

## Burial Rituals and COVID

Human beings have engaged in the ritual burial of the dead since the Paleolithic. The oldest extant evidence of human ritual behavior is funerary. The earliest undisputed ritual gravesite is 100,000 years old and dates to Neanderthals. All cultures and religious traditions have rituals to bury and honor the dead. As a professor of religious studies, I know intellectually the crucial role of ritual in human experience. Having been raised Catholic, I know personally the importance of ritual. As a child, I was deeply and profoundly affected by our rituals. On Sunday evenings my mother and I went to “Benediction,” the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament. I was mesmerized and enthralled by the sound, the smell, the movement and the story of Church. I remember one moment in particular. I might have been seven years old. It was a dark New England evening. Inside, the church was lit by candlelight. I sat beside my mother, the life-sized statue of St. Agatha before us, the organ music low and soft. The priest entered, altar boys trailing behind. He circled the altar, censer held high and then low, high and then low, the clink of the chain and the smoke of the incense perfuming the air and sending the ancient announcement to God that human beings were attending to Him. The priest’s red and gold vestments swirled, the censer clinked, the smoke rose, the music softly played and I remember thinking to myself, “He’s dancing with God.”

And so, almost thirty years ago when I left the church, I missed the rituals most. Subsequent attendance at weddings and funerals still felt like the comfort of home, though it was a home where I no longer lived. If there is one thing Catholics know, it’s what to do when one of their own dies. We have done these rituals all our lives and for centuries. We know what to do. It is deeply imbedded in our collective consciousness and personal experience. We make the arrangements to hold wake, Mass of Christian Burial and interment at the gravesite and then, we gather again after the rites to eat, to drink, to comfort and to tell our stories of the one who has passed. We announce the days and hours. We call relatives and friends and ask them to call relatives and friends to make sure they know the days and hours. And then, we show up. We show up to honor, to say goodbye, to participate in a human ritual a hundred thousand years old. This past Tuesday morning, I sat on my living room sofa and watched a twenty-minute memorial service for my brother live-streamed from a funeral home in Rhode Island nine hundred miles away. There was nothing in my experience to prepare me for this. I don’t know how to do this. I

don't know how to not show up. It was an added grief, an additional loss. The coronavirus has taken much from people; tangible goods, livelihoods, mental health, sleep, normalcy, life. But it has also taken the ability to mourn together, to touch and comfort, to show up for the ancient human rites of honoring the dead. And though it is the case that at some point in the future we will hold the proper rituals for my brother, nothing will be right until those days and hours.

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