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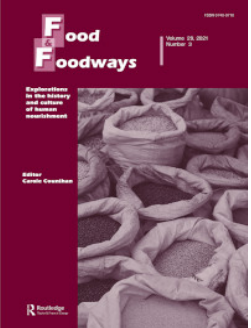

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Reflection: (Not) feeding the bereaved in the time of coronavirus

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ABSTRACT
In this article, I examine the complications to funerary rituals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I consider the breakdowns of normal systems of community food provisions to bereaved families, while reflecting on both the creativity of populations to create new ritual activities and the lingering effects of being unable to complete expected rituals. Beginning with the death of my father in the early days of the pandemic, I go on to trace the ways in which food provisioning to the bereaved changed alongside developments in understandings of the virus. These changes are contrasted with my previous experiences of food as abundant in funerary situations, in order to draw out the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major disruption in how care for bereaved persons is expressed.

KEYWORDS
Coronavirus; food; funerals; bereavement

My father died on March 11, 2020. It wasn't coronavirus, but it hardly matters—in Seattle, the American epicenter of the pandemic where he died, everything was shutting down, and restrictions on movement and gathering were coming into place.

On the Sunday in which his obituary appeared in the *Seattle Times*, the newspaper's cover featured the nearly empty freeway and the headline 'Silence in Seattle.' Above, a quote from a shopper at the city's famed Pike Place Market: 'I kind of want to cry.'

I felt the same. Not only was I dealing with the loss of my father, but also with the loss of the rituals which normally follow death, even in a secular family like my own: we could not hold a funeral; friends and family could not gather; the riotous memorial party for which my father had asked was put indefinitely on hold.

As I sat reading the newspaper, contemplating the shutting down of the city's largest farmers market while eating leftover Thai food for the third day in a row, I suddenly noticed the absence of prepared meals that I'd come to expect as offerings to the bereaved within my white,

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middle-class American community. Nothing from friends, or relatives, or neighbors. No, there was silence in Seattle.

In the first few days after the death of a loved one—while you feel out the shape of your grief and begin to grapple with what your world looks like now—it helps to have someone either bring or cook food for you. This provisioning of food for families of the recently deceased is something we find commonly tied to death rituals and rites across the world; it serves as an important mechanism for assuring survivors of the maintenance of social relations even in the event of such a serious rupture as death (Davies 2017); its ritual importance is tied intimately to how it keeps people alive on both biological and social levels. Consider prohibitions on the families of deceased cooking anything until after the cremation in Hindu tradition—though friends and other relations are allowed to bring food (Parry 1985). Or the *seudat havra'ah*, the consolation meal, of Judaism, in which the community must provide the first meal after a funeral (Berlat and Strauss 2006).

Much American and British tradition around food and death is less formally structured, and while there are regional variations on what is offered across the US and UK, funeral foods are often comforting or familiar (Brien 2013) and share the characteristics, described by Joshua Graham, of being '[h]earty, homemade dishes with long shelf lives' (2018, 91). Regardless of what the meal consists of, the gift of food is an established way to care for the bereaved. Death rituals are, after all, largely for easing the living into a new phase of life, now one person smaller, where the configurations of social relationships among the living are re-shaped. Rituals help us to mediate transitions, order the world, and make sense of the human experience and of death. The feeding of the bereaved by community members thus aids that transition by relieving some of the immediate day-to-day pressures in order for the bereaved to begin approaching the emotional and logistical work—setting up funerals or memorial services, in addition to all the bureaucratic elements of death such as its legal registration—which comes after a loss.

The day after dad died, I drove to the grocery store, motivated only by a vague idea: cook something. Since I'd left my home in England the week before, I'd been living off of airplane food and some Haribo gummy bears; leftover pieces of croissants from the Starbucks in the hospital lobby which my father kept requesting but of which he could not eat more than a bite or two, leaving me to scavenge the jam-covered remnants; a ham sandwich I cannot recall the provenance of; more gummy bears found at the bottom of my purse.

So I drove to the grocery store with the good intention of making something healthy, something with which I could feed and nourish the family, with which I could begin our healing. It did not go as planned.

Despite the paucity of people on the normally packed flight from Heathrow to Seattle; despite the daily temperature testing and health questionnaire required upon entering the hospital and the badges we had to wear saying 'I was screened on SATURDAY'; despite knowing the hospital had banned all visitors except for those few, like me and my family, seeing those whose deaths were imminent; and *even* despite the fact that I'd overheard the nurses wondering when my father would get on with dying because they needed the room and respiratory equipment he was using for the COVID-19 patients the hospital was due to begin taking in… Despite all of this, I hadn't noticed in a meaningful sense what was happening outside the hospital walls. I was wholly, utterly unprepared for what was taking place at the supermarket: it was crowded beyond measure, families pushing carts piled high with tinned goods and pasta; signs on the shelves listed items which had purchasing limits; eggs had long ago sold out.

Disorientated, I found myself, after some time, both on the verge of a panic attack and at the checkout with a basket containing two bottles of wine, three bags of crisps, and four boxes of macaroni and cheese. So much for my healthy cooking plan.

And when I looked up from intensely studying my feet and doing mindful breathing exercises, I realized the clerk was someone I knew: the older sister of a primary school classmate, an older sister who would sometimes join in with our play or watch films with us at sleepovers. She spoke before I could react, asking how I was. There, in the supermarket checkout line, amidst all the shoppers hoarding and the staff already run ragged, I began to cry and told her what had happened. Apologizing for company policy now disallowing hugs, she asked if she could give me an elbow tap. We bumped elbows, my last physical contact with anyone outside my immediate family for the next three months.

When I returned to my family home, I felt too tired to cook after the shock of the supermarket. I phoned in an absurdly large order to the neighborhood Thai restaurant, enough food to keep us all going for a couple of days. Unpacking my bag of chaotic purchases, I discovered the clerk had slipped in a pack of chocolate bars.

They remain the only offering of food given in acknowledgement for our loss.

Around every death I've directly been touched by before, both as bereaved and as supporter, people seemed to materialize from nowhere with food. I recall the funeral of a Filipina-American friend where, after the church service, I located the rest of our mutual friends in the church hall near a table which was piled high with food, both American and Filipino; too sad and confused to do anything else we loitered there and

relatives kept bringing more food, constantly replenishing the table such that we never seemed to make inroads.

And once, a close friend requested I come stay with her in Manchester, England, in the aftermath of her fiancé's suicide: for days, friends, relatives, acquaintances, coworkers, and people I never even caught the names of descended upon the house to drop off food and flowers. I spent most of my time during this period in what felt like a perpetual circuit between the front door, kitchen, and living room: accepting food, portioning some of it out to offer for present eating, freezing the rest of it (so much that we ended up taking over the freezers of the neighbors on both sides), and trying to get my friend to eat something—*anything*. Yet she steadfastly refused all food and took only tea (no milk, no sugar) and when, on the day of the funeral, she insisted on wearing the dress she had bought for the wedding, I resorted to sewing her in: it had become far too big, falling off her frame which was diminishing daily with the anorexia of grief.

In contrast, my grief over my dad's death was manifest as hunger. This may have had something to do with the progression of his particular illness and how, in the last year of his life, it became increasingly difficult and painful for him to eat; each time I saw him he was smaller and smaller—at the time of his death, he weighed just over 100 pounds. After spending so long with someone unable to eat I kept thinking, with deep jealousy, of all that frozen food my friend had the choice of—all the food she had turned down. I would eat it all, I thought.

Where were our friends and neighbors, anyway? Why didn't anyone come with food?

It turns out that my family was not alone in this confusion around food and grief in our current pandemic times. In my work with the Unit for Biocultural Variation and Obesity (UBVO) at the University of Oxford, England, we ran a study on changes in household physical activity and eating patterns during COVID-19 lockdown measures in England, administering an electronic questionnaire to a total of 1,109 adults between June and July 2020. Our early results have shown clear patterns: some households—particularly those who remained very economically secure throughout the pandemic—were cooking more from scratch, enjoying baking, and sharing more meals with their immediate loved ones. Others, particularly among the economically insecure and those with limited access to supermarkets and fresh food, experienced changes which indicated potential worsening of dietary quality (Potter et al. 2020a, 2020b). The idyllic imagery we've seen of baking fresh bread was only available to those who had the time and lack of other immediate commitments such as childcare, homeschooling, caring for ill relatives, searching for jobs—and certainly not for those not navigating the new food needs of the bereaved wherein

the types and amount of food needed for a household might change, or emotional eating becomes a dominant pattern.

Among other data, we combed through several accounts of bereavement, loss, and heartbreak which made me yearn to reach beyond anonymized participant numbers, to break the rules of social distancing, and to give whoever these people were a moment of comfort. Our survey did not ask about bereavement—it asked about mental health, shopping, eating, and exercise patterns—yet there they were: the bereaved, lost and overwhelmed in the supermarket. In text responses to questions about how the pandemic has changed their grocery shopping practices or what they eat, details of struggling with recent deaths which had occurred either during or immediately before the lockdown emerged. People confronted the loss of spouses, parents, colleagues, and friends alone, without the presence of family or friends arriving with hugs, with snacks, or with a dinner to freeze for later.

Alone and lonely, eating ready meals from the microwave—the testimonies of these bereaved survey respondents reveal people who, feeding themselves in this peculiar time in which loss was experienced without the physical presence of support networks, feel profoundly socially unmoored. Arnold van Gennep, an early anthropologist who studied and categorized rites of passage across the world, reported that community meals after funerals are essential to the reincorporation of the bereaved into social life: the sharing of food 'reunite[s] all the surviving members of the group with each other, and sometimes also with the deceased, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined' (2004 [1960], 164–165).

Where were our friends and neighbors, anyway? How come we didn't even receive a stereotypical casserole? There were flowers and cards and phone calls, but I wondered constantly about the food question, about our social and culinary isolation. I've found that grief can feel like someone's replaced your brain with wool stuffing so it's no real surprise that it took me months to remember what I am (an anthropologist) and what I do (ask people questions), and move from *wondering* to *asking* why no one had dropped off meals. In the end, the general shape of the problem emerged:

In early 2020, we still did not have a very good grasp of the novel coronavirus: how virulent was it? By what means did it spread? There was confusion over how long it might stay airborne, how long and how successfully it could live on surfaces, and just how fastidious we ought to be with disinfecting packaging and whatever we brought home from our tentative, terrifying trips to the supermarkets. Spring was unfolding, case numbers were exploding, and news coverage in the United States was constant, chaotic, and sometimes contradictory. People were scared, unsure which actions were okay to perform, or how to perform them safely. In this uncertainty about what was hygienic, and in our fear of catching and

spreading the virus, acts of sharing food faltered because it was seen as a potential opportunity to also share disease, as seen in the following excerpts from the three friends I queried on the matter.

Friend 1, female, age 31:

> I was disinfecting everything we brought in from the supermarket. I'd wipe it all down and leave it in the garage for a day before bringing it into the house. […] It seemed risky even getting the food in, let alone cooking it and bringing it back out. It didn't seem to make sense.

Friend 2, female, age 29:

> I think back in March we didn't have a lot of information yet and it was like, 'Shit. This is a mess.' The thing I was really scared about wasn't getting it, but what if I gave it to someone? And when I thought about bringing something over for you, I thought about how much worse it would be if like, I made your mom sick or something because I'd touched the Tupperware.

Friend 3, female, age 32:

> We sent you flowers and a card. I thought about dropping something off, and doing like the delivery people, the hands-free thing—like [leave it] on your porch and run, basically.

Anthropologists have long known that a fear of contamination shapes many of our food taboos, preferences, and practices; COVID-19 revealed how rapidly social food practices can shift in response to highly specific viral contamination fears. When I asked this last friend why she felt okay about having a postal worker and an employee of the florist deliver the card and bouquet, she said at the time she thought they would have systems in place for safe handling and delivery practices. Moreover, the nation was still undergoing a widespread shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) at the time and she had not yet secured any masks for personal use; she had hoped that professionals would have masks and therefore the delivery would be safer on both ends (for delivery person and recipient). Near the end of our call, she had a sudden realization: 'Restaurants were delivering. I don't know why I didn't send you some sort of restaurant meal. I guess it's because I've always made the food myself. I didn't even think of it until just now, but I totally could have.'

As we pass the year marker of the presence of this pandemic in our lives, the way we understand and interact with it has changed: in particular, we know more about the mode of transmission and that we have more to fear from airborne particles than contaminated surfaces. My friends have stopped wiping down everything that enters their home and by August of 2020, even Friend 1 had ceased to leave items in her garage quarantine center before bringing them inside. As the year progressed,

the deaths around me began mounting: my husband's grandmother, my great-aunt, my uncle, two family friends, and two faculty members in my department; only one from this list died of COVID-19, yet the pandemic troubled each of the memorial plans nonetheless. For some of these deaths there were no public markers, for others livestreamed memorials combined with restricted in-person services. As psychologist Evan Imber-Black writes, 'rituals bent, but did not break during COVID-19 (2020, 920), and so it was with the funeral food too: with those deaths which occurred later in 2020 and into 2021, food offerings began to reappear. Strict limits on gatherings meant there was still no parade of friends dropping off casseroles or other dishes to eat later, but rather, meal box and other delivery services took their place. The fiancée of one deceased family friend reported to me that she had run out of freezer space in which to store the food she had received; for her the pain was not that there was no food but instead that there was no one to share it with.

A small and anecdotal sample such as that which I collected in the Pacific Northwest of the United States cannot tell us much about how food rituals around death have changed across different geographies as the pandemic has progressed. However, data from the British UBVO survey which ran from June to September 2020 shows that feeding and other forms of social support of the bereaved were complicated through the summer across England; similar disruption to social support has also been shown in other locations by studies directly focusing on death rituals during this time (Bitusikova 2020; Moore et al. 2020; Omonisi 2020). For the current disruptions in death practices and grieving due to COVID-19, food is only one part of the puzzle and initial research is suggesting that social distancing and quarantining policies will have major, long-term mental health impacts on the bereaved (Cardoso et al. 2020; Gesi et al. 2020; Stroebe and Schut 2020). Further and targeted studies might show us both the extent of these disruptions as well as new adaptations which are emerging across cultures and the stages of the pandemic, and how this relates specifically to food practices. What has already been revealed—through my own family's experience with an absence of gifts of food in the early stages of the pandemic, and in the abundance of food but lack of people to share it with for those who were bereaved later in the pandemic—is the ongoing importance of food sharing and commensality in death rituals alongside the ways in which the pandemic's disruption goes beyond food habits and to our very connections with others and our communities.

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