

Launching the Death Canoe: Ritual for Grief and Spiritual Connection

by Sarah Kerr

There's an Ojibwa understanding that when we die, we find ourselves on the beach of a vast lake. Here we see the footprints of those who have died before us—people who have crossed the lake, leaving the Village of the Living and journeying to the Village of the Dead. The newly dead cannot make that journey alone, however. They need help from both sides. Those in the Village of the Living must build for their dead a canoe out of love to propel out into the lake with the energy of our grief. Those in the Village of the Dead reach out and receive that canoe, using the energy of their joy to pull it towards them, celebrating the person's arrival with the same intensity as the living mourn the person's departure.

Annie is now 53 years old. When she was three, her mother and younger sister died together in childbirth. Her family responded as well as they could, but in a grief- and death-illiterate culture, few of us have been taught the skills to meet that kind of tragedy.

Annie's newborn sister was buried in her mother's arms but wasn't named or given a headstone. Wanting to protect Annie from further pain, her father and grandparents didn't take her to the funeral. Annie's dad had to be back at work three days after the deaths, so Annie spent her days with her grandparents, but none of the adults in her world had the skills or capacity to help her process her grief. A few years later, Annie's father remarried, and had two sons with his new wife. Annie grew up in this blended family, but her mother and sister were rarely mentioned.

When Annie came to see me, she'd done more than her share of therapy and other healing work. Some things had shifted and improved, but she was still carrying a deep grief and pain.

A forward-thinking psychologist might have described Annie's situation as disenfranchised grief, a kind of double-whammy trauma that occurs when a deep loss is compounded by a lack of social validation and support for the grieving process. I would agree, but add that the issue was not just lack of social validation and support but, more specifically, the lack of required community rituals. Rituals provide a highly structured and specific form of social validation and support, and when they are successful, they channel the energy of this support to shift the underlying energetic patterns of the situation back towards balance.

When Annie missed the funeral, she missed the critical healing experience of having her grief ritually validated and witnessed by her community.

A funeral ritual is not a series of empty formalities and social obligations; it's

a pragmatic mechanism to facilitate re-patterning and healing—for both the living and the dead. It's an energetic experience, not an intellectual one, and even as a young child, Annie would have benefitted from being part of that process. Attending the funeral would likely have been an important first step on her healing journey. When no-one knew how to help her validate her grief (ritually or otherwise), Annie's child-self grew to believe there was something wrong with those feelings. She carried her grief with shame and, even as an adult, didn't often talk about this pivotal experience in her life. It followed the classic pattern of disenfranchised grief.

Annie's baby sister missed two important rituals. She was never properly received into the Village of the Living, and she was never dispatched to the Village of the Dead. From a spiritual perspective, she had become a soul in limbo—she was neither here nor there.

Annie suffered, her sister suffered, and the relationship between the two of them suffered. At some level, Annie didn't know how to relate to this baby whom she never met. All her life she has

longed for the intimacy of sisterhood, but was confused about how it related to her. Did she have a sister? Does she have a sister? Was she an only child in her first family?

Our identities are relational; we are woven into existence by the threads that connect us to our family and community. And those threads are very real, energetic structures that are formed and strengthened by rituals. Annie's sister





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had never been formally claimed as part of the family and so the bonds of sisterhood weren't energetically established. When someone dies, we often say that we've "lost" them. In this case that's exactly what happened. Through a well-meaning act of omission, Annie's sister was lost, and she'd been lost for half a century.

Rituals happen outside of time and space. Their magic is to evoke a kind of eternal present, an ultimate moment of "now" in which past, present, and future are commingled. This ability to transcend linear time means that a ritual done today can heal a wound experienced years ago.

Over a period of a few months, Annie and I set about to perform the ritual healing that had been needed for so long. We wanted to honor and validate Annie's grief, to bring her "lost" sister back home, and to establish the bonds of sisterhood between them.

Names have power, and if Annie's sister was to be brought into existence, she needed a name. Annie remembered that her father had told her that he and her mother had planned to name the baby Sherri, though he didn't recall that now. Nevertheless, Annie made the decision to name her sister Sherri Harriet (Harriet was their mother's middle name). With her own name and a lineage name, Sherri became "somebody." And by taking the responsibility of naming her, Annie made an energetic declaration that Sherri was somebody who was loved and claimed by the Village of the Living.

Annie began developing a relationship with Sherri. She set up an altar with things that felt connected to her sister. She talked to her, and invited her to become part of her life. She used simple ritual processes to connect with her and to open herself to receiving connection back. Annie was extending an energetic hand towards Sherri, offering her a path out of limbo and into existence.

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Slowly, Annie began to have unmistakable sensations of Sherri's presence—in dreams, waking visions, intuitions, and physical sensations. Most importantly, Annie began to feel what it was to have a sister.

Being in relationship with a spirit is different than being in relationship with a living person, and Annie had to learn the language of that kind of relationship—a language of intuition and feeling, of symbol, ritual, synchronicity, and correspondence. It's a language as real and as effective as any other form of communication, but it's not one that most of us have been taught to recognize or speak. It requires noticing and valuing the subtle inner sensations that we are generally taught to ignore. One of the most difficult parts of the process is overcoming the inner societal voice that

tells us these sensations aren't real.

Besides talking to Sherri, Annie began talking about her. She initiated conversations about Sherri

with her father and with one of her brothers. With both of them, Annie was able to touch more deeply into the story than ever before. Not only did this help make Sherri more real and connect her with her larger family, it also allowed Annie to share feelings that had been held back for decades, and the conversations brought the family closer together. The healing was happening on many levels.

Being dead and being in the Village of the Dead are not the same thing, and right ritual action is what makes the difference.

For the dead, a successful funeral builds and launches the death canoe, and calls forth the ancestors on the far shore to receive it. For the living, a successful funeral creates a communal space to fully feel and express the grief and anguish of loss, and to begin the process of coming to peace with it. It offers the social validation that those with disenfranchised grief (on both sides of the veil) require.

As Sherri became more present to Annie and in the world, we began planning her funeral. In order for our dead to be in right relationship with us, they need to be fully present in the Village of the Ancestors. It's similar to Jung's understanding of individuation, that we can't be fully present in a relationship with another if we are not

solidly grounded in ourselves. If Sherri and Annie were to have an ongoing relationship, we needed to help establish Sherri in her right place on the other side of the lake.

To enact the funeral, Annie gathered together a small group of close friends, explaining that she and Sherri needed their help in a very real way. She asked this group to be their “kin-net,” to serve as the village that would provide the love and ritual support needed as they each went through their own rite of passage.

For the funeral, we gathered at Annie’s and her husband Jack’s house. In a simple but energetically powerful ritual, we created the healing space that both Annie and Sherri needed. Annie had a headstone made for Sherri, literally carving her name in stone as a testimony to her existence. She had asked one person to offer a eulogy for Sherri and another to speak about what it means to have sisters and to activate the energy of sisterhood between the two of them. Both speakers took their responsibilities seriously and worked hard to prepare beautiful and powerful benedictions. Into this sacred container of love and support, Annie spoke her own grief, and she finally felt it energetically validated and received by her community.

The ritual energetically established Annie as a woman who is, and who has, a sister; it publicly marked her spiritual transformation from one whose sister is alive, to one whose sister is dead. It provided a safe space in which to reveal and release the grief she had been carrying for 50 years, a space in which that grief was welcomed and honored as necessary and healing not only for her, but for Sherri as well.

The ritual helped Sherri make her journey to the Village of the Dead. For this, we called her ancestors and our own, asking them to gather on the far shore of the lake to welcome her. We imbued the headstone with the energy of the canoe, and in a solemn procession, we followed Annie and Jack as they carried it to a consecrated spot in their garden. As they placed the stone on the

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ground, we saw, with our spiritual eyes, the canoe leaving the shore and carrying Sherri towards those eagerly waiting her arrival on the other side.

Stephen Jenkinson says that the mark of a good death is that it is a “village-making event.”

In a village, we recognize that we need each other, and that we have a responsibility to each other, living and dead. By gathering their community in ritual around them, Annie and Sherri used the tragedy of death to strengthen village relationships—in this world, in the other, and between the two.

I am grateful to Annie (not her real name) for giving me permission to share this story. It is a powerful teaching gift as we remember how important healing rituals are—for both the living and the dead. 🌊



Sarah Kerr, PhD, is a Death Midwife and Ceremonialist in Calgary, Alberta. She designs and facilitates ceremonies that help her clients and their families integrate experiences of death and loss. These rituals honor the spiritual significance of what’s happening and bring healing to the living and the dead. Her website is soulpassages.ca.

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Ann Jacob B.Ed
Stan Tomandl MA. PWD
250.383.5677

annstan@comacommunication.com
comacommunication.com
phone | skype | inperson