

How Long (According to The Media) Should Grief Last?



BY ROBERT BAUGHER

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A man whose wife of thirty-five years died twelve months ago does not suddenly walk out his front door today and say, "Okay, I've resolved that issue." Parents whose four-year-old daughter drowned in a swimming pool do not announce five years later,

"We've accepted our daughter's death. It's okay." Three weeks after the best friend of a fourteen-year-old is shot and killed at her high school, the teenager is not likely to say, "I'm healing." Yet, while a growing number of researchers on loss and bereavement question the use of such words as "acceptance," "healing," "recovery," and "closure," the media continue to use them. This gives the public the false impression that, despite the tragic proportions of the story being told, the grief will soon be over.

For example, a few weeks after the 1998 release of the popular movie *A Civil Action*, an interview appeared in *People* magazine with the mother who blew the whistle on the polluting practices that led to her son's death. The title of the piece was "A Civil Warrior." The blurb, however, revealed the magazine's view of long-term grief: "Still Mourning Her Son's Death After Eighteen Years, an Angry Anne Anderson Fights to Tell Her Side of *A Civil Action*." The story noted: "But it is also painfully clear that Anderson . . . still dwells in grief that no movie can erase." Reread the previous two sentences, this time omitting the word "still." By adding this word, *People* has implied that this mother is somehow not doing something right. Think about the last time someone included the word "still" in a

sentence: "Are you still here?" "You mean you still think that way?" "You mean you're *still* grieving the loss of your son after eighteen years?"

On November 14, 1999, *The Seattle Times* published a follow-up to a tragic story in which a bus rider shot and killed a bus driver, leading to a deadly plunge off a bridge that killed three and injured thirty-two. A picture was shown of the bus driver and his fiancée with the caption, "[They] met on his bus ten years ago and were going to marry May 15. She still grieves the loss of her gentle giant." One year and she's still grieving. Again, in a *Seattle Times* article (August 22, 1999), the sub-head read, FATHER STILL MOURNS LOSS OF HIS SON, 16, TEN YEARS AFTER ATTACK. As before, had the writer chosen to omit one word, judgment of the appropriate length of grief would not have been passed on this father.

Another message from the media is the belief that people who experience the tragic death of their loved ones need to get through it, accept it, recover, and close. In a February 1999 segment of ABC's *20/20*, the reporter said a couple whose six children were killed because of the actions of an illegally licensed driver had turned "their grief into action." What a magic trick! Now you see grief and — voila — it turns into action. The parents of the children who died, anchor Hugh Downs added, are "God-fearing people and they relied on their faith to get them through the loss of their six children." Of course we never actually hear the grieving parents say the words, "get us through the loss of our six children." In fact, in my

twenty years of working with bereaved parents I have never heard a parent say, "I've got to get through the death of my child." As the story continued, another word came up: "But their struggle for acceptance would be disturbed by a series of anonymous phone calls . . ." Few people would dare to ask a bereaved parent, "Have you accepted the death of your child?" Yet the media continue to slip it in.

A February 1999 segment on *48 Hours* featured a mother who successfully waged a twelve-year fight to meet face-to-face with her daughter's murderer, and had gone on to help others in similar situations. The final statement gives us yet another example of the media's own interpretation of grief: "Each one of the victims, like [the mother] is reaching out for remorse, perhaps reconciliation, but especially for recovery," the interview said. "That's *48 Hours* for tonight."

Webster's tells us that "heal" means "to restore to health; to cure." It follows that if you are "healing" then you are on your way to being restored to health, cured. How do the media use this word in the context of a report on grief? The day after the Columbine killings, I heard a radio news announcer in his report on the candlelight vigil in Denver assure us that "the healing begins." Is he kidding us? Every bit of research on sudden death, trauma, and critical-incident stress tells us that during the first few days, weeks, perhaps months after a significant death, a person is in shock. Research and anecdotal reports on thoughts and feelings following a major physical injury to the body indicate that the most common

response is a period in which the individual is somewhat numb to the pain, is oblivious to the surroundings, appears to "go through the motions" of responding, and has trouble integrating the loss into present reality. In the context of major emotional injury — the death of a loved one — why would anyone try to impose a healing schema on to a grieving person?

Yet, five days after Columbine a *Dallas Morning News* story assured us that, after the worst high school killings in the history of the United States, "the healing has begun." Certainly most of the students will someday be able to move on from this trauma. But will they all eventually be cured and return to health? Research on similar tragedies suggests not.

There is hope, however, for honest reporting about grief following a tragedy. One of the best examples comes from an April 1999 *Dateline* segment. On the day of the Columbine

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killings a *Dateline* reporter, citing the eight high school shootings during the past year and a half, asked, "What may be the long term effects of witnessing something so gruesome? . . . Recent history has taught us the sights and sounds of today may never go away. . . ." A reporter actually used the words, "may never go away." Interviewing a twenty-one-year-old survivor of a similar, decade-old incident on a Stockton, California, playground in which a man with an AK-47 killed five students and injured twenty-nine, the reporter said, "What [this young man] and many other victims of violence are finding is, while the traces of blood may have been easy to wipe away, the emotional scars have been almost impossible to erase." Next we hear the authoritative voice of a psychologist: "Any kind of traumatic, life-altering, life-threatening situation will have effects for many people for the rest of their lives."

Too often, however, it is the bereaved who instruct the reporter in the language of loss. In a July 1998 interview with the widow of a firefighter, who, along with his two partners, died fighting an apartment fire, a *Dateline* reporter made an attempt to summarize the tragedy: "... and it almost destroyed your life." This gallant woman — who had just finished baring her soul on national television — caught his intention and immediately responded with the brutal truth: "Well, it *did* destroy my life. This is a different life and this is a different [me]." Bravo!

The reporter on a November 1999 *Dateline* story asked the parents of a young woman who had been murdered seven years before, "You know more than anyone that nothing you do can bring [your daughter] back. Is there a point when you can let it go?" The father replied, "You know, you hear people talk about closure? And — I don't think there will ever be closure because I don't think I'll ever stop missing [my daughter]."

Meanwhile, a reporter in a November 1999 *Dateline* segment declared, "His scars will last for a lifetime." Is this finally an acknowledgment of the potential lifelong effects of a death on survivors? No, it's an investigation of people whose plastic surgery was performed by an unlicensed physician. We seem to have little problem recognizing that physical scars last a lifetime. But what about loss? At the conclusion of a May 1999 *Dateline* investigation, the reporter asked the victim, "Are you going to get over this in a week?" The woman sighed, "No." The reporter, seeming to know the answer, continued, "A month?" The woman's somber reply was the last words we heard, "No. I probably will never get over it." "There," you say, "the media do show some understanding of death and grief." But wait — this was not an interview with a woman who had suffered a death. The woman was discussing her reaction to being the victim of a burglary.

Getting one's house burglarized is a significant loss. The reporter was correct in asking this woman the "Are you going to get over it?" question, correct in acknowledging that, indeed, loss can be something you may never get over. Yet, I ask, when will we see reporters use terms that show the same respect for death? ■

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