Memorialization, Ritual and Public Tragedy

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LIVING WITH GRIEF

COPING WITH PUBLIC TRAGEDY

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of 9/11 there was ritual. People gathered in village squares, in public places, and in houses of worship. They sang, prayed, and stood in silent vigil. There also were memorials. In New York City, firehouses became shrines, as people brought pictures, flowers, and candles. It had been the same in other public tragedies. In Oklahoma City, people left flowers and teddy bears in tribute to the dead children. When Princess Diana died, British embassies throughout the world became spontaneous memorials.

Ritual and memorials are ancient ways we cope with tragedy—both private and public. Evidence from Neolithic humans suggests the presence of elaborate ritual and careful memorialization. Ritual and memorialization precede written history. One of the first written accounts, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, describes in detail the rituals that should accompany a death. The very antiquity of ritual and memorialization is testament to their power.

This chapter explores the power and role of ritual and memorialization in public tragedy. It asks two central questions: Why do we turn to ritual and memorialization in times of public tragedy, and how can clinicians and counselors effectively utilize that power as they assist individuals and communities in coping with private and public tragedy?
RITUALS IN PUBLIC TRAGEDY

Rituals may be defined as acts invested with meaning. For example, in many religious and spiritual traditions, water is used as a symbol of purification. The water that is used may be no different than water used for drinking or washing, but the meaning of that ritual makes it different. The individual is cleaned not only of dirt but also of something deeper—perhaps, depending on the religious tradition—wrongful acts, original sin, or spiritual impurity. The very simple act of washing with water is infused with new understandings. That is the power of ritual—it invests the commonplace with uncommon meaning.

Gennep (1960) uses the term liminal to describe the significance of ritual. To Gennep, liminal refers to the role that ritual has in crossing a threshold, or making a transition or a passage. Yet Gennep’s use of that term suggests an even deeper meaning. At its root, liminal may be defined as the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious. In short, ritual works because it simultaneously engages both the conscious and unconscious.

Roles of Ritual in Public Tragedy

The roles of ritual in public tragedy are many. First, ritual permits meaningful action at a disorganized time; it allows people to “do something.” By doing something, even engaging in ritual, we feel that we have symbolic mastery over events. Ritual allows a reorganization of community and continuity in a chaotic time. Collectively, it offers a reassurance that while we cannot control the tragedy itself, we have reasserted control in its aftermath.

Second, ritual reaffirms community. It offers an opportunity for the different strands of a community, potently fragmented by a crisis, to stand together and publicly demonstrate their fundamental unity. During rituals after both Oklahoma City and 9/11, it was reassuring to see civic and political leaders, celebrities, and religious leaders of all faiths and traditions sharing solidarity. It was a visible symbol that even in crisis we were one. It not only reaffirmed unity, it promised that we would face this crisis and persevere together.

Third, ritual shows solidarity with the victims. Individuals personally affected by tragedy may have need for their own rituals. For those who have experienced the death of a friend or family member, funerals and memorial rituals will provide their own social, psychological and spiritual benefits (Rando, 1984). Public ritual, though, offers a context for these individual ritu-
als. It provides social validation, a public recognition of the loss that was experienced, and a collective reassurance of societal recognition and social support.

Fourth, public rituals structure public grief. In addition to an invitation to grieve, public rituals offer cues on what we are supposed to feel and models how we are to mourn. The funerals of Prince Albert in England and John F. Kennedy in the United States influenced mourning customs and behaviors in both countries. Both offered contemporary perspectives on appropriate ways to grieve and mourn. The role of mass media is critical here since it allows a level of collective participation. Aron and Livingston (1999) note that the funeral of Princess Diana was not only an event for the monarchy; the constant images of grieving citizens added a level of participation that allowed the nation, even the world, opportunity to grieve.

Finally, public ritual reconstructs the narrative—interpreting the death in a philosophical, spiritual, and historical framework. In public tragedy it offers an interpretation of the event. Schwartz (1991) reminds us that the funeral rituals that accompanied Lincoln’s death transformed a controversial president to a symbol of national unity.

**RITUALS IN PUBLIC TRAGEDY**

**Spontaneous Ritual**

Ritual is a powerful and longstanding way to deal with significant events, especially those involving transition and loss. It is not surprising to see their immediate use soon after a public crisis or tragedy. The first rituals usually are spontaneous—the result of a sort of collective impulse. They arise from the public’s need both to symbolically master as well as define the tragedy. Often they take place on or near the site of tragedy, but in tragedies that are larger in scope, they may occur throughout a region.

Beyond initial definition of the tragedy and a symbolic mastery—there is a collective sense of doing something. These spontaneous rituals can have other roles. First, they can be sources of information and action. At these rituals information about what occurred can be shared and processed. Collective actions can be encouraged or even initiated. For example, at the ritual, persons may be encouraged to give blood or volunteer. In some rituals, clothing and money may be collected. Naturally, the one potential difficulty is that these spontaneous rituals can spread misinformation and encourage unnecessary or even unhelpful or violent activities.
A second value of these spontaneous rituals is their inclusiveness. Everyone can attend and participate. These rituals reaffirm a collective stake in the crisis, and they remind individuals personally touched by the tragedy of the social recognition and support of the larger community.

**Planned Rituals**

Following the immediate, spontaneous rituals, there are planned rituals. These are of three types: private, organizational, and public.

*Private Rituals.* Private rituals of individuals personally touched by the tragedy have their unique challenges and issues. Many public tragedies are characterized by periods of disorganization, uncertainty, ambiguous loss, and multiple losses. In the absence of a body, it may be difficult to decide when to have a funeral or memorial service. Where there is widespread destruction of property or social disorganization, it may be difficult to select meaningful places for ritual or to gather mourners together. Where there are numerous deaths, the very timing of rituals may be contingent on the practical difficulties of managing multiple losses.

Counselors, funeral directors, and clergy should be sensitive to these difficulties as they work with families in planning these rituals. Family and friends clearly need to decide when and where rituals should be held. When the needs of family members differ and compromises fail, counselors may suggest that individuals create their own rituals to meet their needs.

In conducting private rituals, there are important points to consider. Because private rituals are likely to be supplemented by public rituals, it is important to personalize the private ritual. Public rituals will define losses in collective terms—what these deaths mean for the community. By contrast, the purpose of private ritual is to commemorate not the collective deaths but the death of that unique person. Effective rituals are personal, noting the many facets and identities of the individual who died. In addition, in contemporary American society, mourners may not share the same faith tradition or cultural contexts. Inclusive rituals do well when they express the significance of readings, actions, symbols or music. For example, at a recent funeral, the song “Singing in the Rain” was played. Since only a few close friends knew of the personal significance of the song, it was explained to the larger group.

Many public tragedies pose an additional problem. There may be tragedies where body parts will continue to be found. In such situations, families should have options about whether they want to be informed of future
finds as well as whether they want additional rituals to accompany the disposition of the part.

There is one further concern. Since public tragedy often involves multiple deaths, intervention plans should address the needs of ritual leaders. Conducting numerous rituals will likely take a heavy emotional toll, possibly leading to the vicarious traumatization of funeral directors and clergy.

Organizational Rituals. In addition to private family rituals, there may be rituals conducted in workplaces, schools, voluntary and fraternal associations, and places of worship. When organizations have experienced the death of a member or members, there is great value in a collective ritual. This ritual, in addition to any family rituals, acknowledges the role the lost member or members had within that organization. Beyond recognizing the loss in the setting, it gives the members both unique opportunity and permission to grieve. It reaffirms the care and sensitivity of management and administration. Even in public tragedies where the organization is not directly affected, such rituals offer opportunities to educate about grief and trauma, frame a definition of the event, and offer collective action.

Public Rituals. Public rituals are necessary interventions in public tragedies. Just as private and organizational ritual validates and structures grief, so does public ritual—but on a larger scale. Public ritual offers reassurance and support, reaffirms community, shows solidarity, structures grief, and offers a narrative of what happened and how we should respond. Because of these roles, these rituals should come soon after the tragedy, but not so early that the dimensions of the crises are yet undefined. These, too, should be timed so as to be liminal, on the threshold between reaction and response, between what we experienced and what now can and will be done. Public rituals have the centering role of holding societal attention and suggesting collective meaning and action. In a time of mass media, these rituals can be extensive and inclusive, truly binding a nation together in grief.

Ongoing Ritual
Grief does not cease with the last funeral or the centering public ritual. Just as grief continues, effective rituals should continue as well, making cycles and events as the public grieves. This may take many forms. Rituals may and should accompany significant events such as the cleanup of a site, recovery of additional bodies, or other significant changes that are likely to engender public notice and renewed signs of grief.
Anniversary rituals are very significant. As an anniversary approaches, there are seasonal and chronological cues. The days take on added significance for survivors, reminding them of events that preceded the tragedy. Grieving family or friends may think or say, “This was the last time we saw him.” Seasonal cues such as the weather, other occasions, or even regular events also prompt memories and renew feelings of loss in both survivors and the general public.

The anniversary ritual can play critical roles. First, it can educate the public about grief—reminding them that grief follows no timetable. This is important since many survivors and other members of the public may still be experiencing significant grief. Ritual validates that grief. Second, the anniversary ritual offers the opportunity to reframe the significance of the tragedy. Sometimes in national disasters, the ritual is a time to reflect on lessons that have been learned. In other cases, it is a renewed commitment to a cause. For example, at the first anniversary of 9/11, President Bush declared that “though they died in tragedy, they did not die in vain” as he called for renewed and continued efforts against terrorists (The New York Times, 9/12/02). In other cases, the tragedy may be a warning. On the sixth anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, fire department Chaplain Ted Wielsen challenged would-be terrorists to “see through the eyes of those present today, or those who are not here, or those who can never be here” as they contemplate the havoc they would wreak (Canadian Press, 4/19/01).

Third, anniversary rituals serve as rites of intensification, strengthening unity within and between groups. The anniversary rituals allow survivors, family members, rescuers, and the community at large to renew the bonds between them. Sometimes they can build bonds between victims of other, similar, tragedies. For example, some families who suffered the deaths of loved ones on September 11 attended the seventh anniversary rituals for Oklahoma City. They found and expressed unity in their shared losses.

Finally, the passage of time allows us to contemplate the enormity of the loss and acknowledge the individuals who died. In the immediate aftermath of loss, the individual dimensions of the tragedy may not be completely known or fully felt. At the first anniversary of 9/11, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani read the names of those who died. In Oklahoma City, a traditional part of the ritual is to observe 168 seconds of silence, one for each victim who died.
Different communities may observe these anniversary rituals in other ways. The immediacy of mass media allows inclusion. Rituals also may be designed by organizations such as places of worship, schools, or workplaces. Especially in areas where populations are deeply affected, rituals may be opportunities for education, solace and support.

**Therapeutic Rituals**

Rituals can offer powerful therapeutic interventions both for individuals and groups struggling with tragedy. These rituals can have a number of uses. Rituals of continuity are rituals that reaffirm that the person is not forgotten. Moments of silence or lighting a candle are simple examples of such ritual. Rituals of transition reflect changes, points in the journey of grief or collective response to tragedy. For example, officials of one company that had to vacate offices near the World Trade Center decided they needed a ritual as they moved back. Participants entered the now clean and empty space, sprinkled water to represent cleansing, and placed plants to represent the renewal of life in a place they had vacated because of the carnage nearby. After that, they retired to a brunch to rebuild a feeling of community after having been scattered to other offices.

Rituals of reconciliation allow individuals to finish business interrupted by tragedy. It provides opportunities to say a final goodbye or to give or accept forgiveness. In one school where a number of children were killed in a bus accident, students were given the option of writing notes that would be burned, the ashes then placed around a tree in their dead classmates' memory.

Rituals of affirmation complement rituals of reconciliation. Here, others may simply wish to affirm the person who died, celebrating that life, and offer thanks for the legacies that person left. In a grade school where a popular fourth grade teacher died, one therapeutic ritual was for each child to have the opportunity to write the most important lesson they had learned from the teacher. These were then read to the family as part of a school-based memorial ritual.

In designing therapeutic rituals, counselors need to keep in mind several points. First, it is important to be clear about the purpose of a ritual. Some rituals might combine purposes, for example, affirmation and reconciliation. In other cases, separate rituals may be necessary to meet varied interventive goals. Second, rituals should have elements that are both visible and symbolic. Rituals need to focus on something external such as water or plants, or objects
that have special meaning. Often, powerful rituals make use of primal elements: fire, water, earth (plants), or wind (chimes). Third, the goal, audience, and elements must arise from the narrative or collective experience of the group. Effective therapeutic rituals arise from the shared story and are fully owned by the participants. This means that participants must have a key role in planning. Finally, therapeutic rituals should allow participants time to discuss and process the experience.

Rituals have no set ending point. They may continue on individual, collective, or therapeutic levels until they are no longer necessary or meaningful. There are still rituals marking Pearl Harbor more than 60 years after that attack. Perhaps as that war fades into distant memory and as the last survivors die, such rituals may gradually cease. In other cases, rituals will be incorporated in special holidays or days of remembrance. The designation of September 11 as Patriots Day demonstrates, among other meanings, a desire that the day never be forgotten and the rituals never cease.

MEMORIALIZATION AND PUBLIC TRAGEDY

While a ritual is an act invested in meaning, a memorial is a space invested with meaning. That space may be a permanent section of ground, set aside to commemorate an event such as a tragedy. Sometimes it is a more portable space such as a memory box or quilt. In other cases it may even be a space in time such as Oklahoma City’s 168 seconds of silence.

Memorials are spaces set aside to remember. This distinguishes them from rituals. While the two are conceptually different, there are clear relationships. Rituals may consecrate a space as a memorial. Likewise, the sacred ground of a memorial is a powerful place for rituals to be enacted.

Spontaneous Memorials

As in ritual, the first memorials are spontaneous. After the death of Princess Diana, individuals brought offerings of flowers and stuffed toys to Buckingham Palace and to British consulates and embassies throughout the world. Similar offerings were brought to the remains of Oklahoma City or sites of other public tragedy.

The nature of spontaneous memorialization attests to the public nature of the tragedy. Haney, Leimer, and Lowery (1997) describe these spontaneous memorializations as inherently inclusive. They allow for the public to express their grief in their own individualized ways. Since they are individual, eclectic,
possibly anonymous, and otherwise uncontrolled, they can allow the expres-
sion of a variety of feelings such as anger, guilt, or revenge that may not be
publicly expressed at a public ritual or in a permanent memorial. Because these
spontaneous rituals represent public expression, they do create a policy issue.
Plans for public tragedy may need to include rituals to acknowledge these
memorials and respectfully dismantle or otherwise deal with them.

Permanent Memorials
Public tragedies often need permanent acknowledgment. Both the site and
type of memorial may generate considerate debate. In some cases, such as a
natural disaster, there may not be a single site representing a tragedy. Even
when there is a single site, there may be other activity at the site or other
projected uses. For example, there may be questions about placing a memori-
al in a school. Often, such concerns reflect a desire to return to a sense of
normalcy, a denial that significant loss and death occurred. In the case of the
World Trade Center, the emotional and economic value of the property has
created controversy about any redevelopment plans. A large question in that
controversy is what type of space on that site, the place where so many died,
will be set aside for a memorial.

A second issue is the nature and design of the memorial itself. At the
Pentagon, there was some concern raised that a memorial holding the known
remains of those killed in the attack would mix victims with hijackers. In other
cases, design itself is an issue. A sculpture titled “Dark Elergy” commemorates
the tragic destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, by a
terrorist bomb. Yet the design, which depicts the grief of mothers who lost
children on the flight, has been criticized for ignoring the grief of fathers.
Rockefeller Center in New York City has draped one of the first memorials to
9/11, a statue of a tumbling woman, because of complaints that it trivializes
the attack.

The problem with such controversies is that they may complicate the grief
of survivors and dissipate public concern about the tragedy. Sometimes these
controversies can be avoided by creating memorial committees that include a
wide range of stakeholders. In upstate New York, a court eventually resolved
complaints about a proposed memorial for schoolchildren killed in a tornado.
In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, only parents who had lost children
were named to the memorial committee. A more inclusive committee,
one that included school administrators and other parents, might not have
finalized a design that polarized the community. The fact remains, however, that in large public tragedies there may be numerous stakeholders and little consensus even within each group.

**Other Memorials**

Technology now makes possible virtual memorials. Much like spontaneous memorials, Internet memorials permit greater public participation, unbound by location, as well as opportunities to express a wide range of emotions.

There may be nonpermanent memorials as well. These can include "moving memorials" such as the HIV Names Project, popularly called the AIDS Quilt, that can travel to different locations. Other memorial events such as races, runs, or community drives mark an event. For example, one food pantry holds a memorial food drive, reminding its community that in a previous tornado, contributions were overwhelming. This provides an opportunity for the community to come together each year to remember and to act. In another community, there is an annual run for a state trooper near the anniversary of his tragic death. Such events reinforce the community and public ownership of a tragedy. They hallow a space, no matter where that space may be.

**CONCLUSION**

Public tragedies demand public ritual and memorialization. These twin processes of ritual and memorialization are powerful. This is attested by both the ancient and spontaneous use. Yet readers, counselors, and individuals can marshal and harness that power to soothe and unify a public coping with tragedy.
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REFERENCES


