Journeys in Grief: Theorizing Mourning Rituals

Mark S. M. Scott, *Concordia University*

"Thou know'st 'tis common, all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity" (*Hamlet*, I.ii.72–73)[1]

The ubiquitous reality of death can desensitize us to its crushing impact on the individual. For those in grief, the world stops with the numbing news of the loss of a friend or family member. The bereaved sometimes marvel at how the rest of the world continues untroubled with its quotidian affairs when their world has come to a (sometimes dramatic) halt. When we suffer the loss of those dear to us, it ruptures our sense of reality, shattering the world as we knew it and often leaving us desperately searching for ways to pick up the pieces. Personal loss compels us to reconfigure our world and reconstitute our identity, since we define ourselves in relation to others, particularly those closest to us.[2] Mourning rituals in all their diversity facilitate our renegotiation of reality. Despite their daily occurrences and religious import, contemporary mourning rituals have been under-theorized in religious studies.[3]

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1. I wish to express my thanks to Mark McInroy for his characteristically insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I also wish to thank Erik Resly for his extremely helpful suggestions on a later draft. Lastly, let me extend my heartfelt thanks to Ros and Glenn Crichton and Adam Crichton for their friendship, their vision for COPING, and their willingness to journey with those walking (and more often than not stumbling) in the valley of the shadow of death. Their wit and wisdom have helped hundreds of grieving souls find their way on their journeys in grief. This article is a tribute to their work.

2. "Death radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world, of others, and of self" (Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [reprint, 1967]), 43.

3. For an excellent interdisciplinary anthology on mourning rituals, see Jenny Hockey, Jeanne Katz, and Neil Small, eds., *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001).

To take a small step in this direction, I employ current ritual theory to analyze mourning rituals associated with COPING (Caring for Other People in Grief), a Canadian bereavement support and education centre.[4] In particular, I interpret their mourning strategies and practices through the lens of Seligman et al.'s new subjunctive approach to ritual, which emphasizes the inherent tension between the world of ritual and the world of experience.[5] Rather than viewing ritual as the reparation and restoration of cosmic harmony, the subjunctive model posits the brokenness of reality and the ongoing need to create "as if" worlds that symbolically redress our "fragmented and fractured" existence.[6] Those in the throes of grief have a heightened awareness of the dramatic incongruity between the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be*. As we will see, mourning rituals open imaginary spaces where these worlds temporarily converge, which help the bereaved integrate their loss into their new reality. My analysis unfolds in three stages. First I explore several mourning rituals associated with COPING. Next I briefly explicate the ritual theory developed by Seligman et al. Finally, I employ the subjunctive ritual model to deepen our apprehension of the meaning and function of these mourning rituals.

Rituals of Mourning: "When Words Fail"

At the outset it will be instructive to briefly define the salient terms of our discussion, with the caveat that these definitions have recently come under critical scrutiny.[7] For the purpose of our analysis, then, bereavement

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4. For more information on the history of COPING and its educational and counseling resources, see: http://www.griefsupport.cc/.

5. Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). "The model we propose instead understands ritual as a subjunctive—the creation of an order *as if* it were truly the case . . . we emphasize the incongruity between the world of enacted ritual and the participants' experience of lived reality, and we thus focus on the work that ritual accomplishes" (20).

6. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30.

7. For instance, Corr et al. distinguish between bereavement and grief by classifying the former as a "state of being" and the latter as an internal and external "reaction" (Charles A. Corr, Clyde M. Nabe, Donna M. Corr, *Death and Dying, Life and Living* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006 [Fifth Edition]), 205–206). Wolfelt, conversely, defines grief as an inward state of being and mourning as its outward expression, as we will see.

signifies a state of loss.[8] Grief, on the one hand, denotes the internal response to loss, particularly affective responses.[9] Mourning, on the other hand, denotes the outward expression of loss: "[It] usually indicates the process of coping with loss and grief and the ways in which individuals and societies incorporate this process into their reality."[10] Roslyn Crichton, co-founder of COPING, describes grief as a "journey of the heart and soul" that unfolds throughout our lifetime in the aftermath of loss: it is not an "event"; it is a "process."[11]

Roslyn and Glenn Crichton founded COPING in 1990, seven years after the sudden loss of Rachele, their five year old daughter.[12] Their mourning experiences impressed upon them the need for grief support services and over time they felt a growing "passion to companion grieving people" on their grief journeys.[13] The COPING Centre provides support

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8. Hockey et al. *Grief, Mourning, and Death Ritual*, 4–5. "The term *bereavement* refers to the state of being bereaved or deprived of something. In other words, bereavement identifies the objective situation of individuals who have experienced a loss of some person or thing that they valued. Three elements are essential in all bereavement: (1) a relationship or attachment with some person or thing that is valued; (2) the loss—ending, termination, separation—of that relationship; and (3) an individual who is deprived of the valued person or thing by the loss" (Corr et al., *Death and Dying, Life and Living*, 205).

9. "Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone loved dies" (Alan D. Wolfelt, *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* (Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2001), 1. Corr et al. caution against over-emphasizing the emotive and internal dimension of grief, which can obscure its outward manifestations (Corr et al., *Death and Dying, Life and Living*, 205). While I agree that grief manifests itself outwardly in numerous ways that are not, strictly speaking, expressions of mourning, the basic distinction between the inward reality of grief and its outward manifestation through mourning remains helpful.

10. "Mourning is the outward expression of grief" (Wolfelt, *Healing Your Grieving Heart*, 1). Hockey et al. take issue with this distinction: "At the level of overarching theory, therefore, this book shares Walter's view that the contemporary Western distinction between internal emotion (grief) and external behaviour (mourning) is problematic (Walter 1996)" (*Grief, Mourning, and Death Ritual*, 267).

11. Personal correspondence: July 15, 2009. It is a pervasive myth of grieving that "we should 'get over' our grief as soon as possible" (Alan D. Wolfelt, *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Families* (Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2000), 47. "As scary as this may sound, you will never 'get over' your grief. Instead, you will learn to live with it" (44).

12. http://www.griefsupport.cc/about_us.htm.

13. http://www.griefsupport.cc/about_us.htm.

services for the bereaved and educates caregivers.[14] It hosts and facilitates multiple support groups (with a maximum of eight per group) for children, teens, young adults, and adults, which meet for 8–10 weeks. While the weekly participation in these groups over two months has ritual dimensions worth exploring, here I will focus on two specific COPING rituals: memory night and the Christmas memorial.

Adam Crichton, the eldest son of Roslyn and Glenn Crichton, has facilitated COPING support groups for over 10 years. He describes memory night as follows: "One ritual each group engages in is a memory night wherein they bring in pictures or articles (e.g., clothing, keepsakes, etc.) of significance," which triggers memories of their deceased loved ones.[15] By presenting an object to the group they focus their feelings of loss and concretize their memories. In addition to memory night, COPING hosts an annual Christmas memorial. Former participants in the support groups and their families gather around the large Christmas tree in the back of the COPING Centre to sing songs and light candles. Decorative ornaments with the name of the deceased person adorn the Christmas tree and support group participants receive a memorial gift that reflects the theme of the year.[16] At the ceremony the facilitators "mention the name of their loved ones" and discuss the importance of remembering.[17] Roslyn remarks that the memorial service "provides a place where they [the bereaved] can step aside from the busyness of the Christmas season and remember and honour the person they have lost," allowing them to re-engage the world.[18] In both COPING ritual activities, then, participants mourn by eliciting the memory

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14. COPING's theoretical and practical approach to grief counseling has been heavily influenced by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, a highly regarded grief counselor and educator: http://www.centerforloss.com.

15. Personal correspondence: July 12, 2009.

16. Here is how one participant describes the Christmas memorial: "The [COPING] Centre gave us all Christmas tree balls beautifully painted with our loved ones' name on it, so that we could take it home and decorate our tree each year with it; thus helping us to remember them and the things that we brought away from our grief sharing/learning at the [COPING] Centre" (Personal correspondence: July 19, 2009).

17. Personal correspondence: July 14, 2009.

18. "The purpose is to provide a place where they can step aside from the busyness of the Christmas season and remember and honour the person they have lost. The outcome of this ritual is that people are then able to join into some of the activities with those around them who they love. It is as if they can now give themselves permission to invest in life around them."

of their loved ones through ritual action, objects, and words. Structurally, then, COPING employs ritual to facilitate the "work of mourning," that is, to facilitate the process whereby the bereaved confront the reality of loss and slowly—in their own way—come to terms with it and begin to move forward with their lives.[19]

Lastly, COPING encourages participants to create their own mourning rituals.[20] The rituals participants perform range widely, but they all serve to give expression to grief "when words fail."[21] Ruth, who lost her mother and participated in a COPING support group, reflected that COPING helped her realize the need "to 'do' something with my pain, rather than just 'feel' it."[22] Ruth engages in three annual mourning rituals. First, she "celebrates" her mother's birthday by eating her mother's favourite ice cream (maple), a ritual often shared with a close friend who also lost her mother.[23] Second, she marks Mother's Day by planting a garden at her mother's grave.[24] Lastly, on the anniversary of her mother's death she spends the day with family and does something "special": "Some of the things that we have done are: made a cross and engraved our family names on it and put it at the site of her accident; go to the cemetery (every year); tell stories; go to her favourite restaurant."[25] Rituals such as these reflect COPING's central principle or insight: that we process the reality of loss through the ongoing

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19. Personal correspondence with Adam Crichton: July 12, 2009.

20. Wolfelt suggests some "ongoing ways" to honour and remember those we have lost, including marking special days, recording memories, creating memorials, as well as through ceremonial activity (*Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies*, 52–55).

21. Roslyn Crichton describes some of these rituals: "At Coping we are creating a safe environment or container [note the similarity to Seligman et al.'s concept of "pockets"] if you like for people to begin the work of mourning by allowing them to begin to express their grief. It has been said *when words fail use ceremony and ritual*. We give people opportunity to share about the rituals that have been done around the death of their loved one, such as the funeral service, a memorial, planting of a tree in a significant location, creating a scholarship in memory, donating money for a cause or a building, sending children to camp. Special dates such as birthdays, anniversaries etc are remembered with a special ritual that is meaningful to the family members. Kids and adults often like to let go of balloons or butterflies to remember their loved one on a special date" (Personal correspondence: July 15, 2009, emphasis mine).

22. Personal correspondence: July 19, 2009. This is a pseudonym.

23. Personal correspondence: July 19, 2009.

24. Personal correspondence: July 19, 2009.

25. Personal correspondence: July 19, 2009.

work of mourning. Hence, the mourning rituals we encounter at COPING express grief through meaningful activity, but how do we interpret the inner dynamics and function of these types of rituals?

Ritual as Subjunctive: The Symbolic Redressing of the Tragic

In their recent book, *Ritual and Its Consequences*, Seligman et al. rethink ritual theory, transposing it from the realm of harmony to the realm of fragmentation. Rather than conceive of ritual functionally or hermeneutically, they conceive of it subjunctively, that is, as "the creation of an order *as if* it were truly the case."[26] The grammatical term "subjunctive" signifies an imagined, desired, or possible state of existence. Departing from traditional ritual theorists, particularly Radcliffe-Brown and Geertz, Seligman et al. argue that ritual does not strive for personal or social harmony but for temporary respite from the painful disjunction between the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be*.[27] The work of ritual, then, involves the construction of transient imaginative spaces that make room for our flourishing: "By emphasizing ritual as subjunctive, we are underlining the degree to which ritual creates a shared, illusory world. Participants practicing ritual act as if the world produced in ritual were in fact a real one."[28] Illusions "are not lies," however: they are symbolic engagements with the world that manifest our deepest desires.[29] Taking an example from everyday exchanges of courtesy, Seligman et al. suggest that saying "please" and "thank you" creates the illusion of freedom and equality despite the power dynamics inherent in these exchanges.[30] Ritual expresses the "could be" or "what if" of our existence.[31] It reaches for an unrealized ideal and strives "to develop more productive ways of connecting with other people and with the larger world."[32] For Seligman et al. rituals are the site of creative interplay between the familiar world of struggle and imperfection

26. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 20.
27. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 42. "Ritual action creates a new world, in self-conscious tension with an unritualized world" (21).
28. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 25.
29. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 22.
30. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 21.
31. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 25.
32. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 42.

and the ideal world of personal and social cohesion and wholeness, a world that constantly eludes our grasp or ability to fully actualize.

Ritual operates in the "register of the tragic."[33] It posits the irreparable brokenness of the world: "From the point of view of ritual, the world is fragmented and fractured."[34] Ritual does not seek to mend the wounds of life: it is powerless to "fix" the brokenness of our reality. It accepts as its starting point "the tension and incongruity" between the world of ritual and the world of everyday life.[35] In response to the fundamental disorder and disharmony of the world, therefore, ritual constructs new worlds through activity that re-imagines reality. In ritual we find ourselves "building, refining, and rebuilding webs of relationships" to offset our relational fragmentation.[36] These "as if" worlds "create pockets of order" that make the "disconnect" between the real world and our ritually-constructed worlds "less painful."[37] Ritual does not, however, harmonize them. It simply opens a ritual space wherein we can find (always temporary and imperfect) respite, and, perhaps, a vision for how society could be if we shared these subjunctive universes.

When we re-imagine reality through ritual activity, we symbolically redress and ameliorate the brokenness of life. In these moments, we live out our vision for reality, a vision that remains at variance with our actual reality. We attempt to enact a sense of order despite the disorder of life. Ritual does not bridge the gap between the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be* or as we imagine it in our "as if" worlds. It "operates in tension" with the real world precisely because it does not alter reality: "The world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring the repairs of ritual."[38] Consequently, ritual functions as a temporary salve, a patch or sling for a fragmented and fractured world rather than a cure. It responds to the imperfections of our existence with redressive activity that never realizes its highest ideals for social and personal interconnection. Thus, ritual work

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33. Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 170. Cf. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30.

34. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 31.

35. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 31.

36. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 180.

37. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 42.

38. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30.

is "endless" and "ongoing": ever searching for ways to lessen the sting of the profound disjunction between our *as if* and *as is* worlds.[39] Despite its best efforts, ritual fails to actualize the world it enacts. Nevertheless, it helps us cope with our collective and personal brokenness.[40] By redefining ritual as redressive rather than restorative, we begin to apprehend the work it accomplishes: it transforms us, not the world.

Imaginative Oases: Coping with the Wounds of Loss

When we apply the subjunctive model to mourning rituals, we begin to realize its enormous potential for interpreting ritual activity in these circumstances. First, the subjunctive approach begins by positing the irreparable brokenness of the world. More than any other experience, death, particularly untimely or unexpected death, becomes a locus of brokenness and fragmentation. For the bereaved, the world has been altered—sometimes dramatically—by loss, and to greater and lesser degrees they inhabit broken worlds. Mourning rituals explicitly operate in the "register of the tragic." They step in when words fall short, since rituals, as "inherently nondiscursive" activities, reshape the world primarily through action, not words.[41] Rituals of mourning acknowledge the reality of loss and the way in which it indelibly shapes us. COPING expresses the "incongruity" between the world before and after loss by distinguishing between the "old normal" and the "new normal."[42] Hence, COPING participants respond to the "fragmented and fractured" world that befalls them through loss with creative ritual activity, both in the immediate aftermath of loss and in the ensuing years.[43] Mourning rituals have an underlying orientation toward "the tragic," which lends itself to subjunctive analysis.[44]

Next, by calling grief a "journey," COPING signals the ongoing and unfinished nature of mourning and hence the continual need for mourning

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39. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30–31.
40. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30–31.
41. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 26. This is not to say, of course, that "ritual has no words," as Seligman et al. readily concede (26). Words often accompany ritual action, but their meaning and significance lies in the "ritual action itself" (26).
42. Adam Crichton, Personal Correspondence, July 14, 2009.
43. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30.
44. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30–31.

rituals. Since bereavement does not diminish over time, our journeys in grief continue throughout our lives. We do not (emphatically) advance through a series of predictable stages of grief and at the end find resolution or recovery.[45] Rather, over time, we slowly and continually reconcile ourselves to the reality of loss. In our theoretical terms, we would say that: "The world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring the repairs of ritual."[46] As we go through life, we gradually adjust to our new situation. Ritual facilitates this adjustment: it helps us come to terms with loss, not "get over it."[47] The subjunctive approach "operates in the realm of the limited," that is, it responds imperfectly to tragedy, engendering the "endless need of constant, if only minor, adjustment to make the disconnect less painful . . . Ritual, therefore, means never-ending work. It is a recurrent, always imperfect project . . ."[48] Mourning rituals, then, do not aspire to mend our fractured world. They do not restore harmony or heal the wound of loss; they help us cope with our broken reality. When Ruth goes to her mother's grave year after year her loss does not diminish, but her ability to cope with her loss increases. She slowly adapts to her fractured existence.

How does the subjunctive model illuminate the work of mourning rituals? In the first place, mourning rituals cultivate a sense of presence, that is, a sense that those who have passed still impact our present reality. In the

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45. Contra the theory of the five stages of grief (viz., denial and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; acceptance) developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969) and expounded on further with David Kessler in *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005). While grieving people may experience these "stages", you cannot systematize the grieving experience into a sequential series of predicable stages. For a discussion of alternate models of mourning, see Corr et al., *Death and Dying, Life and Living*, 218. Wolfelt dismisses the "myth" that "there are predictable stages of grief": "While grief often manifests itself in similar ways, and at times there is a logical progression of emotion, grief is not predictable. It is tempestuous and fickle, revisiting its earlier emotions without warning, bounding here and there, sometimes skipping 'stages' altogether" (*Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies*, 47).

46. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 30.

47. On seeing the goal of mourning as *reconciliation* rather than *resolution or recovery*, see Wolfelt, *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies*, 48–50. Seligman et al. point out the continual need for adjustment: "It [ritual] is in practice (the only place that matters) imperfect to the situation at hand and in endless need of constant, if only minor, adjustment to make the disconnect less painful" (Seligman et al., Ritual and Its Consequences, 42).

48. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 42.

"illusory world"[49] or symbolic space of ritual we experience the presence of those we have lost. As we remember special moments and think about their imprint on our lives, we create a sense of presence. Not surprisingly, in these moments some people talk aloud to their deceased loved ones. Through mourning rituals, then, we invite our dearly departed into our *present* existence. On memory night and at the Christmas memorial COPING participants remember their loved ones and reflect upon their enduring importance to them. In mourning rituals the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be* symbolically converge in a therapeutic interface, if only for a fleeting moment. In these moments, through memory, thought, and action, we construct imaginative spaces for continual communion with the departed, despite the reality of loss. Put in our theoretical terms: "Participants practicing ritual act as if the world produced in ritual were in fact a real one. And they do so fully conscious that such a subjunctive world exists in endless tension with an alternate world of daily experience."[50] Allowing the deceased to inhabit our world in these symbolic and imaginative moments helps us to integrate their passing into our new reality.[51]

In addition to cultivating a sense of presence that eases the disconnect between the world *as it is* and the world *as it ought to be*, mourning rituals also create "pockets" for us to renegotiate our identity: "The work of ritual ceaselessly builds a world that, for brief moments, creates pockets of order, pockets of joy, pockets of inspiration."[52] These "pockets", Seligman et al.

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49. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 25.

50. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 25–26.

51. For religious persons, integration takes on a theological dimension that sometimes results in theodicy, that is, the intellectual process of reconciling the experience of evil and suffering with the goodness and justice of God. Theodicy, according to Berger, seeks to integrate "anomic" experiences with an over-arching "nomos" that restores meaning to our personal and collective "cosmos": "A plausible theodicy . . . permits the individual to integrate the anomic experiences of his biography into the socially established nomos and its subjective correlate in his own consciousness . . . It is not happiness that theodicy primarily provides, but meaning" (Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 58). On the project of theodicy in religious studies, see Mark S. M. Scott, "Theorizing Theodicy in the Study of Religion," *The Religion and Culture Web Forum* (November 2009).

52. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 180. These "pockets" resemble Berger's concept of religion as a "sacred canopy": "Religion [is] the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos" (Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 51). The

suggest, create a space "in which humans can flourish."[53] Within these pockets, or symbolic oases, we find temporary respite, bitter-sweet joy, and perhaps a vision for our future. We cannot remain in these pockets: they are inherently temporary and transitional. Despite their transience, they facilitate our renegotiation of our identity on the other side of loss. We see, then, that the subjunctive model yields valuable conceptual resources for theorizing the work of mourning rituals. Moreover, it provides a basic grammar for articulating and interpreting experiences of mourning.

Conclusion

Our lives are punctuated by *before* and *after* moments that shape our existence. Before the death of a loved one, we live in the reality that we later define as the world before their death. After their death, we live in another reality: the world after their death. They are *literally* two different worlds. Ritual does not harmonize these worlds, nor does it bridge the chasm between them. It does, however, open a temporary imaginative space where we begin to come to terms with the loss of these other worlds.[54] So long as the wounds of loss need mending, the work of ritual will continue. Mourning rituals do not repair reality; they repair us, but only partially. We cannot find complete wholeness in the aftermath of loss. For the bereaved the world remains forever changed and forever broken: they do not magically heal from the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (*Hamlet*, III.i.57). And yet, through the ongoing, creative process of mourning, those wounded by loss can find hope, healing, and a way forward in their journeys in grief.

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primary difference between Berger's "canopy" and Seligman et al.'s "pockets" is that the latter makes no pretensions of permanence.

53. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 42.

54. Berger transposes the personal encounter with death to a societal key, noting the central role of religion: "Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably toward it" (Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 51).