

Rituals that helped heal a nation after a terror attack

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We have identified six types of rituals that were spontaneously organized by communities directly after the terror attacks in Norway in 2011, write Anthony Hawke and Ottar Ness.

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This article is about rituals that helped a nation heal after a terror attack. Our aim is to describe some of the spontaneous rituals organized at a local and national level in response to a dreadful event. Following a brief review of the international research literature and a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of Norwegian newspaper articles and an Internet news site, we identify six overarching rituals that emphasize different socio-psychological phases related to collective crisis response and recovery. We discuss how these rituals helped a nation come to grips with the most shocking and deadly event in its present-day history. Furthermore, we suggest ways in which professional helpers and volunteer staff could have involved themselves in these rituals as an agent of healing and change.

The attack and the immediate response

On Friday afternoon, the 22nd of July 2011, a devastating explosion outside the entrance of Norway's government headquarters in downtown Oslo suddenly shattered the summer tranquility. Mayhem erupted in the city center. Parts of Oslo resembled a bombed suburb of a war-torn city. Severely injured pedestrians lay moaning in agony on the streets. The blast had killed people both inside in HQ and outside on the road and pavement. Bodies lay strewn in the streets among the tangled wreckage of cars and other smoldering debris. The government buildings were badly damaged. Many windows had been blown out and glass lay scattered on the pavement below. Several of the buildings were on fire. A few hours later the media reported that shots had been heard on Utøya Island (forty minutes outside Oslo), where the youth of Norway's Labour Party were holding their annual summer camp. Reports quickly emerged describing a gunman dressed in a police officer's uniform who was walking around the island and summarily executing young people at point blank range. Sixty-eight youth were shot dead on Utøya Island that fateful summer evening. Another died later in the hospital. Many others were seriously injured.

Norway is a small, peaceful, and tightknit country. On the 22nd of July 2011, the population, totaling five million people, was in utter shock. Norwegians had experienced nothing like this day since the Second World War when German forces occupied the country. Emergency services struggled to cope. Operational centers were set up in Oslo and at a hotel on the mainland adjacent to Utøya Island. Police in a

rubber dingy finally landed on the island and were able to apprehend a young Norwegian man. It emerged that he had attacked the Labour government headquarters in Oslo and Labour youth on Utøya Island because he held the Labour Party responsible for what he called a mass immigration of Muslims and “non-European ethnic groups” to Norway.

Collective impact, intervention, and recovery

Ida Marie Høeg, an associate at the Institute for Church, Religion, and Worldview Research in Oslo, maintains that the terror attacks in Oslo affected a whole nation and left people “feeling sad and with a sense of unreality” (Høeg, 2015, p. 198). Research unequivocally links major disasters to a general shock response involving entire communities. When entire communities are affected by a disaster, it would seem logical that support services encourage mass responses that promote collective coping strategies. Nurmi, Räsänen and Oksanen (2014) explain how *the community* is affected by mass violence. They maintain that since the whole community can be affected by a major disaster, “social support provided at a community level must promote recovery and togetherness” (p. 303). They further emphasize that “a rise in social cohesiveness after a critical event can carry with it negative consequences such as a lack of consensus, polarization within the community, and a focus on affixing blame” (p. 303).

Saul (2014) states that promoting resilience and well-being within the community will encourage collective recovery. Thus, collective recovery is a process that is constructed through collective action, reflection, and narration. Saul stresses the importance of collective recovery that presupposes a concerted support apparatus directed toward the entire community. Thus, the importance of establishing support mechanisms directed toward local communities cannot be underestimated.

Breckenridge and James (2012) emphasize the importance of assisting individuals, local communities, and national entities. Not addressing the needs of local communities also results in failure “to explore fully the therapeutic or mediating role of social or community support in surviving trauma” (p. 242). Further, if practitioners accept that whole communities and social networks can be traumatized by a single critical event, then the possibility of helping communities heal becomes a necessity.

Moscardino, Capello and Altoe (2009) conclude that social cohesion, social capital, and sense of community are key elements promoting mental health and well-being after a national disaster. These three factors provide meaningful social ties in local communities, and they enhance communities’ ability to cope with trauma. In other words, helping the community means helping individuals directly affected by a critical event work through the trauma they have been subjected to.

One method through which communities can be helped in dealing with a serious crisis is by creating rituals that express solidarity, support, and togetherness with those who are directly affected by the critical incident (Breckenridge & James, 2012; Chauvin,

McDaniel, Banks et al., 2014; Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Kristensen, 2014; Dyregrov & Kristensen, 2015; Dyregrov, Straume, Bugge, Dyregrov, Heltne & Hordvik, 2012; Kropf & Jones, 2014; Nurmi et al., 2014). Whether or not rituals are an effective way to help communities requires further research. Breckenridge and James (2012) suggest that relevant interventions following a critical incident should include increasing community resilience by recognizing the importance of rituals that bring people together with a sense of common purpose. They further emphasize that interventions must reflect the interdependence between the individual and their community. Nurmi and colleagues (2014) conclude that collective rituals of mourning play an important role in the healing of the community. Chauvin, McDaniel, Banks et al. (2014) stress the importance of commemorating rituals that reframe the traumatic event and give meaning to participants through honoring the lives of the deceased. They conclude that “preserving positive memories is an effective grief-focused activity” (p. 422), and “commemorative techniques will serve to foster the return of organization, order, and logical thinking” (p. 422).

Rituals theory

The word “ritual” comes from the Latin word “ritualis,” which is a derivative of the Latin word “ritus” or “rite” in English. In social anthropology, one thinks of the phrase “rite of passage,” which describes rituals that affirm a child has become an adult (Van Gennep, 1960). Rando (1985) defined a ritual as a “specific behavior or activity that gives symbolic expression to certain feelings and thoughts of the actor(s) individually or as a group. It may be habitually repetitive behavior or a one-time occurrence” (p. 236).

Rando (1985) identifies nine elements that define the beneficial significance of rituals: (1) the power of acting out; (2) legitimization of emotional and physical ventilation; (3) delimitation of grief; (4) the opportunity to venerate the deceased; (5) the possibility to process mourning and confront unresolved grief; (6) the opportunity to learn through doing and through experience; (7) the provision of structure and form for ambivalent and vaguely defined affect and cognition; (8) the opportunity for significant others to connect through common experience; and (9) the structuring of future ceremonies and anniversaries.

Gino and Norton (2013) write that research certainly does confirm that rituals can be effective but only with regard to influencing ourselves individually or collectively. Therefore, whereas a typical rain-stick ceremony from South Africa might not necessarily bring much needed rain, the ritual might reduce anxiety with regard to a shortage of water resources. Other rituals might help relieve grief after the death of a loved one or increase self-confidence before an exam or job interview. Whether or not rituals actually help in attaining a particular outcome seems not to be important for those performing the ritual. They perform the ritual anyway. The crucial point is that the ritual is believed to bring relief, and this belief in turn brings peace of mind, confidence, and optimism for the future. Rituals tend to restore feelings of control in challenging circumstances (Gino & Norton, 2013). By performing a ritual, one is endeavoring to

transcend from being a helpless victim to becoming an active agent in one's own destiny. Rituals provide a method by which a person or group can cope with fear and uncertainty and replace these negative sensations with inner peace.

Høeg (2015) emphasizes the important link between rituals and emotions, which is generally attributed to Durkheim's work from the 1970's (Durkheim, 1982). Høeg (2015) writes: "Terrorist attacks are deeply traumatic" (p. 201). Saul (2014) also concludes that the need for local communities to express their collective grief and shock can be met through the staging of collective rituals. Therefore, Saul (2014) claims that such staging brings shattered communities together, thereby re-establishing a collective togetherness and resilience. The rituals we describe in this article are collective rituals that involve entire communities.

The Community Capacity Model

Kropf and Jones (2014) state that "public tragedies create disruptions across multiple domains of community functioning" (p. 281). Therefore, it is important to focus on not only the individual but also the way in which a critical incident affects and damages the whole community. In their article, Kropf and Jones (2014) present the Community Capacity Model (CCM). This model suggests that communities face three stages of adaptation: (1) the crisis stage; (2) the processing of the event; and (3) the adaptation phase.

The authors of this article describe spontaneous rituals that were organized at a local and national level in response to a shocking event. We attempt to describe what emotions and psychological mechanisms these rituals express as part of the process of coming to terms with a national tragedy.

Method

The objective of the article was verified through a brief review of the international research literature and a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of Norwegian newspaper articles and the Internet news site of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). Qualitative document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, including both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material (Bowen, 2009). The analytic procedures entailed finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained in documents. Document analysis yields data such as excerpts, quotations, or entire passages that are then organized into major themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis (Bowen, 2009; Labuschagne, 2003).

During December 2015, we searched through online versions of Verdens Gang (VG; national newspaper), Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK Rogaland), and Aftenposten (national newspaper) looking for information about rituals related to the 22nd July terror attacks. The keywords/phrases we used in our search were "22nd July," "terror attack," "remembering," and "public action." From this online search, we

used the following criteria to make a short list of rituals described in detail in these newspapers and the news site: (1) The rituals had to have been performed after the 22nd July attacks and as a direct result of the attacks; (2) We focused only on public rituals where large numbers of people had been involved; and (3) Rituals that involved the whole country were of particular interest as were rituals based in Stavanger. The local rituals based in Stavanger were important because the first authors' involvement in crisis management after the 22nd of July was rooted in the same city.

After having read through the selected Norwegian newspapers and the Internet news site, we compiled a list of rituals that local communities had created and participated in. The nature of these rituals could suggest that Norwegian people were expressing emotions related to six different phases of working through trauma: (1) the shock phase; (2) counting our losses; (3) saying farewell; (4) justice must be done; (5) moving on; and (6) rebuilding. In many senses, these six phases are similar to the three above-mentioned CCM phases. However, through our analysis, we added a further three phases that covered a range of emotions otherwise not accounted for in the CCM model. In each of the six phases, there were rituals that allowed for expression of different emotions. In summary, each of these phases incorporated rituals we believe might have helped the nation to heal.

In the CCM first stage (the crisis stage), we have incorporated the following three phases: "the shock phase"; "counting our losses"; and "saying farewell." In the CCM's second stage (the processing phase), we have incorporated the following phase: "justice must be done." Finally, in the CCM's third stage (adaptation) we have incorporated the following two phases: "moving on" and "rebuilding." We will now describe these stages, emphasizing the rituals used within one of them.

Findings

Stage 1: Rituals related to the shock phase

Kropf and Jones (2014) maintain that immediately after a critical event, life in the community unravels. People do not do what they would normally have done. Chaos can ensue as social structures collapse. Families and communities lose contact with each other. In the case of the Oslo attacks, Norwegians would normally have travelled home to spend time with their families at the beginning of a weekend. After the news of the attack had spread, people would no doubt have turned to different news channels or to friends to find out what was happening. This "gathering of information" to make sense of nonsensical events is a typical first response following a critical event (Kropf & Jones, 2014).

On TV news, the Norwegian Prime Minister was seen hugging some of the young survivors from Utøya. He was weeping (Andersen, Grøttum, & Utheim, 2012), thereby sending a message suggesting that "we are all in this together." Later the Norwegian monarch addressed the nation. He struggled to maintain his composure. He was deeply shaken (Eide & Bjerkeseth, 2011).

“We are all in this together” was a phrase that also characterized the main ritual immediately after the attacks. Between the 24th and 28th July, 43 different towns and cities in Norway arranged torchlight processions. Close to one million Norwegians took part in these processions (Nipen, 2013). In Stavanger alone, 75,000 of the city’s 129,000 inhabitants took part in the torchlight procession on the 25th July (Alsaker-Nøstdahl, Fosse, & Stormoen, 2011). A young citizen living in Stavanger, Nadia Sheikh, organized the procession (Oppedal, 2011). Each person in the procession carried a burning torch as well as flowers. Høeg (2015) has described this ritual extensively in her article, “Silent actions – emotion and mass mourning rituals after the terrorist attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011” . She called the procession in Oslo a “rose march” because many of the participants in the march carried roses. Beforehand, the organizer of the march in Oslo as well as its co-organizer, Amnesty International, had requested that no banners or posters be used during the march. Flowers, on the other hand, were allowed. Høeg (2015) emphasizes that the march proceeded in absolute silence, a silence in which thousands of citizens marched quietly together. A silence expressing grief, sympathy, and unity. The man whose idea it was to organize the march in Oslo later stated that he wanted it to be a “silent sympathy action for the people stricken with grief” (Høeg 2015, p. 199).

In the procession in Stavanger one banner was allowed. In front of the procession, young Labour Party politicians carried a banner stating simply, “Standing together.” When the procession in Stavanger reached the small lake at the city center, people were encouraged to throw their flowers into the waters of the lake or alternatively onto the steps of the nearby cathedral.

During the days immediately following the attacks, Norwegian newspapers carried front page headlines stating simply, “the country grieves” (“Norge i sorg”). Social and cultural events such as concerts and parties were cancelled across the country. Norwegian athletes and sports teams wore black armbands of mourning. Through a ritual of “standing together” and different symbolic acts, Norwegians were expressing their grief and sadness after what had happened. The torchlight processions across the country called for people to come together and express sympathy with those who were directly affected by the terror attacks and, more specifically, to stand together against values such as intolerance and hatred.

The rituals in this “shock phase” expressed the nation’s grief, its togetherness, and its determination to stand by its values. The clear message expressed through the torchlight processions was that in spite of this shocking event, “we the Norwegian people know what we stand for. We stand together for freedom, tolerance, democracy, and transparency.”

Stage 2: Rituals related to counting our losses

Kropf and Jones (2014) claim that in the initial phase after a calamity, health professionals need to reunite those who have been separated. They must also inform authorities and loved ones of who is missing and who is presumed dead. In many

Norwegian cities, crisis teams were compiling lists of those who were directly affected by the terror attacks in Oslo. Each person was identified as belonging to a town, city, or municipality. Everyone on the list was assigned a status as “accounted for,” “missing,” or “deceased” (Hawke & Ness, 2016). The lists were continually updated as more news updates clarified the status of individuals. Informing families of the loss of loved ones is a critical but demanding task. Crisis teams had to move fast so that relatives did not hear of the death of their loved ones via the media.

Placing the name of a citizen on a list is a significant gesture. It is a ritual that determines who you are and where you belong. Local communities were quite literally reclaiming their citizens and taking responsibility for them and their families. Macabre though this might seem, the ritual can also provide a sense of security—it signifies to citizens that state authorities are able to look after them when the need arises. This would, of course, also be the case for citizens attended to by Norwegian embassies outside the country’s borders.

Where appropriate the crisis network involved the local community in rituals related to “counting our losses.” Many organizations and individuals contacted the crisis network in Stavanger asking for help after the attacks in Oslo (Hawke & Ness, 2016). In one case, a local school contacted the network asking for assistance. One of its young pupils had been killed in the terror attacks. The head-teacher was concerned that the child’s teacher (who was visibly affected by the incident) might need help in supporting and containing the surviving pupils’ anguish in her own class. Two members of the crisis network visited the junior school to support staff and pupils. The child’s teacher and her fellow pupils fetched a Norwegian flag and walked to the school flagpole. As the class gathered around the flagpole, many neighbors of the school opened their front doors and walked out onto the pavement. They stood in silence with their heads bowed as the school flag was raised to half-mast. This was a moving ritual and a simple ceremony that also affirmed belonging—in this case the school to which the child belonged was expressing its grief and its solidarity with the child’s family. “She was part of our school and we are grieving” is what the ceremony could be interpreted as saying. Høeg (2015) described how important belonging is. A sense of belonging creates a feeling of togetherness or unity. Unity in turn creates tranquility, quietness, and calm, states Høeg. “Members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others,” asserts Alexander (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). This also means, of course, that social groups can “restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone” (Alexander, 2004, p. 1).

Stage 3: Rituals related to saying farewell

The most obvious ritual related to saying farewell with someone is the funeral. Funerals for the victims of the Oslo attacks were held all over the country. Labour Party leaders and former Prime Ministers insisted on attending each funeral. In Stavanger, a past Prime Minister, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, was present during the funeral of one of the city’s young politicians, aged 16. In this way, the Labour Party wanted to honor its

fallen.

Chauvin, McDaniel, & Banks et al. (2014) stress the importance of commemorating rituals. We create a ritual that is not only about saying farewell, but also about honoring the life of the deceased. In this case, Stavanger cathedral was filled with people. Hundreds stood outside the building. Both the former Prime Minister and the current leader of the Labour youth in the county read messages during the service. As the coffin left the cathedral, young Labour Party politicians holding huge red flags formed a guard of honor outside the entrance. Many of these young politicians were weeping openly. Hundreds of onlookers and also tourists, stood in silence around the hearse. This young woman was honored as a human being but also as a young politician who was willing to die for her values and beliefs. Chauvin, McDaniel, & Banks et al. (2014) conclude that commemorative techniques “will serve to foster the return of organization, order, and logical thinking and will facilitate clients’ ability to accept the event that has occurred” (p. 422).

For the nation, there was once again a spontaneous outpouring of solidarity. In saying farewell to the fallen, thousands of citizens laid down flowers at different sites around the country. Messages were written and attached to these flowers. Candles were lit and left to burn. Myriad objects such as teddy bears, ribbons, photographs, and placards were left with the ever-mounting quantity of floral gestures. Kropf and Jones (2014) make a relevant point when they ask, “When should these rituals end? How long should the nation continue grieving? Moreover, what should happen to the great pile of objects left in memory of the fallen?” In Norway, the ritual of laying down flowers and memorabilia ended two weeks after the fallen had been buried. The end of the summer holidays and the start of the academic term was a signal for the nation to move on. The Norwegian government decreed that memorabilia left at different sites across the country should be gathered together and stored in the state archives.

Stage 4: Rituals related to justice

The perpetrator of the Oslo attacks had, all this time, been sitting in jail. It was decided that he be tried in open court. The trial began on the 16th April 2012 and ended just over two months later. Judgment fell on the 24th August 2012. Video links were set up with many different courtrooms across the country. Giant screens stood in front of numerous courtrooms so that local communities could sit and watch court proceedings. Places were reserved in the courtroom for those directly involved in the Oslo attacks as well as their families. Staff from the crisis network were also constantly present in the courtroom during the trial. A room adjacent to each courtroom was reserved for use by the public if they needed to talk to someone from the crisis network. Many were deeply affected by the prosecution’s detailed account of the attacks and the horrific evidence presented (Hawke & Ness, 2016).

The trial of the perpetrator could be described as a ritual involving retribution. It might also be viewed as a test for Norway. Could the country give a fair trial to a man who had wreaked such havoc with so many innocent people and their families? Many of

those directly involved in the Oslo attacks sometimes witnessed horrific evidence presented by the prosecution. Stories of those who had survived painted a ghastly picture. In addition, the deceased were “given” a voice in the courtroom as their stories unfolded and evidence of their wounds was presented. Pictures of severely damaged bodies were accompanied by detailed medical explanations. The symbolic nature of the court case was that of a voice being given to the survivors and the deceased. The perpetrator was made to sit and listen to the suffering he had caused. Further, many witnesses were able to speak on behalf of their comrades who had fallen and had no means of speaking for themselves.

In this particular context, the authors would postulate that “revenge” was not an appropriate word to describe this trial. Revenge could be defined as some dastardly out-of-court punishment that would kill or cause great suffering to the perpetrator. Retribution, on the other hand, involved the metering out of a just punishment through normal channels of state (i.e., the justice system). For many persons, those both directly and indirectly affected by the Oslo attacks, the final judgment in this court case represented the close of a dreadful chapter in their personal lives and indeed the life of the nation. The relief as the trial finally ended was almost tangible.

Stage 5: Rituals related to moving on

In a newspaper article published on the 21st July 2015, Helene Skjeggstad, a well-known Norwegian journalist, summarizes her own journey through life following the Oslo attacks. She writes, “I understand now that we are not ready to forget. Sometimes one has to revisit the past in order to move forward.”

Moving on entails leaving the past behind. “Tragedy is finally incorporated within the life of the community. Communities reconstitute and community practice skills are needed to sustain long-term repair” (Kropf & Jones, 2014, p. 293). However, moving on does not mean forgetting, though many are afraid of forgetting their loved ones who have passed away. Rather, one should question whether Norwegian society could learn anything from the Oslo attacks. Learning something from the past presupposes that we remember the past. Remembering rituals such as annual events that mark the day on which the attacks happened would be important in this respect. Norwegian authorities have indeed organized such events every year. Later in this article, we will discuss what could be learned from such a dreadful event.

Another form of remembering is to place a memorial in a significant place to remind ourselves of what happened and the loss of life the attacks involved. An anonymous donor paid for simple memorials to be made and given to each of the country’s municipalities that had lost citizens during the attacks. Those memorials are shaped as a simple hollowed-out granite column into which the rough image of people are carved. In Stavanger, a discussion ensued as to where the memorial should be placed. Some wanted it to be placed in the middle of the city center. Others did not want to be constantly reminded of the event and asked for the memorial to be relocated to a quiet place outside the city center. Eventually an agreement was reached. By placing the

memorial at a peaceful place, an opportunity was provided to those who need to visit the memorial and remember their loved ones. Park benches were set up at the memorial so that the public could sit quietly while contemplating the meaning behind it.

Two other “memorials” related to the Oslo attacks have also been planned. One has been built, the other not. The Norwegian government has identified a small rocky island in Tyrifjord that will literally be cut in half. A beautiful island with fir trees growing on it, it is a summer paradise for sailors. When finished, a narrow slice of the island will be removed, creating a simple empty space through which one can walk and look. Currently, the project is put on hold because residents living near the island have stated that they do not want to be reminded of the Oslo attacks whenever they look at the view. Another memorial is the establishment of an information center (museum) related to the Oslo attacks ([VG Newspaper, 2015](#)). Symbolically this center is situated adjacent to one of the government buildings that was blown up during the Oslo attacks. The center houses a large number of objects, pictures, and mementos associated with the attacks. Even the panel van in which the bomb exploded is to be placed outside the entrance to the center. The aim of the center is to document with factual items the chain of events before, during, and after the attacks. At the opening of the center, Erna Solberg, Norway’s current Prime Minister, poignantly noted, “This is an important part of our history which must be passed on to coming generations” ([VG Newspaper, 2015](#)).

Stage 6: Rituals related to rebuilding

“Rebuilding” would, at first glance, seem to relate to the built environment that was damaged during some significant event such as a terror attack or an earthquake. Although this is true, the symbolism behind the rebuilding of the physical environment cannot be underestimated. This was evident immediately after the Oslo attacks in 2011, when the leader of the Labour Party youth movement stated, “We will take back our island, we will one day return to Utøya.” However, before this could be done, the buildings on Utøya Island had to be repaired and renovated. Windows and doors were broken, there were bullet holes in the walls, and bloodstains had soaked into wooden floors. The island’s buildings had to be rebuilt and could not simply stand as they had done earlier. So in the same way the nation could not return to an earlier way of life before the terror attacks, neither could the buildings on Utøya or Oslo remain as they had been before the 2011 terror attacks.

Both the rebuilding of the government buildings in Oslo and the houses on Utøya Island have been the subject of intense national debate. Employees in the government services stated that they could not return to the same buildings and be reminded every day of the tragedy they now represented. Architects and many others have stated that the buildings need to be repaired but remain as they are, amongst other things, because of a very large and valuable Picasso motif chiseled into one of the government building’s walls. Until the current status quo is resolved, the government buildings in Oslo will remain wrapped in white plastic—itsself a significant reminder of

that fateful summer day in 2011.

Norwegian police searched Utøya Island and removed any important evidence to be presented at the court case. After this process was complete, Labour youth returned to the island on several occasions accompanied by parents or friends. In 2015, the first summer camp since the 2011 attack was arranged at the island's newly rebuilt campsite.

Discussion

Immediately after a catastrophic event, life in the community might unravel ([Kropf & Jones, 2014](#)). Harmonious and secure communities become fearful and uncertain because the life of their community is threatened. Where many lives have been lost, torchlight processions serve as an expression of coming together to support and comfort each other. "Together we can cope with this" would be a fitting phrase to use in this regard. At the same time, the processions were about expressing common values and uniting the nation around these values. Later, in the "counting our losses" phase, the local community was attempting to establish how many and who had lost their lives. Kropf and Jones ([2014](#)) emphasize the importance of reuniting families and communities and of communicating news as to who is injured and who has lost their lives. After these specifics became clear (approximately four days after the attacks took place), the community could grieve its losses through ceremonies such as placing flowers and personal items at particular locations, writing personal letters of support, etc. These rituals would finally culminate in a ceremony, the funeral, where families, loved ones, and the public could say farewell to the fallen.

Different societies have different views regarding retribution. In South Africa after the fall of apartheid, the country was united through the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's detailed work with both victims and perpetrators of national violence and oppression ([Morkel, 2011](#)). In Norway, it was important to follow the law and provide the perpetrator with a fair and proper trial. The trial provided the victims with the opportunity to tell their stories as witnesses and to speak for their fallen comrades. Through the court case, Norwegian authorities re-established a social equilibrium. There was no need for revenge or mass protests simply because the state took responsibility for metering out a just punishment to the perpetrator.

The difficulty in moving on after a crisis where loved ones have lost their lives sometimes has to do with the fear of forgetting. Creating remembrance rituals such as memorials and anniversaries would help reassure those who are afraid that their loved ones will be forgotten. At the same time, these rituals would create an opportunity to teach up-and-coming generations about what happened and what was learned from the incident.

Moving on also requires a certain degree of rebuilding. Decisions need to be made as to whether the physical environments damaged by a terror attack should be rebuilt.

Rebuilding entails the “reclaiming” of earlier traditions as well. The Labour youth movement in Norway, for example, had to decide whether to continue holding summer camps on Utøya Island.

The importance of collaborative community work

Collaboration is vital when it comes to planning public rituals (Morkel, 2011). Lack of collaboration can quickly lead to rituals people do not feel comfortable with. For instance, a well-meaning Norwegian hospital chaplain organized a ceremony for Labour youth a couple of days after the terror attacks. The chaplain had ordered trays of food and the location of the ceremony would be the hospital chapel. However, a significant number of Labour youth are either Muslims or not religious in any sense. They did not feel comfortable meeting in a chapel with a chaplain. Thus, the ceremony was moved to the hospital’s cafeteria, where two psychologists met with the young people instead.

Rituals serve as an important method by which individuals or whole communities can give expression to their feelings (Morkel, 2011, 2015; Rando, 1985). Rituals help make tangible the sometimes overpowering feelings of fear and dread. Through simple and clearly defined ceremonies, overwhelming grief can be channeled into manageable manifestations in the presence of a strong support network. The significance of social support after a catastrophic event can be a key factor leading to recovery (Hawke & Ness, 2016).

For many years, therapists and mental health professionals have been encouraged to take part in and help create rituals in different contexts. As far back as 1985, Rando suggested that mental health professions have a responsibility to help create appropriate rituals for survivors, the bereaved, and the public. Morkel (2011, 2015), herself a psychologist, describes a participatory approach to transformation in South Africa, where rituals are employed as a fundamental catalyst for change in post-apartheid South Africa. Kropf and Jones (2014) emphasize how important it is that professionals work at a community level to deal with crises and rebuild new community structures. This might mean “organizing ways in which people come together to learn facts, share ideas, raise questions, and search for solutions” (Kropf & Jones, 2014, p. 290). Professionals are also needed to help manage conflict in the community that may arise after a critical incident. In the Norwegian example, a discussion ensued concerning the placement of a memorial in the boundaries of Stavanger. In Oslo, the public disagreed as to whether government buildings should be repaired or torn down.

Just how difficult it is to get professionals to leave the safety of their offices and meet the public on common ground was made apparent in the Norwegian example. A group of parents whose children confronted the perpetrator on Utøya Island wanted to have a summer barbeque together. These individuals were all members of a support group for parents established after the Oslo terror attacks. They invited two professionals to join them and help them temporarily close the group for the summer holidays. There followed a divisive argument in the crisis network as to whether this invitation was

defensible. Whereas some members of the network felt that professionals have no place at a summer barbecue with clients, others felt that this was an opportunity for professional persons to meet the parents of survivors and the bereaved in a different setting. It was a chance to get to know them personally and to provide support where necessary. One colleague stated, "The next thing that will happen is that we'll be offered a glass of wine." The crisis network did in fact take part in many different rituals, but a summer barbecue was interpreted by some as "off limits."

The crisis network did not organize any rituals per se, primarily because the public itself was so involved in events after the attacks in Oslo. Politicians, municipal authorities, the public, the church, and volunteer organizations such as Red Cross organized all rituals following the attacks. However, this does not let professional healthcare givers "off the hook." Their contribution is important whether as a participant in a ceremony or ritual or as an organizer of such an event.

The introduction of professional mental health specialists such as psychologists or psychiatric nurses at a community level could be construed as problematic, primarily because most cultures tend to associate these professions with mental illness. Traditionally, priests have assumed the role of crisis counselors in Norway, whereas social workers have worked in communities. Because work at a community level in the current context of this article is not focused on mental illness, health professionals had to base their work on approaches not related to the medical model. Morkel (2011) describes such an approach as do Kropf and Jones (2014) and Hawke and Ness (2016).

Conflict mediation

It would seem that local communities are especially vulnerable after critical incidents and that conflict can easily arise. This was the case in Finland after a school shooting in 2007 (Nurmi et al., 2012). It was the case in Norway as well. It was also the case in the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Professional healthcare workers have a real opportunity here to help mediate conflict and encourage dialogue through listening techniques.

As it so happened, staff from the Stavanger Family Counselling Agency were experienced mediators. Their work entails parental mediation in child custody cases. They were able to help parents discuss where a memorial should be placed in the city. Parents were able to listen to others' arguments in a respectful manner so that no one felt affronted or hurt (Hawke & Ness, 2016).

Are rituals effective?

Whether or not the public rituals that followed the attacks in Oslo were effective is difficult to determine. Our impression is that the Norwegian nation has moved on. Apart from ongoing discussions regarding the rebuilding of damaged buildings and the placement of memorials, it would seem that society has reconstituted itself in the years following the attacks. In order to ascertain whether rituals involving many thousands of

participants are indeed effective, more research is required.

Following an attack of immense proportions such as the twin attacks in Norway, a whole nation can feel affected by the critical incident. Høeg (2015) reminds us, “Research has shown that terrorist attacks are deeply traumatic” (p. 201). At the same time, rituals can bring a nation together, allowing for the expression of grief and creating resilience (Saul, 2014). But who do these rituals benefit and can they in fact disturb the process of grieving for those directly affected? There is ample research suggesting that rituals provide an appropriate and sometimes beneficial method by which communities can express feelings of sadness and insecurity. Saul (2014) postulates that “people who suffer from individual trauma usually have difficulty recovering if the community to which they belong remains shattered” (p. 4). The authors of this paper are currently unaware of research detailing how a national movement might affect the individuals and families mourning the loss of loved ones.

What we learned

When evaluating what was learned through this event, one needs to focus on four different dimensions: (1) the nation as a whole; (2) caregivers involved in support work after the attack; (3) authorities who helped organize an immediate crisis response; and (4) the survivors, their families, and the bereaved. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on what was learned by caregivers.

A lesson we hope crisis teams have learned is that there is no shame in asking for additional assistance. We would postulate that the crisis team in Stavanger could not have coped without help from another professional office such as the Family Counselling Agency. The demands on the crisis team were daunting. Through the trial of the perpetrator, the crisis team could not have constantly been present in the courtroom together with families, survivors, and the bereaved were it not for the participation of the Family Counselling Agency.

In their article “Is there help you have not received after the terror attack on Utøya Island? Parents speak out,” Glad, Jensen, & Dyb (2014) interviewed 429 parents regarding their unmet needs. Thirty percent stated that they felt their family had not received adequate help. Parents felt their whole family had been affected by the tragedy on Utøya Island and that the whole family needed to meet with a professional person. As one parent put it, “Our family was like a minefield of unresolved and unspoken feelings [for] a long time after the terror attacks” (Glad et al., 2014, p. 541). This assertion underlines the importance of providing help to families as well as individuals after a critical incident. Rituals related to families would help them heal and would help parents provide appropriate assistance to their children. Our experience suggests that it is necessary to constantly uphold the needs of families and to remind caregivers that not only individuals but also families and communities are affected by disasters.

Methodological limitations

There are some methodological limitations we would like to highlight from our study. Newspaper and Internet news site articles are produced for a purpose other than research, meaning they have no research agenda. Consequently, they do not provide sufficient detail to qualify as bone fide research. A more systematic review of the literature and structured analysis method would have enhanced the data for analysis. There may also be important newspaper and Internet articles we didn't discover in our search, which might therefore have created an incomplete collection of documents.

Conclusion

Through a brief review of the international research literature and a qualitative document analysis of Norwegian newspapers and an Internet news site, we have identified six types of rituals that were spontaneously organized by communities directly after the terror attacks in Norway in 2011. These rituals can be described as a visible manifestation of a psychological process encompassing the whole country. There is no evidence that conclusively proves these rituals were effective in helping to heal the Norwegian nation. However, five years later, Norwegian society seems to have moved on. And it is our belief that the rituals identified in this article may have helped steer the nation through a tumultuous period in its history by helping people heal and the nation reconstitute itself.

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Abstract

Rituals that helped heal a nation after a terror attack

In this article, the authors describe rituals that helped the Norwegian society heal after a terror attack. Through a brief review of the international research literature and a qualitative document analysis of Norwegian newspaper articles and an Internet news site, we identified a list of rituals that were organized spontaneously in response to a deadly terror attack in Norway on the 22nd July 2011 this tragedy. We divided the rituals into six overarching groups that emphasize different socio-psychological phases related to crisis response and recovery. These phases refer to reactions such as experiencing shock, counting our losses, saying farewell, searching for justice, moving on, and rebuilding. We postulate that rituals could potentially help heal a nation, thereby enabling it to move on. We conclude this article by discussing what professional helpers and volunteer staff might have learned from this event.

Keywords: community, crisis, document analysis, Norway, rituals, social work, terror attack.

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