

SABBATICAL REPORT DEACON SELINA NISBETT
WANTAGE AND ABINGDON CIRCUIT
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CONTEXT

My ministry takes me into a primary school in Abingdon where I work with children on their emotional literacy. These are children who find the world a difficult place to navigate, for complex reasons. There is also a high turnover of armed service families, and children often come to school to find their best friend has moved on and therefore experience loss, and conversely there are those who may be in their third or fourth school and are grieving the loss of their friends they have left behind.

Through this ministry, I also encounter other bereaved children, in the more regular sense of the word, who will attend funerals, but whose parents/ carers have inadequately prepared them for the event, sometimes due to their limited experience of funerals, their endeavours to shelter the child from the pain of death, and for other personal reasons.

Some children in this situation, are at risk of “fantasising” what they will encounter as they search for answers, and the scenarios and solutions they build into their minds are often horrific, frightening and traumatizing. It was because of this, that I felt called to provide a “tool” which could “intercept” possible trauma, equip children and their parents/ carers with clear terminology and provide a “shape” to challenging end of life events. It was in this context that I chose to look at funereal rites with primary aged children and resolved to provide a useful resource to be used in family or school settings.

METHOD

I began by studying the predicted development of most children, focussing upon both the pedagogy practice of Maria Montessori, and the educational development theories of Jean Piaget.

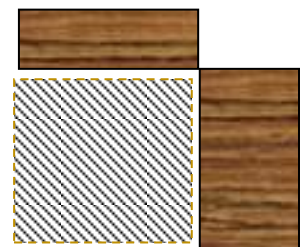
Montessori’s research initially with intellectually disabled and deprived children, led her to recognize that children were in need of stimulation from their environment to maximise their opportunities for psychological, intellectual, social and spiritual development and it was to this area that she introduced the use of didactic materials which could be handled and explored through the senses, thus enabling children to develop and thrive. This brought her to the conclusion that the purpose of education was to enable each child to build a secure foundation for the future.

Piaget similarly recognised that a child’s development, goes through a series of recognised stages and that they learn about the world through engaging their senses, through imitation and “representational play.” Before reaching what he called the “operational stage” when a child acquires the ability to work things out internally in their heads through language and mental imagery, they need opportunities to try things out in a concrete and kinaesthetic manner in order to embody their learning.

PRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

Whilst specialist books are an invaluable resource, they do not provide the child with the fullest opportunity to handle and explore this difficult subject in a manner that is most appropriate for their age. I have therefore produced, what I initially intended to be a portable crematorium, but during its evolution, I felt that it needed to become a space that children of all faiths and none could relate to. With its portable adaptations, it can therefore be used to represent any place of worship or a crematorium.

It is electronically lit with sensors and has variable windows scenes which can be slotted in to reflect the different seasons of the year. It comes with a catafalque which can be removed according to which scenario it is being used for, and a small recording device is available upon which children can record their thoughts of their loved one. A white board and pens is available within it for children to use as they explore or respond to their experience. I chose to keep the colours of the peg doll “congregation” neutral, in order for them to be accessible to people of different ethnicities. There is a traditional coffin provided with a crocheted person inside, and I turned a papier mâché pencil case into a wicker coffin as is sometimes used at funerals. The box which contains the portable room and contents, opens out to reveal a square area into which the chairs and the people can be placed; the wider section is the point of focus containing the curtained catafalque, and the lectern; the narrower section contains the window onto the world with the changeable scenes, a reminder that life goes on.



TRAINING

Whilst I was satisfied with the construction, I felt that I needed to explore a means of opening up deep and sometimes difficult conversations, in a gentle way, prior to offering the mechanics of funeral rites, and so enrolled myself on a story telling course with Open the Box Training. Click the link here:

[About — OutoftheBox Training](#)

Open the Box comes from the contemplative tradition, and is influenced by Montessori and Godly Play, and is accessible for all faiths and none and for all ages

and stages of life. As I had not had much experience with Godly Play, I also enrolled on an introductory session on GP offered by the United Reformed Church, and through this I added the white board for responses to my box. The carefully prepared stories are written and use small parts to open up conversations and wondering on subjects which are broadly headed as:

- Compassion
- Choice
- Contentment
- Courage
- Community
- Control and
- Conflict

Within each story are opportunities to explore subjects such as loss, recovery, relationships, freedom, boundaries, contentment, letting go, values, unkindness, vulnerability, and many multifarious aspects of the human condition.

In school it has been a really helpful tool in exploring the themes of bereavement, loss of friendships, aloneness, connectedness, grief, vulnerability, reasons for strong feelings such as anger and a sense of betrayal, and transitions in life, and to then go on to explore the perceived “solutions” for healing, hope and a future. Some of the solutions offered by the children were:

- connecting with others
- being hugged
- listening to one another
- mutual sharing of feelings
- sharing memories with someone else
- coming alongside another without talking
- deflecting the “sad” person by engaging with them in play

All of these were relational solutions, and in the wider scheme of things ritualistic in some way, and this led me on to investigating the importance of ritual to our psychology and to the grieving process.

THE PLACE OF FINAL RITUALS

I am aware that due to the Covid pandemic, and with greater numbers of people not subscribing to a particular faith, rituals have either been enacted remotely, or have been abbreviated, diminished or eradicated altogether, especially with the increase

in direct cremation. For some people, this has led to feelings of disbelief, incompleteness and a sense of betrayal towards the deceased, and has hindered the grief process. This led me to investigate why rituals are so important as we grieve, which research strongly suggests, plays a major role in easing the stages of bereavement for people of all ages.

The word “ritual” comes from the Latin *ritualis*, meaning “a formal act or observance performed according to an established manner which is carefully followed” and I noted the number of formal rituals that were enacted upon the death of HM The Queen, by her family, the state and the church as well as the informal rituals enacted by individuals, coming together to lay flowers, sign books of condolence and pay their respects.

Matt Rosando in his book, “ritual in human evolution and religion” speaks about rituals stemming from acts of co-operation, which ensured the survival of our ancient ancestors. The self-giving act of grooming amongst primates, proves a sense of commitment and dependability to that group and deepens the bonds of trust giving a better outcome for survival.

Similarly, our direct ancestors did the same, using the rituals some of which are embracing, kissing, the giving of gifts, community dancing and story-telling all of which deepened their commitment to their groups or tribes.

With the progression in science, researchers have shown that commonly enacted rituals affect our physiology and changes the neuro chemicals in the brain. Blood pressure and cortisol lowers, a rise in endorphins and dopamine occurs, our tolerance to pain is increased, and heart beat and breathing becomes synchronised with others. In short rituals can give a sense of well-being and supportive cohesion, and become tools of resilience. Anthropologists have also observed that during periods of stress, people across the cultures will engage in more ritualistic behaviours to give a sense of certainty in an ever changing world.

The death of a loved one is a stress inducing time for those left behind, and set rituals as are found in many faiths, offering a sense of certainty to mourners of all ages as they journey through the transitions of grief give way to acceptance and reorientation. The American anthropologist Victor Turner, described three key phases in the transitions of grieving

- Separation (the bereaved person comes away from their usual daily tasks)
- Liminality (time seems suspended- our usual rhythms are temporarily suspended)

- Reintegration (we are reorientated back into daily life)

Traditional communities in Papua New Guinea recognise these three states of being whenever there is a farewell, and use a ritual called the Awumbuk. When a loss is experienced and lethargy and sadness sets in, the bereaved person is relieved of all communal duties, such as gardening/ hunting/ and caring for children and everyone is expected to behave considerately and gently around them. During this time the bereaved person will fill an empty coconut shell with water to “soak up their tears”, and when ready to re-emerge they will throw the water away as a demarcation sign that they have expelled their emotions and are ready to come back to take up their tasks within their communities. This ritual does in effect give sadness a shape and gives permission for the person to grieve, something which our society does not do well and which I am aiming to address.

CONCLUSION

Whilst engaging in this study it became apparent to me that this is now just a beginning rather than a neatly defined conclusion! There is much more work to be done, with the suggestion that I go on to make a burial ground and seek ways to expand the book aimed at children to encompass burials, and the provision of a booklet to go with portable crem/worship space/ burial ground. Unfortunately a family crisis absorbed the final few weeks of my sabbatical, which I was going to use to make my felt (material) hearse to go with the set, and to “mop up” anything that was unfinished, but I am deeply thankful to God and to the church for giving me this valuable time for study and rest.

Dcn. SELINA NISBETT