Between Worlds: Communication Perspectives of Female Funeral Celebrants in British Columbia --- A Visual Ethnography
by
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MASTER OF ARTS

In

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

This visual ethnography is an interactive, online, multimedia project that explores female funeral celebrant perspectives on communicating with members of the general public who are immersed in liminal states of consciousness during the process of bereavement. Non-representational theory is incorporated to afford better understanding of female funeral celebrant communication practices. The multimedia project is made up of select video and audio clips taken from in-depth interviews completed with four female funeral celebrants in British Columbia, Canada about their specialized communication work. Favourite poetry and quotes from celebrants are included. Three main themes emerge as central to funeral celebrant work: witnessing, following and engaging with the process; the limen as creative source --- companioning mourners at the threshold; and the art of (irretrievable) performance through facilitating affective, participatory ritual. These same themes are reflected in the interactive, multimedia visual ethnography, which may be engaged with here:

http://prezi.com/w85_hps4acf1/between-worlds-communication-perspectives-of-female-funeral-celebrants-in-british-columbia/?auth_key=7536c83649629fcf0547168f04462c8f089a6179

Keywords: funeral celebrant communication, visual ethnography, non-representational theories, grief-induced liminal states, participatory ritual
Between Worlds:
Communication Perspectives of Female Funeral Celebrants in British Columbia

An interactive, multimedia, visual ethnography

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“When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.”
Friedrich Nietzsche
Just like lay chaplains of countless past societies, contemporary celebrants are called upon to perform as Masters of Ceremony for perfunctory and crisis-based societal rituals. These include marriages, baby-namings, end-of-life rituals, and other important life events. Celebrants who specialize in end-of-life rituals are known as funeral celebrants.

It is estimated that more than 1.1 billion people on the planet identify as non-religious. Of these, there is a growing contingent who identify as spiritual, but not religious (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). As such, the role of the funeral celebrant exists in order to help these members of the general public design and perform customized end-of-life ceremonies.

The majority of funeral celebrants are women who predominantly attend to the ceremonial needs of spiritual, non-religious and/or mixed-faith, bereaved members of society. This is usually for a brief duration only --- from the time a death occurs to the time of burial or interment. Celebrants companion and guide bereaved initiands through facilitating rites and rituals of transition intended to help mourners through the initial stages of grief.
A funeral celebrant provides funeral, memorial or celebration-of-life services that are highly personalized, and reflect the beliefs, personality and lifestyle of the person who has died.
“The visual has implications not only for the discourses of modernity and ethnographic practice, but also for our understandings of the individuals who are the subjects of ethnography” (Pink, 2006, p. 16).
This qualitative inquiry into the life world of funeral celebrants takes the form of a visual ethnography. It is based on in-depth interviews completed with four, female funeral celebrants in British Columbia about the specialized kind of communication work that they do. It includes select video and audio clips of the celebrants speaking to three major themes that emerged during the interviews. Namely, the process-oriented nature of the work, companioning bereaved individuals through grief-induced liminal states of consciousness, and the art of irretrievable performance through facilitating affective, participatory ritual.
The Celebrants

Susan Breiddal – Celebrant and Hospice Counsellor also in private practice, Victoria, B.C.

Pamela Harte – Celebrant, Retired School Counsellor, Palliative Care Volunteer, Brentwood Bay, B.C.

Joyce Murphy – Celebrant, Retired Nurse, Victoria, B.C.

Norma Wellwood, past Celebrant and Funeral Director, Vancouver, B.C.

(audio only by request)
IN THE EVENT OF DEATH:
Witnessing, Following, and Engaging With the Process
Entering the unknown
Funeral celebrants have developed a specific subculture based largely on process awareness and sensory-grounded capabilities for working with people in intense emotional and altered states of consciousness. Celebrants use their finely-tuned senses as proprioceptive tools to help them perceive and navigate these altered states while communicating with those who are bereaved.
Witnessing what unfolds
Trusting in and being open to the process
Supporting the process
Using intuition and precognition
Holding strong emotion
Making sense of body language and other signals
Being in the moment
Temporal unfolding of the work
Grieving as a process
THE LIMEN AS CREATIVE SOURCE:
Companioneing Mourners at the Threshold
limen: a sensory threshold or subjective state between two different existential planes; characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorientation from established structures and hierarchies (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1967)

liminality: characterizes the passage through the limen
“The conquest of the fear of death is the recovery of life’s joy. One can experience an unconditional affirmation of life only when one has accepted death, not as contrary to life, but as an aspect of life. Life in its becoming is always shedding death, and on the point of death. The conquest of fear yields the courage of life.”

(Campbell, 1988, p. 188)
Crossing the threshold
Experiencing liminal states
Liminal states can be experienced as sacred and enticing or dangerous and frightening, depending on the context of the given situation. That is, who is experiencing the altered states, how skilled they are in negotiating them, and what kind of support the receive from others whilst navigating them.
Connecting with those in liminal states
Understanding liminal spatiality and temporality
Healing potential of liminal grieving
Living in the tension
Channelling creative energy through the limen
Constantly facing the limen/death
Affecting and being affected
Everything is relationally constituted

(Thrift, 2004)
THE ART OF (IRRETRIEVABLE) PERFORMANCE: Facilitating Affective, Participatory Ritual
All performances are encounters with the not-yet-known, aided by our intuition (Deleuze, 1983; Dewsbury, 2000)
“That whole problem of breaking out of the field of waking consciousness into a field of dream consciousness is a basic problem of ritual... I would say the main function of ritual is to orient an individual to the dream consciousness level, which is the productive level... Dream consciousness is further in, and it’s a creative consciousness, whereas waking consciousness is a critical consciousness.”

(Campbell, 1990, p. 60)
Bridging states through rites of passage
Allowing for sacred space
Integrating loss through storytelling and mirroring
Containing liminal energy
End-of-life ritual performance is a way to witness and acknowledge death, enter into moments of embodied experience, and move with the energies of life. Rituals are most successful when they are participatory, inclusive, and fully engage the senses. No two rituals are ever the same. The number of variables, and therefore possible outcomes, make them somewhat unpredictable.
Employing multimodality
Making ritual participatory
Respecting limits
The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi (from Barks, 2004, p. 109)
To all those we’ve loved and lost who continue to affect our lives.
Special thanks to:
Susan Breiddal
Pamela Harte
Joyce Murphy
Norma Wellwood
and
Robert Birch
Michael Real
Phillip Vannini

★ Video/audiotaping by Don Ollsin
♪ Music by Jonn Ollsin
□ Photographs by Sandra E. Ollsin

With much gratitude for my loving family and all of their assistance and support.
Thank you for engaging with the material presented here. I hope you found it to be of value. Upon exiting the Prezi you will find a comment section just below the main screen if you scroll down. I invite you to offer comments and enter into dialogue with other viewers about the subject(s) explored here.

Sandra Ollsin
References


## Appendix A: Video & Audio Clip Key (55 clips in total)

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