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Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective (Book Review)

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Review of: *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective*
By: William G. Hoy, New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-66205-5 (paperback). \$37.95, paperback

Have individuals come to you asking how to navigate the overwhelming process of funeral preparation in the midst of their grief? What happens when the family's views vary on the best funeral process? Should there be an open casket? In current Western society with its amalgamation of cultures and funeral practices, questions such as these can present confusion for the grieving and those supporting them. Awareness of a variety of funeral and memorial rites can inform and support the grief process. With improved information, families are able to make choices that allow the bereaved to receive support from meaningful symbols, familiar traditions, and the broader community. "By honoring the life of the deceased in community, grieving people connect with each other, provide support to their co-mourners and tell each other the stories of how life has been transformed" (p. 65).

William G. Hoy's purpose in writing *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* "is to assist in acknowledging the need for those [funeral] rites and understanding them" (p. 3). In the 10 chapters in this 208-page text, Hoy examines such topics as funeral practice history, common symbols, value of community, rituals and heritage, inclusion of the physical body in ceremonies, trends in funeral practices and businesses, and clinical values of funeral practices.

Hoy's book offers a brief history of funeral rituals and traditions, with greatest emphasis on the last 100 years. Although this history primarily explores a Western and American perspective, it does include discussion of practices found in varied religious traditions such as Hindu, Roman Catholic, Sikh, varied Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim groups. Additionally, practices from secular, military, Hmong, Javanese, Muscogee Nation, and Kenyan Luo groups are described. This survey of history and practice is clearly not comprehensive, yet it provides enough breadth of the various funeral expressions to effectively illustrate the book's stated requirement for practitioners to be aware of diverse practices and needs of those dealing with death.

As a sample, in Chapter 2, Hoy illustrates how the important basic ritual symbols of fire, air, water, and earth are used in various cultural practices, including funerals. It is common to find fire used in a number of traditions. Most familiar, perhaps, is the role of candles in vigils and other ceremonies: "Wick and flame are symbolic of the bond between body and soul" (p. 36). Additionally, at gravesides, frequently soil is symbolically shoveled onto the casket at the close of the service.

Most chapters in this text are introduced through a funeral story about a celebrated personality or everyday person. This narrative backdrop allows for a clear connection to the included points drawn from empirical research summaries, qualitative research reviews, and personal accounts. For example, Chapter 4 explores the use of action rituals in some ceremonies, citing many studies exploring the use of movement in the New Orleans jazz funeral (Atkins, 2012; Bordere, 2008–2009; Touchet & Bagneris, 1998) and then supports research with an account describing the Navy SEALs' traditional symbol of a final good-bye as the practice of pounding a trident into the coffin, as was done during the funeral ceremony for Lt. Jim Cathey (pp. 79–81).

Although there are other publications that inform clinicians and educators on this topic, Hoy's text provides a unique addition to the literature. There are no other resources that combine an inclusion of historical perspectives and current trends, comparisons of various cultural and religious funeral rituals and practices, and the business aspects of funerals. This distinctive combination is accompanied by thoughtful questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter. These questions could be used to support decisions on practices that support communities, clients, and students in a variety of settings including classrooms, training programs, clinical and chaplain offices, and for various religious and cultural organizations. This aspect of the book may very well be its greatest resource for many readers.

The primary shortcoming of the book is that in its effort to cover such breadth, it cannot cover each topic in significant depth. In light of this, the book can serve as an introduction, and the reference section provides a variety of publications that might be explored further to offer the depth that readers may be seeking. Supplementary resources in publication not listed in Hoy's book include an overview of practices around the world in *Death and Religion in a Changing World* (Garces-Foley, 2005), specific considerations for those with intellectual disabilities (Forrester-Jones, 2013), and the impact of the Internet on grief practices, as described by Sofka, Gilbert, and Cupit (2012).

Although different readers may be drawn to specific chapters, as a clinician I found it quite helpful to read the entire text to best understand the overview. This backdrop will undoubtedly allow me to more effectively support clients in their grieving. For example, the chapter “The Business of Funerals” provides a perspective of the funeral industry that allows clinicians to help clients ask better questions in order to reduce potential stresses about choices and purchases. In light of this, the author’s stated purpose is served well through a fairly balanced presentation of the broad picture and quality recommendations for further resources, should the reader wish to do further research.

This book is a valuable introduction for students going into the helping fields, for educators in helping fields, and for clinicians working with those dealing with death and funeral issues. The benefits will be especially valuable for clinical counselors and psychologists, hospice workers, chaplains, and spiritual counselors. *Do funerals matter?* Yes, and providers of all kinds will be better equipped to help their populations with this relevant resource from William G. Hoy.

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