

When You are Considering Visitation

Making Sense of the Custom

Rachel's husband, Sam, had been sick off and on for most of a decade when he died of renal failure. The hospice team had assisted Rachel and their three sons as they took care of Sam over the last months of his life. As his death approached and thoughts turned to a funeral, the four of them began thinking about the arrangements.

One of the questions they contemplated was whether or not to hold a public visitation at the funeral home. Rachel remembered the experience positively from when her parents died many years earlier, but the boys weren't sure. Robert, the youngest, even said, "I want to remember dad like he was when he was full of vitality." Rachel felt certain their neighbors and friends would "expect" a visitation, however.

Like Rachel's family, you may be considering whether or not to hold a public visitation as part of the memorial arrangements for your loved one. There are voices on all sides of the discussion, each one with sound rationale for their beliefs. In some cases, the issues get a little clouded, however.

What is a Visitation's Purpose?

The visitation serves several useful purposes as part of the memorial arrangements. First, seeing your loved one a day or two after the death helps confirm the reality of death. Even when death comes after a lengthy illness, the news is met with some element of shock; we knew the day was coming and then find difficulty in believing it really has arrived. In *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, the unequalled textbook for grief counselors-in-training, J. William Worden writes this about the funeral: "It can help make real the fact of the loss. Seeing the body of the deceased person helps to bring home the reality and finality of death."

Second, the visitation provides a dedicated time for drawing comfort from the entire mourning community—those people whose lives your loved one touched. Many people were impacted by your loved one's life, and most likely, that impact was much wider than you might first imagine. Neighbors, coworkers, fellow members of a faith community or civic organization, and a plethora of other people need an opportunity to express their care and love to you. The visitation provides a set time and place for that care to



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be offered and for you to receive it. The stories that are shared at visitations help sustain bereaved people in the early weeks and months of grief.

Third, the visitation provides some "containment" for the initial support of friends. Not every friend feels comfortable stopping by the family home in the early days after a death. Though they want to express their love to you, they might be afraid they are intruding on your family's time together. Moreover, when family does not receive friends at a visitation, there is a greater tendency for some people to come at odd hours or stay too long, not realizing that you and your family also need to rest. Those few hours at the funeral home visitation provide a set time and place for those who want to express their concern to you, as well as creating a limit on those who might not realize when or how long to visit you.

When my own father died, I was amazed at the people who gathered with us to remember his life. He had touched a much broader community than I might otherwise have realized. Though at his death, he had

been retired for ten years, the men with whom he worked painted in some of the corners of his life that we simply could not have known. Friends of my brothers and me—some of whom did not even know my father—came to express their love to us. We regaled each other with stories for that entire evening—and those few hours flew by.

However, we were exhausted from long days and an all-night vigil at the hospital the night he died, so the set hours of the visitation helped us rest when we were at home. Most important, though, was that all of us—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors and fellow parishioners—drew comfort from and comforted one another through the sharing of these stories and the simple act of being together in one place at one time.

Some of Your Concerns. . .

Families commonly are concerned about holding a visitation. You might be concerned about how well you will manage. “What if I break-down?” and “How will I ever find the energy to visit with these people?” might be among your questions. Friends and family members will be very supportive of your tears; they understand that this is a very emotionally-challenging time for you, and your tears might just signal that it is okay for them to shed a few, too.

In my experience, the visitation becomes energizing rather than energy-depleting. At the end of the evening, you are certainly tired. But receiving so much support from people who care for you and whose lives your loved one touched is an incredible gift in your grief.

Visitations do not prevent close friends from also visiting your home. However, they do seem to create a time and place for others who aren’t quite so closely connected to you and your family to acknowledge your grief. Without the visitation, some of these people would undoubtedly visit you at home, perhaps making it more difficult to rest.

Perhaps one of your biggest fears concerns how your loved one will look if you choose to have the casket open. Some people say, “I want to remember him like he was,” but keep in mind that modern preparation techniques make it more likely your loved one will look more like they did before an illness or accident, aiding that picture in your mind. Make no mistake, however; the open casket provides a clear reminder that death has invaded your family’s life.

Also keep in mind that you can personalize the visitation. Favorite music can be played and a photo collage, memorabilia table or life tribute video can provide the “props” for the sharing of stories. Some faith communities incorporate prayers or readings into an informal service during the visitation time if that is your wish. And remember that the visitation can be held in the funeral home chapel as well as a place of worship or other location chosen by you and your family. Not very long ago, family homes were most often used for the visitation—and your funeral director can make the necessary arrangements if that is your choice.

A visitation can provide a wonderful, informal gathering time for family and friends to remember and reflect on a life well-lived. Whether you are choosing traditional burial, cremation with memorial service, or dozens of other options, the visitation can play a meaningful role in the memorial process for you and your family. This event helps everyone draw support from each other and provides a meaningful way for the entire community to acknowledge their grief after the death of your loved one.

This article was written for Butler Funeral and Cremation Services by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy provides clinical oversight to the counseling program of Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach, California. Copyright ©2010 by GriefConnect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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