

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader.

This issue is about mourning, both private and public. Attention is especially paid to public displays of mourning that are new, at least in the forms they now take. Television is the great variable in this development. In Thomas Lynch's essay on real and false grief, the author is scathing in his attack on television. The excesses of television are easy to document but one has to grant that television also reveals some need that is not being met elsewhere.

In addition, television at times can hold the nation together. Jack Hitt, in his essay, contrasts the Kennedy and Lincoln deaths and the subsequent patterns of national mourning. He does not note the positive role that television had in the immediate aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. Restraint was shown at the time of the Kennedy funeral when the nation stopped for four days. Ever since then, however, the funerals of rock stars, athletes and other celebrities have been shamelessly exploited by television.

The events of September, 2001, showed television at its best and worst. For the first three or four days, a small cadre of reporters close to the scene, together with a few admirable political leaders, provided calming reports and commentary. The funerals that followed and some of the memorials at ball games, concerts and political meetings provided an appropriate outlet for mourning. But television has no built in restraints; it goes on and on. In September, 2002, television cannot commemorate the event of 2001, because it has never let go of the event.

The rest of the world has long since become exhausted by the U.S. claim to sympathy. Thousands of people die every day in tragedies around the world. (Consider by comparison to the World Trade Center that Rwanda suffered eight thousand killings a day - for 100 straight days). Millions of children in Africa now mourn or soon will mourn their parents dead of AIDS. Every human death is precious to those people intimately involved. There is no need to claim superiority when it comes to grief. Each of us faces it, James Atlas reminds us in his essay, as the generations move on and we let go of our parents.

THE AMERICAN WAY OF DEALING WITH DEATH

By Jack Hitt

The United States as a culture has changed how it deals with death publicly, and these changes now inform that specialized architectural structure called a memorial. At some point, the country decided that the meaning of a person's life can be honored only by never forgetting the circumstances of death. Modern memorials invite us to relive the sensations of the dying and the hideous moments for the survivors on first learning of some tragedy.

Anthropologists from Samoa to Paris say that the funeral service in every culture is a ritualized version of the resurrection story: someone dies, is buried and then lives again. Funerals typically usher the guests through two proceedings. The most intense is at the graveside, abrupt and unforgiving. There, the survivors contemplate a hole in the earth and the physical body destined for it. It is gut-wrenching.

The other part of the ceremony occurs elsewhere and usually involves eulogies. The meaning of the person's life is detailed and explained. The survivors then take those things and celebrate them, carrying them back into the world of the living, frequently with a party.

This sequence - moving through the grief, then beyond it - has changed. We talk about closure and healing, but it's just cover for a new anxiety. Instead of honoring the dead by leaving them in the grave, we worry that we disrespect them by moving on. So we dwell on them, revive the worst agonies of death and enlist public sculpture to carry on this grim work for future generations. When it comes to the grave, Americans are no longer moving on, they're moving in.

Consider how the nation honors Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy, killed a century apart. We officially celebrate Lincoln's birthday in February. When was Kennedy born? Who knows? We remember him on the day he died, Nov. 22. Lincoln's life and work are memorialized in one of the great architectural edifices, the Lincoln Memorial. The Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's breathtaking Second Inaugural are carved in stone. He sits, majestically large, contemplating you as you contemplate him. How did he die? Where did it occur? You won't find that out at the Lincoln Memorial.

Kennedy has no such official memorial. But that doesn't stop people from making one: Dealey Plaza, the site of his assassination in Dallas. The book depository still stands. Some version of the grassy knoll. A visit can mean only

one thing: to relive that single moment, looping back in our minds as a silent procession of black limos broken by an unnerving pop and then Jackie Kennedy bounding out of the back of the car in search of something - now lost forever. So we honor Kennedy by maintaining our gaze on that most intense moment of suffering.

The desire to honor Kennedy's death by perpetually reliving that moment in Dallas has trickled down. Some parents seem to believe that the most sincere way to honor the pain of a child's death is by channeling the loss into a political crusade. This is done largely by confronting a legislature with the unassuageable grief of graveside death. Who can rebut such emotion with the dry claims of reason? If the parents prevail, a new public awareness program is created, or even better, a new law bearing the child's name - a postmodern memorial.

The American way of death has become a way of life. And now those changes in the public display of emotion have affected public sculpture. If Dealey Plaza is an improvisational version of the country's new death memorial, then the Oklahoma City National Memorial is that idea brought to architectonic perfection. The structure is two high walls with doorways. On one is etched the time: 9:01. On the other: 9:03. The blast set off by Timothy McVeigh ignited at 9:02. In that space between - where time literally stopped at the moment of maximum raw death - is a long reflecting pool, and beside it are 168 stone and bronze chairs memorializing the people who died. Nineteen chairs are half size, for the children who died in the day care center. Visitors are invited to sit on them. The ancient taboo against standing on a grave has been overturned. Intimacy with the dead, identifying with the victims, never forgetting - that's modern respect.

Ultimately, any memorial will have either to acquiesce to America's increased fascination with public grief or to take the public beyond unanswerable misery. Memorials used to be simple ways in which the natural sorrow of death was transformed into hope for the future. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, memorial libraries, memorial theaters. They were places where people were reminded of a past loss by dedicating themselves to some other purpose - reclaiming democracy, celebrating the arts, curing a disease, educating the next generation. For a while, such philanthropies seemed corny, but maybe not now.

Without some connection to the best intentions of those who survive, death seems like just another pointless Darwinian occurrence. That is the difficult work all great memorials attempt, binding the meaning between two temporal realms - that they died and why we live.

MOURNING AS PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

By Gabriel Moran

If, as is often said, death is hidden in our culture, then one should not be surprised that mourning is, too. The dying cannot help what is happening to them. They stir up sympathy for their plight. The mourner is more likely to generate impatience and resentment. "Get on with your life" is the frequent advice given to the mourner. When mourning is hidden or suppressed, it does not go away; it operates quietly but endlessly. As patients can be put on life-support systems that maintain a semblance of life, if not human functioning, so millions of people go on mourning with no end in sight.

Mourning is a personal and communal act that can only be understood as a relational response. If there is no community with rituals for mourning, then feelings of grief cannot be accepted and dealt with in a healthy way. What we increasingly have is a dichotomy: intense private mourning that feeds on bodily and spiritual health, next to an ostentatious public mourning that promises what it cannot deliver. Public displays of mourning, such as the new practice of victims confronting criminals at court sentencing, supposedly bring closure, but more often they interfere with people coming to terms with their grief. Feelings of grief are repeated every time we relive one of the nation's calamities.

Geoffrey Gorer in his 1960's study, Grief, Death and Mourning, compared mourning in the twentieth century to sex in the nineteenth century. Everyone is known to do it in private but one should not speak about it in public. Things have changed in the decades since Gorer's study but perhaps not as much as the surface would suggest. The place of sex was changed by adding public displays to the main activities that remain intensely private. Mourning, too, has acquired splashy public displays but feelings of grief are likely to remain bottled up in a private sphere.

It is not public mourning that is lacking but a form of public that is not cut off from the private. The bridge between private and public spheres is rituals of community life that sustain interpersonal relations. Rituals of their nature are conservative, reminiscent of the past. They are always vulnerable to being attacked as outdated and irrelevant. But at the most intense moments of life humans need to be buoyed by routine gestures that hold the world together until new and reasonable actions can be performed. Rituals have to grow organically; they cannot simply be invented. The best rituals are hundreds or thousands of years old. The funeral, with all its cultural variations, seems to have emerged at the very beginning of humanity.

The rituals for the disposal of the dead have changed over time. Rituals can change without losing their effectiveness provided the change emerges out of past experience, usually very slowly. What can be especially corruptive of rituals surrounding death is the exploitation of tender feelings for the sake of profit. The commodification of grief - books, workshops, chat rooms - has been booming.

Washington D.C., which Philippe Aries described as a city of monuments to the dead, has one memorial that is different. The Vietnam memorial, a plain dark wall with 58,158 names on it, has done as much as any one thing to heal the division caused by that disastrous war in Southeast Asia. The young designer, Maya Lin, accomplished a near miracle in getting the monument built. She had an impulse to cut open the earth, wrote Lin, then a twenty-one year old student at Yale. The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain.

Any doubts about the memorial's effectiveness were quickly erased not just by the size of the crowds but by the genuine emotion that the memorial elicited. A Veteran's Day editorial aptly describes the usual scene: They walk as if on hallowed ground. They touch the stone and speak with the dead. They come to mourn and to remember - an old ritual made new, creating in this time another timeless moment....As the long polished panels reflect those that move before them, the names of the past become etched on the faces of the present and, for a moment, the living and the dead are one.

National monuments seldom carry such power because mourning (in contrast to grief) requires interaction. People rather than stones are the ordinary basis for interacting. The genius of Maya Lin's design is that, unlike so many recent memorials that merely relive the past horror, the Vietnam memorial has a narrative, a powerful story that begins with the grim facts but then moves the visitor beyond the grave. One walks down until one is literally overwhelmed by the dead but then one walks up and out. Perhaps the only comparable memorial in Washington is the Holocaust museum, filled as it is with the ordinary stuff of life and the extraordinary means of death. The museum is most powerful for Jewish people but, as the crowds of visitors indicate, its stark simplicity crosses both ethnic and generational lines.

For most people most of the time, mourning is possible because there are one to a dozen people who are physically present to share the grief. The correlative of the verb *to mourn* is *to comfort*, a word that means to bring strength. Often the mourner ends up comforting the one who has come to offer support. No matter; the comforter and the mourner share the burden of grief and also share the healing that comes from genuine human encounter in dark times.

Words are important in such moments, although exactly what words are spoken is not so important. Religious rituals contain formulas that everyone in the community knows well. Such fixed formulas can be criticized as clichés or empty formalism. But in the midst of profound grief, few people are able to come up with fresh and brilliant insights that fit the situation.

It is the strength of ritual sayings that they carry people through times of great sorrow. The standard Roman Catholic practice at wakes was to say the rosary (A decade of the beads@), the repetition of a prayer formula without much thought to the words. Jewish religion probably has the most precisely specified gestures and words from the moment of death to the departure from the cemetery and for the week that follows.

For people attending a funeral service, the uppermost question is often: What do I say? But once they have suffered the loss of someone close to them they usually realize that one need not worry about what to say. In the United States the funeral service still has enough ritual about it to provide help in what to say and do. The same is seldom true of the mourning period that follows. Widows complain that their friends and associates shun them for months and then pretend that nothing has happened.

Writing a letter of condolence is something of a lost art but cards and letters are an important form of comforting during the weeks and months after a death. Whether the card comes three days or six months later it is always welcome. Today's e-mail lacks some of the desired formality but it does have the advantage of providing easy access to worldwide communication.

Harold Kushner's fine book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, emerged from the author's own experience of mourning and offered helpful advice to comforters. Kushner notes that it is hard to know what to say but it is easier to list what not to say: anything critical of the mourner, anything that tries to minimize the mourner's pain, anything that asks the mourner to disguise his or her feelings. Particularly to children it is important *not* to say: ADon't feel bad. God took your mother because he needed her more than you did.@

Commenting on the Book of Job, Kushner says that Job's comforters did two things right: they came and they listened - for several days. After Job was finished, they should have said: Yes, it's really awful. Their mistake was in thinking that when Job said AWhy is God doing this to me,@he was asking a question and they should answer by trying to explain God's ways.

GRIEF, REAL AND IMAGINED

By Thomas Lynch

By dressing public interest and passing curiosity in the needful garb of bereavement, TV's talking heads have become our virtual therapists, trumping the squad of Agrief facilitators@that the President apparently keeps at the ready to dispatch to Oklahoma City or Littleton or wherever.

The news anchors dress in dark clothes, voices are toned down, a title and a logo are created, experts from anywhere hold forth, anyone who knew anyone who knew anyone is interviewed, never-before-seen video clips appear and appear again, and again, and again.

The ubiquitous makeshift shrine materializes, from which updates are broadcast on the quarter-hour and citizens who felt they had to do *something* gab for the cameras and go their ways. Cameras zoom in on the note attached to a teddy bear or roses or balloons. Weeks later, the memorial video can be had by calling a toll-free number with one's credit card.

Tragedy-cam and Grief TV give couch potatoes easy access to the Atherapies@ of national mourning for people we do not know, but may know of. With the proliferation of cable channels and network news magazines and special reports, no one need change a schedule, put on a suit, order flowers, bake a casserole, go to the funeral home or church, try to find something of comfort to say, or endure the difficult quiet of genuine grief when nothing can be said. Nor need anyone confront a dead body or help carry the casket or pay for anything, or perpetually care.

These mourners need not budge. The catharsis is user-friendly, the Ahealing@ home-delivered. Being there for perfect strangers has never been easier. When viewers have had enough, they can order a pizza, flick to the Movie Channel or Home Shopping Network and wait until the helicopters locate another heartbreak to barge in on.

Whatever these viewers have experienced, it is not grief. Grief is the tax we pay on our attachments, not on our interests or diversions or our entertainments. We grieve according to the emotional capital we invest in the lives and times of others, that portion of ourselves we ante up before the cards are dealt. We only grieve our losses when we play for keeps - real love, real hate, real attachments broken.

MOURNING FOR PARENTS

By James Atlas

What happens when one of your parents ends up alone? If one of us goes first... my mother says during one of our weekly calls, trying to prepare me. What other scenario is there? I interrupt. We both laugh nervously, avoiding further discussion of the obvious - the hurt that lies in wait to ambush the elderly. A friend who recently lost his father told me a poignant story. When his mother later went into the hospital for a routine checkup, she burst into tears while filling out the hospital admission form: You had to circle D, W, or M - divorced, widowed or married.

My friends who have lost parents have a forlorn look, as if they can't quite believe they're alone in the world. (I'll never forget my father's face as he stumbled away from his mother's grave in Chicago a quarter century ago: bewildered, stunned, afraid.) A friend grieving for his recently deceased parents told me he wakes up in the night wanting to call them. They're the only ones who give you unconditioned love, this manager of a major mutual fund says. My mother would have been delirious, a writer confided to me after his book became a best-seller. Certainly, it's a fact that having no parents sharply diminishes one's circle of admirers. Life is poorer without them, the writer says simply.

When my father died I was for a long time *sunk*, Saul Bellow wrote to his biographer, Mark Harris, consoling Harris on the death of his father. I think of that simple, eloquent confession whenever I come home from work and see my father, on a visit from the West Coast, dozing on the sofa. I'm seized with a sensation of emptiness, a prefiguring of abandonment that's primal in its intensity. I last felt this way, it occurs to me, when my parents left me alone at Camp Shewahmegon forty years ago and drove off in their Olds, leaving me by the door of my bunk with a knapsack and a sleeping bag. How would I ever get through the night without them? How will I get through a quarter century of nights?

Not long ago, the father of a close friend died in his late eighties, and I spent a week sitting shiva - the Jewish period of mourning during which the bereaved gather each night at sundown to recite the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. As we stood in the parlor of his East Side town house, surrounded by Impressionist paintings and leather-bound books, I saw my friend as the boy he'd been, vulnerable in his yarmulke, growing up in the Bronx. And when I got to the part where the prayerbook says, A final separation awaits every relationship, no matter how tender. Someday we shall have to drop every object to which our

hands now cling, @I nearly wept myself.