

Visible Signs



“You’re a good bloke, Q”. It is one of life’s joyful mysteries that extraordinary clarity is often found among those who live with the chaos of mental illness. When Neil Quinlan (a.k.a. ‘Q’) left EACH earlier this year the Halcyon Men’s Group gathered over coffee to say farewell. This ‘farewell speech’ from one of the men said all that needed to be said.

In the most ordinary setting – a coffee shop in Ferntree Gully – we performed a ritual: a deliberate, intentional, communal activity, with a beginning and an end. Like a gift between friends, or an engagement ring – a tangible thing pointing to an intangible reality – our gathering was a symbol of something greater than itself, of gratitude for Q’s contribution to the group and goodwill for the next stage in his life.

Some years ago I was employed as a mental health outreach worker. The time came for me to ‘exit a client’. His name was Phil. We had arranged a time when I could introduce him to his new support worker. Phil decided we do this at a local coffee shop. We met, and Phil ordered coffee and cake for all three of us. At the end of the meeting he thanked me for my support, and paid the bill. If I had been wondering whether my support had made any difference at all, this simple ritual convinced me that our time together had mattered, had counted for something. He had articulated this through the ritual. And for Phil, he had been restored from ‘a client being exited’ to a man saying farewell.

Rituals give shape and content to the commitment people make to one another in marriage, the grief we feel at the death of one we have loved, the sadness and fear we might feel when a relationship ends. There is the reassurance that comes from all the little rituals that families practice to remind them that they belong to one another. All these and so many others make meaning in a world that is always at risk of collapsing into barrenness and hostility. In the church we call these ‘sacraments’ – a visible sign of an inward grace.

Death and dying intensify the need for rituals of meaning. A few years ago I led a funeral for a man who had lived almost his entire adult life in the world of psychiatric illness. His name was John. His family had been professionally successful and John had lived his frailty in the shadow of their strength. At his funeral the church was packed and afterwards John’s family expressed to me their astonishment at how many people knew and cared for him.

Rituals are powerful because they enact a story that speaks beyond jobs being lost, relationships failing, mental and physical illness, imprisonment, and even beyond life itself. Rituals of meaning tell the kind of stories that acknowledge what is – pain, fear, uncertainty, grief, anger, confusion, frustration – and then invite us to see that even there, in these places, are the hidden seeds of new life.

The Uniting Church has a ritual called 'A Service of Healing for those Whose Marriage is Ending'. The gathered community says together,

We share your sorrow.

We rejoice in your hope.

We pray for your new life.

Earlier in the service a candle has been extinguished. Now it is lit. Something has happened. The possibility of hope has been named. A visible sign of an inward grace.