that’s kind of good. [*laughs*] It makes for a very rich world. All the richness, all that fecundity, all that beautiful miracle of life, it happens because we live in cycles, not perpetuity” ([On Being](#)).

So much more can be learned about grief work; indeed it must for the health of the country.

— *Dupe Oyebolu*
For The Mash-Up Americans

⁴ The preceding three are to accept the reality of the loss; to process the pain of grief; and to adjust to a world without the deceased ([Training Document](#)).