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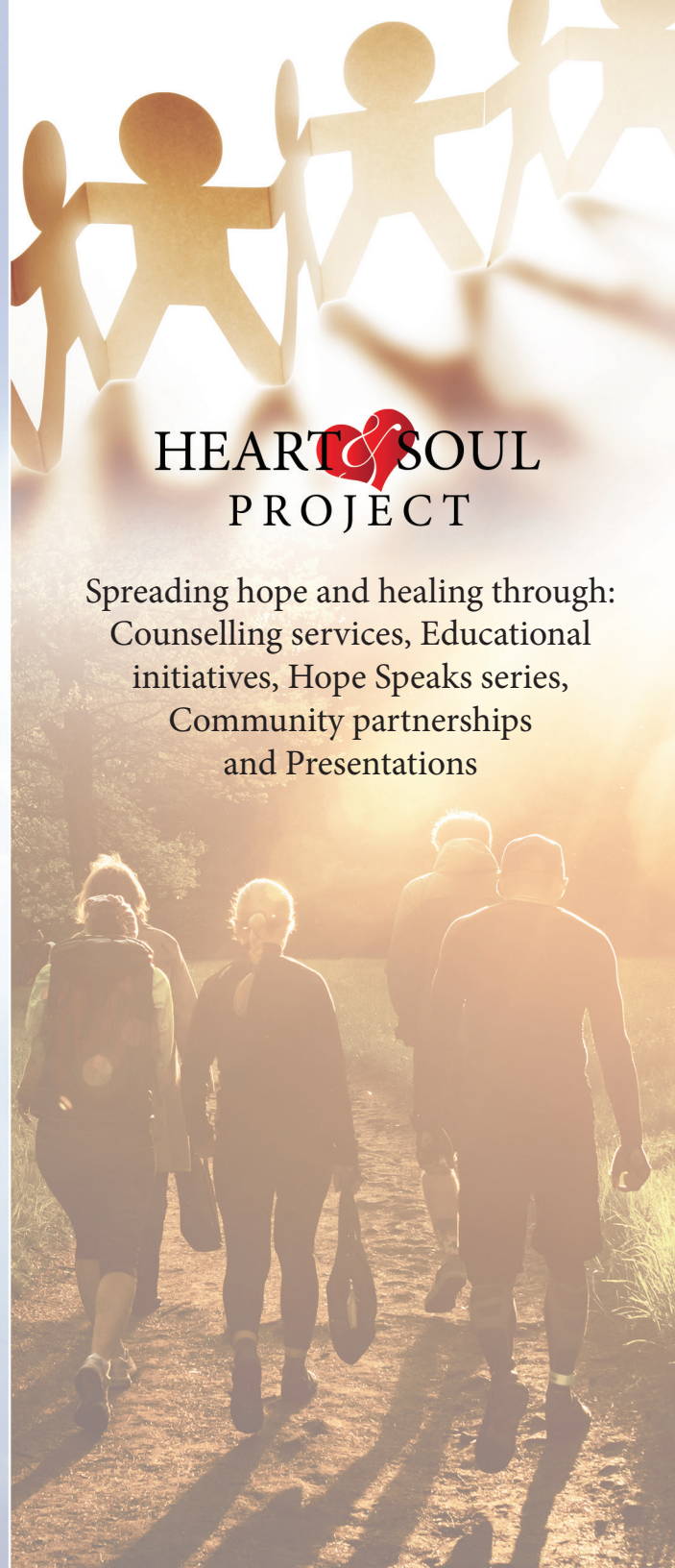


Dr. William G. (Bill) Hoy

Active in the leadership of the Association for Death Education & Counselling, Dr. Hoy holds the organization's advance practice credential, the FT (Fellow in Thanatology). Since 2013, Bill has served on the Association's board and in 2014, Bill was elected to a three-year term as the association's Treasurer.

Bill edits *GriefPerspectives*, an email newsletter read every month by more than 4,500 caregiving professionals and volunteers. His book, *Guiding People Through Grief* (Compass, 2007) is in its fourth printing and the newer volume, *Road to Emmaus* (Compass, 2008) is in its third. Along with Dr. Laura Lewis (University of Western Ontario), he co-authored the chapter "Bereavement Rituals and the Creation of Legacy" in the recently-published *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society* (Routledge, 2011).

His newest book, *Do Funerals Matter? The Purposes and Practices of Death Rituals in Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2013) takes a practical anthropologist's look at the "anchors" present in funeral rituals around the world and throughout history. Additionally, he has written more than 100 journal articles and educational pamphlets for bereaved people and the professionals and volunteers who care for them.



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Volume 6

## WHEN YOU MUST THINK ABOUT A FUNERAL

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“Funerals are just barbaric” was the philosophy Cindy learned from her parents and adopted for herself. She could understand no sound reason for why people invested large sums of money, looked at dead bodies in caskets, and sent extravagant floral arrangements. But when her 17-year old son was killed in a tragic car crash, her views changed.

What she learned for herself was how important the ceremonies were in her own journey through grief. “I couldn’t believe the outpouring of love from Bob’s teenage friends,” she said. “At the visitation, it seemed so important to them to see his body in the casket while holding on to one another. It was hard to see him there and I really cried—but I would never have believed how helpful it would be for me.”

## “FUNERAL” MEANS MANY THINGS

The term funeral holds a diversity of meanings depending on family background, religious affiliation, and cultural heritage. For some, the idea of a funeral service suggests an outdated custom while for others, it is “just the thing to do.”

The funeral service is not just “something we do because of tradition.” Rather, it fulfills some vital functions to help you, your family, and friends in your own journey through grief.

Ceremonies marking the death of a person are observed in virtually every culture throughout the world. Like weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings, and high school graduations, the funeral service is an important “rite of passage.” These rituals help us mark significant changes in life, and provide a framework for the

individual, the family, and the community to pass through those changes.

Funerals are helpful to mourners in at least four ways. These ceremonies help reaffirm basic values and beliefs and remember the ways life was impacted by the person who died. They also help us realize that death has occurred and release the physical presence of the person who died so we can go on living.

Rather than seeing them as outmoded, the scientific study of bereavement validates participation in ceremonies and other mourning customs in supporting healthy grief. A loved person’s death often causes great upheaval of emotions, physical well-being, thinking process and spiritual challenge. As disorienting as the bereavement process is, funerals help bereaved families and communities find direction again.

It is natural to fear being embarrassed or “losing control,” but be assured that these tears are a helpful part of the bereavement experience. Though these parts of the ceremony are difficult, your bereavement needs are simply too important to ignore.

## CREATING A PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL SERVICE

Some people are “down” on funerals because they have never attended one they found meaningful. You can ask your clergy or other officiant to work with you in creating a service that will be personally meaningful to those attending and that meets the four vital needs of all grieving people. These ideas may also help:

- Invite three or four friends to share a favorite memory during the service
- Create a photograph collage to share at the visitation
- Select music that is appropriate to your loved one’s life and beliefs
- Include family members or close friends in reading poems, scripture, or special tributes
- Choose a casket or urn that can be customized with insignia, pictures, or important symbols



- Bring significant items to the visitation to arrange near the casket, including a fishing rod, garden tools, camera equipment, books, artwork, or other expressions of your loved one’s life
- Assist the funeral director in closing the casket as a personal goodbye
- Place a photograph, letter, toy, or symbol in the casket

## TODAY, TOMORROW, AND BEYOND. . .

Grief does not disappear in a few days or even a few months. When a loved one dies, our lives are changed forever; life takes on a new “normal” rather than returning to how things were before. But creating a funeral ceremony that is a reaffirmation of shared values and a tribute to a life lived is vital to helping family members and friends begin the journey we call bereavement.

This article was written by William G. Hoy, a counselor widely known to bereaved people and the professionals who care for them. After more than 16 years working with bereaved people and directing the bereavement counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice in Long Beach, CA, Dr. Hoy now teaches in the Medical Humanities Program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

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