



# Grieving Together: The value of public ritual for family members of executed persons

by Susannah Sheffer

## *Editor's note*

*Here in Australia, many people are talking about the looming executions of two Australians, Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, in Indonesia. It seems a highly appropriate time to be considering the experiences of family members of executed persons. In this context, we particularly appreciate the following paper on this topic by Susannah Sheffer from Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights. It has been written in a US context which is quite different than the context of current conversations in Australia. Firstly, executions in the USA are far more widely accepted than here in Australia and more than 30 executions take place there each year (see <http://deathpenaltyinfo.org>). Secondly, Susannah, is writing about executions undertaken in response to murder (in contrast to the executions for drug smuggling that are currently the focus of attention here in Australia). And thirdly, the overwhelming media focus on the plight of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran is including, to some degree, an acknowledgement of their families' suffering, whereas in the situations Susannah is describing, this rarely occurs. Despite these differences of context, we hope this article will spark conversation in our field about responses to families of those who are executed.*

*Dulwich Centre has a long history of publishing articles and books questioning and challenging the existence of prisons, and the real effects of the criminal 'justice' system on marginalised communities. We are profoundly opposed to the death penalty and relieved that Australian families do not usually have to fear or endure the experience of their loved ones being executed. We are deeply saddened for the families of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran.*

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## *Abstract*

Families of people who have been executed receive little sympathy for their grief and little recognition of the execution's traumatic impact. Their grief is disenfranchised in that the loss cannot be publicly mourned and is not socially supported (Doka, 1989; Jones & Beck, 2006). This paper describes an attempt to address some of the harm to families of executed persons through the creation of a private support gathering and public remembrance ceremony. Designed by the organisation, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights, the ceremony gave participating family members an opportunity to come together, mark their losses publicly through a symbolic act, have their grief witnessed by others, and acknowledge both the murder victim and the family member who had been executed. As a demonstration of the value of public and communal ceremony in the aftermath of traumatic loss, this discussion offers an example of a way to respond to losses that have been stigmatised and re-establish community among those whose grief has been disenfranchised.

***Key words: death penalty, disenfranchised grief, families of executed, traumatic loss, ritual, ceremony***

An execution is a death that no-one is expected to mourn. An inventory of criminal justice protocols or even best practices in bereavement counselling would suggest that executed persons have no families; their needs are that unrecognised and unimagined. A newspaper editorial said of such families, 'We hardly give them a second thought – if we notice them at all (The families left behind, 2005).' If families of the executed do seek notice by trying to articulate or demonstrate their grief, they are often met with a response that disavows their emotional experience. Speaking almost three years after her father's execution, Brandie told an interviewer:

His execution is something I have to deal with emotionally by myself. There's nobody out there who wants to help me and talk to me about what happened. People don't have any sympathy or empathy for me. They say, 'It doesn't matter – he got what he deserved'. They don't think about the people who have to live afterwards. If you try to tell somebody about your story, people say, 'I don't even understand why you feel bad'. (Gardner, 2013, p. 4)

As Brandie's comment begins to suggest, families of the executed are isolated in at least two ways: in their emotional experience and in their social experience of bereavement. They suspect and too often discover that other people do not understand, sympathise with, or confirm their grief and the other feelings that accompany their family member's death sentence and execution. Meanwhile, they receive no public acknowledgement of their loss, no community witnessing of their attempts to mourn and to remember.

In the following pages I describe a small but significant effort to create an opportunity for a communal experience and a publicly witnessed grieving ritual for families of the executed. In addition to highlighting the suffering of family members of executed persons, the story of this ceremony and its impact may suggest a model for using ritual to address trauma, particularly trauma that has not been widely acknowledged.

## The need for public acknowledgement

One could argue that most individual deaths go by without public notice or ceremony, and that lack of public acknowledgement for families of the executed is therefore not unusual. There is an important difference, however, between a loss that, though acute only for an ordinary-sized group of family and friends, is nevertheless socially understood and recognised, and a grief that is socially *disenfranchised*, as Doka (1989) has termed it. Jones and Beck (2006) have suggested that no better illustration of disenfranchised grief exists than the grief of death row families, and indeed the definition reads as if it were written with these families in

mind. Disenfranchised grief is characterised as 'grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka, 1989, p. 4).

In this case, the grief of families of the executed cannot be publicly acknowledged or supported because of the stigma associated with those who are sentenced to death – a stigma so strong that they are often described as 'monsters' rather than human beings – and because the manner of death is paradoxically both deliberate and sanctioned. To the family members, execution feels like a killing, but the traumatic impact of an execution is not commonly recognised in the way that the impact of other forms of life-taking is. Since families of executed persons do frequently experience the execution as a traumatic event (Long, 2011; Sheffer & Cushing, 2006; Sheffer & Long, 2011), it follows that they might benefit from responses that have historically proved helpful in the aftermath of a traumatic event. Bloom and Reichert (1998) suggest that ritual and ceremony have long been important to recovery from trauma, and yet it is likely harder to engage in ritual or ceremonial acts when the trauma is so unacknowledged.

Execution creates a need for shared mourning and remembrance for yet another reason: because of how an execution disrupts the survivors' relationship to the broader community. The ambiguity surrounding the responsibility for their loved one's death – the explanation is that 'the state' took the life of their family member – can make survivors wonder if everyone is somehow in on the act or at least complicit with it. It can feel as if the public has not only failed to acknowledge the loss but has also somehow caused or at least sanctioned it (see Sheffer & Cushing, 2006 for more on this idea).

## Bringing families together

In 2005, the nonprofit organisation, Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights (MVFHR), organised a private support circle and public remembrance ceremony for a group of family members of executed persons in the United States. The organisation's membership had from the start comprised family members of homicide victims and family members of people who had been executed, and the event in late 2005 was meant to mark the launch of a specific project, 'No Silence, No Shame', which would focus on the distinct needs and experience of families of the executed.

Though the 18 participants who gathered in Austin, Texas, for the one-day event represented only a small percentage of the hundreds of surviving family members of executed persons that presumably exist in the United States, for most

of the 18 it was nevertheless the first time they had met or spoken intimately with anyone who had suffered the same kind of loss.

In designing the event, we on the staff had consulted with family members of the executed within the organisation's membership and had come up with a deliberate two-part structure: first a private gathering, and then a public ceremony, each serving distinct but complementary purposes. The private gathering, which lasted about two hours, gave participants time to speak confidentially within the group about what they remembered and how they had been affected by the experience of a loved one's death sentence and execution. The facilitators offered some questions as guidance for those who wanted it, and most participants did choose to address some of these questions: How did you learn that your loved one was charged with a capital crime? What was the execution like? Who was left behind? How were you treated by others? What are the ongoing effects of being the relative of someone who was executed?

Such a gathering, offering each participant a chance to speak without interruption in a circle of others who have been similarly affected, is clearly powerful. One participant said afterward:

I was in a place where I could really be me. I was not looked down upon because I loved my brother. I could finally just be open and just tell the truth, just be real. I could talk to people who could identify with what I was saying, because they had dealt with the same pain and the same hurt. I felt like those people were my family. I came back [home afterward] with another burst of energy and strength to go on. (Sheffer & Cushing, 2006, p. 13, and telephone interview with the author)

And another:

I cannot describe the peace I felt, sitting around that table and hearing people talk. I was crying, but yet I had such peace. That is a peace you can't get anywhere else. Everybody's pain was different, everybody's situation was different, but I felt a bond with everyone that was like good medicine. I feel strength from it now as I think of it. (Sheffer, 2009, p. 3, and telephone interview with the author)

By the time they came out of the room where the private gathering had been held and began to prepare for the public ceremony, the participants had developed some trust in one another and some sense of communal experience, which in turn may have helped them to feel that it would now be possible to share or manifest their grief in front of a wider

group. That had been our assumption in scheduling the private gathering to take place before the public ceremony. Rituals build community but also assume that enough community already exists to support the ritual (Kollar, 1989), so it helps if those who are about to engage in a public remembrance ceremony don't feel entirely alone as they prepare to stand before others in such an exposed and vulnerable manner.

## *A public ritual*

The design of the public ceremony was simple. A vase on a table at the front of the room created a stage area. The participants gathered off to the side and then each in turn approached the table and placed a rose in the vase in memory of their executed family member. Each said something brief about the person whom the rose was commemorating: 'I place this rose in memory of my brother, who was executed in Texas in 2003', and so on. Some chose to say a few additional words.

We had chosen roses simply for their aesthetic and availability; they otherwise carried no particular meaning, though a couple of participants commented afterward on the symbolism of turning the loss into something beautiful. Certainly flowers are a common mourning symbol and the growing collection of individual flowers in one large vase may have felt like a representation of the shared experience linking the individual losses. Whatever the specific resonance for each participant, the ritual act of placing the flower was crucial to the ceremony. Indeed, the flower placing can be thought of as the 'core symbolic act' (Kollar, 1989, p. 275) that made the event into a ritual. Placing a rose oneself is a different experience from simply observing a vase full of flowers meant to symbolise the group's losses. Each participant's accompanying words ('I place this rose') had the effect of a deliberate marking: 'I do this act, I mark this loss'.

The ceremonial gesture was also a kind of storytelling, albeit briefer and less detailed than the storytelling the participants did in their private gathering. 'This is what happened', the gesture said, 'This is what I am commemorating; this is what I want witnesses to recognise'. The placing of the roses recognised the commonality of the experience of losing a family member to execution without blurring the individual differences; it said, in effect, 'I place a rose for my own uniquely beloved family member, whose execution was a singular event, and by placing that rose in a vase of other such roses, in the context of a communal ritual, I acknowledge the common experience that I share with others whose loved ones have been executed. Through this act, I begin to feel that I am not alone, and I demonstrate to the witnessing audience that I am not alone.'

## Acknowledging both sets of losses

Given that Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights is, as noted earlier, an organisation of both family members of homicide victims and family members of people who have been executed, it was central to the mission and values of the organisation that the loss of the murder victim be recognised as well, even in a ceremony focusing on the loss that executions create. A victims' organisation could not credibly fail to acknowledge (and did not want to fail to acknowledge) the victims even in a ceremony focusing on the families of the offenders. It was therefore central to the design of the ceremony that the pain and loss not be viewed in zero-sum terms, with a focus on one loss effectively blinding the participants or witnesses to the other. Instead, the ritual's design explicitly recognised both.

Thus, in addition to placing a rose commemorating the loss of their executed family member, the participants also placed a rose for, and spoke the name of, the victim of murder in the crime. Comments from the participants tell us that this holistic acknowledgment was important not only for the sponsoring organisation but for the individuals as well.

To acknowledge the victim's family is paramount to me. It was absolutely the right thing to do.  
(Telephone interview with the author)

I'm so remorseful for the loss of [the victim of my relative's crime], it felt more complete to me, to do [the ceremony] that way. (Telephone interview with the author)

On the one hand, families of the executed wonder why they are guilty by relationship, why they, having committed no crime, are vilified and treated as if they have. At the same time, the second speaker's comment reminds us that family members of executed persons carry and struggle with their own feelings of remorse *even if* they are not guilty of anything and are not responsible for their loved one's acts. In this sense, we can see why acknowledgement and the chance to express some sorrow about that loss meant something important and made the ceremony feel more complete.

## Being witnessed

Families of executed persons, as we have seen, are accustomed to trepidation about how others will respond to them. They have suffered a loss that is not only publicly unrecognised but is actually sometimes publicly celebrated. During the private gathering, some of the participants described themselves standing outside the prison on the night of the execution and hearing others cheering for their loved one's death.

The public audience for the remembrance ceremony was therefore important. The invited guests served as a kind of stand-in for the community at large, in that they were people who had not themselves experienced the loss of a family member to execution but who could, by their presence, witness and confirm the ritual being performed. Yet they didn't quite represent a cross-section of society, in that they were for the most part people at least somewhat familiar with the issue of the death penalty and generally inclined to be sympathetic to the participants. It's true that there might have been some additional benefit to inviting a wider group so that even strong supporters of the death penalty could have the opportunity to observe the impact of executions on surviving family members. Invitations to members of the press did aim to serve that goal of garnering wider coverage of the event. But other considerations also influenced the choice of audience. Given that this was the very first gathering of its kind and the participants were vulnerable to others' response, it was important to offer a balance between safety and public exposure. Compared to the private gathering that the participants had just held, the remembrance ceremony certainly had the feel of a public event, but it was not as open and unprotected as, say, an event in a town square would have been. Nevertheless, from participants' later comments, the event seems to have felt both ceremonial enough and public enough to achieve some powerful effects.

One participant described how she felt while standing with the others waiting to place the roses.

I wasn't nervous, because we were well prepared for [the ceremony], but I was overcome with intense emotion that I can't really describe. It was very bizarre. I can't really say 'sad' or 'happy'; I can't put it into words. I was shaking, but it wasn't nerves, it was pure intensity.  
(Telephone interview with the author)

It's as if this participant recognised and experienced on a visceral level the sense of having entered into a ritual space, where her participation might have the power to transform or at least in some way *act on* her heretofore private grief. The power of this kind of remembrance ceremony is perhaps best summarised by this comment from Jonnie, sister of an executed man:

It helps to grieve your loved one in public. [The ceremony] actually got the attention of the other people right there in that room. A lot of times people don't see grief. The reporter just wants to get a picture. Publicly grieving is different. You want other people to know that you're human and your people were human, and you love them too. (Sheffer & Cushing, 2006, p. 14, and telephone interview with the author)

The ritual was powerful not only because it was performed publicly but because it 'got the attention' of those who witnessed it. The grief of family members of the executed made a visible impact on the audience, and in turn this sister of an executed man felt that she had been seen in a very specific way. The distinction between a reporter's 'getting a picture' and the audience members actually witnessing the grief is an interesting one, and part of the difference may have to do with whose interests are being served through the seeing.

One senses in Jonnie's comment the extent to which it is not just the families' grief that has been disenfranchised. Jonnie is alluding to a more general sense of being cast out, thought of as not human or as if one's family member was not human. If prison exiles a person from society, execution does so even more profoundly, in both literal and symbolic terms, and it can exile the surviving family members emotionally as well. We can see all the more powerfully, then, how a ritual of grief and remembrance, performed together for others to witness, can create a circle that draws families of the executed back in.

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