



Incorporating the Extraordinary Experiences of the Bereaved into Personal Rituals

By Louis E. LaGrand, PhD, C

For 63-year-old Jeanne, her mother's death came unexpectedly since she had been in good health even though she was suffering from dementia. The day following her death at 7:30 in the evening, Jeanne was lying in bed watching television trying to take a break from the stress of the past 24 hours. Suddenly, she looked to her left out of her bedroom window, having been distracted by something on the roof of her neighbor's home. At first she thought it was a cat, and then realized it was an unusually large bird. She called to her husband to come and take a look. He immediately recognized it as a great horned owl, a species very rare in the state of Florida. Her husband grabbed his camera, went outside and was able to take a couple of pictures. The end of a welcome distraction, or so she thought.

The next day, the task of cleaning out her mother's room weighed heavily on her mind. She came home in a buoyant mood despite her ordeal for one reason: in her mother's effects she found nine pieces of jewelry, pins and pendants of owls of various sizes. Two days later, when cleaning out two boxes of her mother's belongings that had been stored in her garage, she found four more owl pins of various sizes. Although she knew her mother loved birds, she never knew that owls were her favorites. Now the episode of the previous day had a purpose. She was convinced that her mother had sent a message. As the owl is a symbol of wisdom, Jeanne was sure that, "My mother has her wits back. She's in a good place." What a gift she had received to cope with her loss.

How can this or other Extraordinary Experiences (EEs) be used to create rituals of remembrance, continuity or to symbolize the presence of the deceased? There is a multiplicity of possibilities (LaGrand, 2001). Most caregivers and mourners think of ritual in a formal sense, although all of us have personal rituals that are practiced daily. Some of these rituals are primarily internal in what we say or think, like saying a morning prayer or remembering an uplifting affirmation to silently repeat at the appropriate time. Others are practiced in overt behaviors at various times such as talking out loud to the deceased or lighting a candle of remembrance.

Jeanne could use the owl experience to honor and keep her mother's memory alive by purchasing a replica or picture of an owl and placing it where she will see it each day and

be reminded of the gift she was given. Here's what she actually did. She bought a picture frame. On one half of the frame she mounted the largest owl pendant. On the other upper half, she placed an enlarged picture of the great horned owl that her husband had taken that eventful evening and below it a picture of her mother. This linking object (Volkan, 1981) hangs on the wall at the entrance to her bedroom. She is ritually reminded of her mother and her gift each time she passes by.

Like all informal bereavement rituals this one is built on a desire for connection. We all search for a symbolic union with the loved one. Rituals not only help us stay connected, they give us comfort, and, most importantly, provide meaning. In the above instance, Jeanne's beliefs about an afterlife were reinforced. The meaning of the owl's appearance was that her mother lives on, she is whole again. Acceptance of her death finds support in the EE.

Other Uses

The owl experience could also be used to develop an affirmation to help in coping with the loss or in moving forward into the mourner's new life. "I know you are OK and I will be OK too" or "I will practice giving to others as you have given to me" are examples of ritualistic affirmations that could be used in transition. Many mourners who experience the extraordinary will automatically replay the experience at times when they are feeling sad or wish to refocus on happy memories. Visualizing the experience as a ritual can be employed when lying in bed at night, on a long train or plane ride, or when meditating.

EEs can also be used as part of a yearly or anniversary remembrance. The experience should be written down as accurately as possible so that no details are forgotten. It can be read to an audience, if appropriate, or silently to oneself, and kept as part of family history. It could also be the subject of a poem read to give time to pause and reflect. In Jeanne's experience, she bought a small crystal owl that will be displayed at family holiday get-togethers in her home to symbolize her mother's presence.

Finally, it may be appropriate to ask the mourner if she would like to create a ritual that sends a message back to the deceased, a reply of sorts for the gift received. Expressions of love, thanksgiving or inspiration can be written ("You will always be loved." "Until we meet again." "Always remembered.") or inscribed on an object that can be used each day such as a plate, glass or cup. If the mourner does not want the message displayed for others to read, then a symbol or word picture can be constructed that will have meaning only to the mourner.

These and many other informal rituals can evolve from EEs and they answer the critical question Carl Jung posed many years ago: "Are we related to something infinite or not?"

References

LaGrand, L. (2001). *Gifts from the Unknown: Using extraordinary experiences to cope with loss & change*. New York: Authors Choice Press.

Volkan, V. (1981). *Linking objects and linking phenomena: A study of the forms*,

symptoms, metapsychology, and therapy of complicated mourning. New York:
International Universities Press.

About the Author

Lou LaGrand is Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York College at Potsdam and gave a keynote address at the 2002 ADEC Conference in Portland, Ore.

© 2003-2007 The Association for Death Education and Counseling
All rights reserved.