

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

DEATH MAKES no sense. How can someone we know and love exist one day and then (poof!) be gone forever? Religions have their explanations, and faith, as a belief system, suggests that everlasting life or reincarnation ensure that existence transcends a temporal stay on earth. That might be true. For believers, it is true. For non-believers, you only go around once.

When we look at the rites and rituals for death, they can be interpreted as ways to help the deceased journey to the "other side," but they're also ways to help the survivors reknit the social fabric ripped by the loss of a loved one. They are ways to bring the community together, not only at the funeral, but also to remind the mourners that they are not alone. Not alone in their grief and not alone in the world.

We send flowers, donations and casseroles to say, "We miss that person, too" and "We are

here to help you when you need whatever it was that the departed one provided." We deliver eulogies and place ads in newspapers to announce that people have died, when the services are, and why that person's life mattered.

When my older daughter, Elizabeth, was 6, we had to go to New York to pay a shiva call on a friend from my childhood. We brought home-baked quiches and brownies and spent much of the day telling the stories of our intertwined families. Barbara, the friend, older by six years, asked me how the chocolate stain came to be on her prom dress, and I finally told her. We laughed, we cried, and then my daughter and I returned to Philadelphia. I asked Elizabeth how she'd describe the day to her kindergarten class.

"When someone dies, you

can't bring them back," she said, "so you bring the family their favorite foods and make them laugh so they can forget for a little while how sad they are."

Liz got it, so I knew she'd know what to do when she was an adult. There's a lot of comfort in the familiar, especially when we've lost a valuable piece of it.

All of this makes abundant sense when we know either the deceased or the family. But what about when the person who died is a stranger? What are the rituals, and what is their purpose?

When there's a killing at a school, business or neighborhood corner these days, people bring notes, flowers and stuffed animals. How much of that is to emphasize to the family that the public cares? And how much of it is for us?

How do we decide who to

mourn? And how intensely? Why do we need to let others know we're mourning? How do we decide which deaths to commemorate and which to ignore?

For example, since 2003, more than 200 journalists have died or been killed while covering the Iraq war. Most of them, not surprisingly, were Iraqis. Yet, for Americans, it's as if most of those deaths never occurred.

We know about columnist Michael Kelly and David Bloom of NBC News, but we don't know even the names of the others. Do we care?

When Tim Russert died, his death was covered intensely during the week leading up to his funeral. He was a prominent journalist and seemed like a terrific man, but the media tributes seemed excessive.

I don't know what the right

The way we mourn

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amount would be. One good thing about the rituals is that each step is laid out for us. We follow them even when we've even lost sight of what they meant in the first place — we do it because that's the way it's done. At a stressful time, that can be soothing.

When I thought of Tim Russert, I asked myself, is it because we don't have royalty that we make our media stars the focus of so much attention? Or is it the 24/7 news monster that makes us feel as if we should be mourning more?

Is it about them or — about us? Are we afraid our own deaths will come too soon and we won't be remembered? Does it have more to do with our self-worth and sadness for ourselves? RIP means "rest in peace. Perhaps it now also means "repeat in public." ★

Ann Rosen Spector is a clinical psychologist in Center City and an adjunct member of the psychology department at Rutgers-Camden.

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PAGE 19